

NEOMEDIEVALIST INTERPRETATIONS OF THE SWORD EXCALIBUR

Diana Marques, Ph.D.

ULICES (University of Lisbon Centre for English Studies),

Portugal

diana.sofia.s.marques@gmail.com

Abstract

The Arthurian legend has proved its longevity and popularity throughout time, its relevance attested by the number of adaptations it has originated in film, television and literature. Each adaptation brings new perspectives to this medieval myth, transformed each time to reflect contemporary audiences' issues and values. Still, it seems that one element is always present and is always associated with king Arthur: his sword Excalibur.

Nowadays, in films and television series, it is still through Excalibur that Arthur is recognized as King of England, and people generally cannot dissociate one from the other. However, Excalibur is portrayed in different ways in contemporary adaptations, diverging from the medieval sources in order to update the legend. Thus, this article will analyse three modern television series that adapt the story and in which Excalibur presents itself as a central object in the narrative: BBC's Merlin (2008-2012), Starz's Camelot (2011), and Netflix's Cursed (2020).

The aim of this article is to consider how Excalibur is portrayed in the television series, what is its significance and how its original meaning has been translated to our times. Moreover, it is important to understand how the Arthurian legend is reimagined through Fantasy narratives like this one, by exploring the concept of Neomedievalism and how it can affect our view of the Middle Ages.

Keywords: Neomedievalism; Fantasy; Arthurian Legend; Television

According to N. J. Higham, the Arthurian legend has proved its longevity and popularity throughout time, its relevance attested by the number of adaptations it has originated, both in

film, television and literature. Despite the never-ending debate over if Arthur really existed or not, the truth is that his importance lies in the fact that he is a literary and cultural construct that accords with the same ideals and values of those who are still rewriting and revising the legend. In the words of Higham: “Each Arthurian manifestation therefore reflects the way in which a particular author and his or her audience thought to fashion their own conceptions of the past, so as to benefit their own positioning in the present” (Higham 3). Moreover, there are different versions of the same story even in medieval texts. Each author adapts a text in a different way, adding or removing elements, being faithful to his own historical and cultural context, opening the door for modern adaptations and re-workings of the legend, without the concern for historical accuracy, because: “[h]ad Arthur’s position in history be clearer, the suspension of disbelief necessary to accommodate each different story line would have been more difficult” (Higham 8). Therefore, the Arthurian legend is a fertile ground for modern interpretations that have little in common with the original medieval texts, but in turn reveal modern attitudes and values that shape contemporary culture and society.

As it is clear, the Arthurian legend is very malleable, but even medieval authors had to attest their authority by referencing to more ancient texts, embedding the new work in an already established tradition. According to Jon Sherman: “Once embedded in the tradition, authors – medieval and modern – felt free to change and update these narratives, and it is perhaps this mutability that makes the legend of King Arthur as productive in the twenty-first century as it was in the twelfth and thirteenth” (85). Due to this subjectivity, it is easier to regard Arthur as a fantasy of the past, leading to the creation of Fantasy films and television series with Arthurian characters, themes, or with an Arthurian influence. Therefore, it is possible to say that the Arthurian legend, nowadays, is partly embedded in the Fantasy tradition of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, in the sense that stories of King Arthur and his Camelot court are mainly retold within a Fantasy frame. Examples of this tendency on television are series such as BBC’s *Merlin* (2008-2012), Starz’ *Camelot* (2011), and Netflix’s *Cursed* (2020). Thus, it is possible to speak of a narrative sub-type within the Fantasy genre: Arthurian Fantasy, a narrative that integrates elements of the Arthurian legend in a Fantasy world created in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. In this way, this paper will analyse the presence of the sword Excalibur in these three television series in order to

reflect on how the sword has been adapted and transformed in order to portray contemporary ideas and values. The concepts of Neomedievalism and Arthurian Fantasy will be taken into account because the aforementioned series fall in these categories.

One can, therefore, begin with this question: why are contemporary re-imaginings of the Arthurian legend mainly rooted in the Fantasy genre?

NEOMEDIEVALISM AND ARTHURIAN FANTASY

Fantasy deals with the impossible and is rooted in myth, folklore and fairy tales. And although it only fully emerges as a genre by the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century, it has elements that precede these periods, thus establishing a deeper connection to the past. Moreover, Fantasy creates new worlds with specific characteristics that do not necessarily exist in the reality of the reader, something that Tolkien called the Secondary World which is created by the artist, who is a sub-creator: "Inside it, what he relates is 'true': it accords with the laws of that world. You therefore believe it, while you are, as it were, inside" (36). Therefore, a Fantasy world obeys its own laws, and has its own features that allow the reader or spectator to momentarily escape their own reality and enter a new one. In this sense, it is somewhat easy to place Arthurian narratives within a Fantasy setting because they are also part of the sources of Fantasy, all put in the Cauldron or Pot of Stories, according to Tolkien: "[...] Arthur, once historical [...], was also put into the Pot. There he was boiled for a long time, together with many other older figures and devices, of mythology and Faërie, and even some other stray bones of history [...] until he emerged as a King of Faërie" (30). Therefore, Arthurian tales are more connected to the world of an imagined medieval past that can be remodelled and reworked to the point that it becomes more connected to Fantasy, than to original medieval chivalric romances.

This constant reimagining of the Middle Ages in post-medieval periods in order to portray contemporary values and concerns is called medievalism, the concept first discussed by Umberto Eco in his influential essay "Dreaming of the Middle Ages" (1973). In his work, he also writes about a "fantastic neomedievalism" (63), referring to works that are mainly in the realms of Fantasy, as creations of worlds and stories that resemble the Middle Ages but are not faithful representations of the period. Kim Selling also defines the term 'fantastic

neomedievalism' as: "[...] the intersection between the field of fantasy and the field of medievalism" (211). Selling goes on to explain that the medieval period is also the chosen one as the main setting of most Fantasy works because the "medieval image is instantly recognizable in myth and symbol [...]. Magic swords, dragons and unicorns are readily accepted as being routine features of the 'fantastic' Middle Ages, along with beautiful princesses and knights-in-shining-armor" (212). Selling also points out that Eco's term 'fantastic neomedievalism' further emphasizes the link between Fantasy and medievalism (211), which in turn favours the creation of Arthurian narratives within the scope of Fantasy. Besides, modern Fantasy is nowadays a very profitable industry, especially with the massive success of HBO's *Game of Thrones* (2011-2019) which triggered a number of other television adaptations of the same genre, such as *The Shannara Chronicles* (Netflix, 2016-2017), *The Witcher* (Netflix, 2019-2021), *Shadow and Bone* (Netflix, 2020), and the *The Wheel of Time* series, produced by Amazon Prime and based on the homonymous book series by Robert Jordan. In this sense, BBC's *Merlin*, Starz's *Camelot* and Netflix's *Cursed* fall in this category of Arthurian Fantasy, because although they are reimaginings of the Arthurian legend, they are not concerned with the representation of the historical medieval past nor with a faithful adaptation of episodes of the Arthurian legend. As such, the narrative occurs in a setting that includes fantastic elements.

Neomedievalism is, thus, more associated with the creation of Fantasy narratives because it is even more removed from the medieval period from which it draws inspiration than medievalism is, such as is stated by Kaufman: "Neomedievalism is thus not a dream of the Middle Ages, but a dream of someone else's medievalism. It is medievalism doubled up upon itself" (4). In fact, some authors associate neomedievalism to the concept of Baudrillard's simulacrum, stating that, "medievalism implies a genuine link – sometimes direct, sometimes somewhat indirect – to the Middle Ages, whereas neomedievalism invokes a simulacrum of the medieval" (Toswell 44). Thus, while medievalism is closer to the medieval sources and it aims to represent the Middle Ages in a somewhat faithful manner, neomedievalism plays with preconceived notions about the Middle Ages in order to subvert them, as well as to reflect about contemporary issues within a medieval setting. In this sense,

neomedievalism can be perceived as a challenge to traditional medievalism because it comments on the process that underlies its creation (Mayer 223-224).

David Marshall also looks at neomedievalism as “a self-conscious, ahistorical, non-nostalgic imagining or reuse of the historical Middle Ages that selectively appropriates iconic images [...] to construct a presentist space that disrupts traditional depictions of the medieval” (22). Accordingly, neomedievalism has a disruptive nature that questions preceding representations of the Middle Ages. Thus, modern retellings of the Arthurian legends include narrative elements and characters generally recognised by the public, but they also add a modern ‘twist’ in order to connect with contemporary audiences and portray contemporary issues and values. Neomedievalism creates more than recreates a medieval setting, it assimilates a past culture and includes elements of the present in order to think about it. To Grewell: “neomedievalism [...] is entirely fantastical in its creation of alternate universes from quasi-medieval contexts and tropes, and utterly unmoored from ‘responsible philological examination’ in its ‘anti- historical’ nature” (36). Thus, neomedievalism has a strong presence in Fantasy works and, in turn, Fantasy worlds are often based on the medieval period:

The neomedieval takes its inspiration and its materials from what is hegemonically accepted as ‘the medieval’, thus affirming the central narrative. However, it then deploys these elements in ways unacceptable to ‘traditional’ medievalists, in order to create playful narratives that trouble and challenge the central ‘medievalist text’. (Coote 29)

This is also what happens in the case of Arthurian Fantasy narratives, where Arthurian characters, storylines, objects and other elements are included in order to offer a new interpretation on the legend and, at the same time, provide a commentary on the period it is being created.

It is also worthwhile to explore the fact that television medievalism has received relatively little critical attention when compared to movie medievalism as is noted by Pagès and Kinane (1).ⁱ However, since the commercial success and critical acclaim of HBO’s *Game*

of *Thrones*, being adapted from George R.R. Martin's series of novels *A Song of Ice and Fire*, television medievalism has gained more critical attention. Moreover, it seems that television series writers and producers seek the same formula of *Game of Thrones* in order to gain prominence and authority in the field, mixing fantasy elements with medieval ones, appealing to a generation that grew up watching the adaptation of Martin's books. Furthermore, it became clear with *Game of Thrones* that what is more important is not a realistic representation of the Middle Ages on television, as it is the aim of medievalism, but the creation of a medieval-like world that spectators can recognize as such, in which contemporary issues are portrayed and discussed, as it is true with neomedievalist narratives. In fact, the Middle Ages on television,

[...] has come to be associated increasingly with the genre of fantasy. Overall, recent television programs focusing on the Middle Ages or set against a medieval background show a marked decline in concern with historical accuracy, glorifying instead in the imaginary and the fantastical and thereby looking more like medieval romance [...] than any contemporary notion of historical realism. (Pagès and Kinane 6)

This reinforces the idea that neomedievalism is more predisposed to the creation of Fantasy worlds than the accurate representation of the medieval period, an aspect that is also present in contemporary adaptations of the Arthurian legend and, particularly, in *Merlin*, *Camelot*, and *Cursed*.

Additionally, television series also present certain characteristics that differ from movies and, thus, must also be taken into account. Television series, especially the ones in modern streaming platforms, introduce a new dynamic of experiencing a story on a screen: the investment of the consumer is greater than watching a movie, due to the different lengths of each media; the consumer can binge-watch a program, so they have a choice in how they want to watch the show, and nowadays, some television series, especially fantasy ones, have budgets that are similar to the ones allocated to movies, which raises expectations when it comes to the quality of the final product. Furthermore, the "serialization of most conventional

programs means that viewers usually develop a far more sophisticated bond with the characters and world of a television show”, demonstrating that viewers will remain more faithful to a television series than to a movie because of the time they invest watching it (Pagès and Kinane 4). Television series also allow for a more in-depth psychological characterization of the characters and the world it is portraying, an aspect that also emphasizes the relationship of the viewer with the series and its characters. Being a domestic medium, television shows are also consumed privately, which accentuates a type of involvement from the viewers that differs from those who watch movies, and “the show is no longer “a” show but “their” show. As a result, their involvement with television becomes even more visceral” (Pagès and Kinane 5). This goes to show that television series, mainly those which are presented in streaming platforms, such as Netflix, HBO, Hulu and Amazon Prime Video, have already reached an importance that rivals that of the movies, allowing for a more complete exploration of a story.

In the case of the Arthurian legend, there are three television series that emerge as the more relevant ones: BBC’s *Merlin*, Starz’s *Camelot*, and the more recent Netflix’s *Cursed*. These portray the Arthurian legend differently, adapting it to younger audiences that may or may not be familiar with King Arthur’s story, but recognise the tropes of Fantasy narratives to locate the story within its realms. Melissa Ridley Elmes also notes that television series have more in common with medieval romances, from which contemporary ideas of the Arthurian legend were born, because both appear in episodes that interlace with each other to form a greater narrative arch. Additionally, they both adapt original material “for different audiences; characters are introduced, altered, combined, and omitted to suit various storylines; and multiple writers are involved in their crafting” (Elmes 99). Thus, it seems that television series offer a much more suitable means of portraying the Arthurian legend than movies, and they also allow for a more authentic representation of these stories as they circulated during the medieval period, making television shows “as the modern visual successors of the medieval literary romance tradition” (Elmes 100). Thus, *Merlin*, *Camelot* and *Cursed* continue this established tradition of not only portraying the story of King Arthur and his knights, but also of updating it to newer and contemporary audiences that, although

may not be familiar with the original Arthurian tradition, they have knowledge of Fantasy tropes that not only shape this Arthurian world but also alter and expand it.

EXCALIBUR IN *MERLIN, CAMELOT AND CURSED*

In the medieval tradition King Arthur is the bearer of two swords: the Sword in the Stone and Excalibur. The first one appears in three medieval texts: in the French romance *Merlin*, by Robert de Boron, written between the twelfth and the thirteenth centuries; in the second book of the Vulgate Cycle, *Merlin en Prose*, also called *Estoire de Merlin*, written between 1210-1220; and in the *Le Morte D'Arthur*, written by Sir Thomas Malory at the end of the fifteenth century. This sword is stuck in a stone in a churchyard, and is reserved to the rightful king of England. It symbolizes not only Arthur's right to the throne as the legitimate king, but also his lineage from Uther Pendragon which guarantees him a place as king of England. Besides, by being in a churchyard it also represents God's sacred anointment of Arthur as king of England. However, the Sword in the Stone is not Excalibur. In the medieval tradition, Excalibur is mentioned with greater importance in Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae* (1136), in its Latin form 'Caliburnus', and in Malory's *Le Morte D'Arthur*.

In Monmouth's work, this sword is the symbol of Arthur's strength and power and it first appears as an element of Arthur's military gear when he is preparing for the Battle of Badon: "Arthur himself put on a leather jerkin worthy of so great a king. On his head he placed a golden helmet, with a crest carved in the shape of a dragon; and across his shoulders a circular shield called Pridwen [...]. He girded on his peerless sword, called Caliburn, which was forged in the Isle of Avalon" (Monmouth 217). In this work, Arthur's sword is incomparable to any other and it was forged in a sacred place connected to pagan beliefs: Avalon. This island was also created by Monmouth and described in more detail in his *Vita Merlini* (c. 1150), it is inhabited by nine women and would later on be associated with healing, since it is the place to where Arthur is taken after being mortally wounded at the Battle of Camlaan. Thus, Caliburn, or Excalibur, seems to be associated with magic, great power and strength since its inception. With it, Arthur kills more than four hundred men in

the Battle of Badon (Monmouth 217), and kills his enemy Frolo in Gaul with a single blow, cutting the man's head in half (Monmouth 225).

In Malory's *Le Morte D'Arthur*, Excalibur also has a magical origin, but is depicted in a different way. During Arthur's fight with King Pellinore, the Sword in the Stone breaks, leaving Arthur defenceless against his foe. Merlin, then, casts a sleeping spell on Pellinore and leads Arthur in search of a new sword, which he spots in the middle of a lake, held by a woman's hand. After this vision, Merlin tells Arthur that the woman is the Lady of the Lake, and she gives the magic sword to Arthur with one condition: that he gives her what she asks for when the time comes (Malory 35).

The sword Excalibur is, thus, given to Arthur by the Lady of the Lake, Nimue, who can be considered a personification of the sovereignty of the land according to Celtic myth. This episode is a reminder of that Celtic heritage, and of the union between the king and the land, where the Goddess gives Arthur legitimacy to rule England and reinforces his power through Excalibur. Therefore, the Sword in the Stone is the sword of Arthur's coronation as king, but Excalibur is the sword of his masculinity and his connection to the land's ancient customs, and with it Arthur receives increased power to rule the territory (Matthews 240). In this sense, one may say that Excalibur is connected both to masculine and feminine characters: it belongs to Arthur as king, but it is given to him by the Lady of the Lake, who is a representation of sovereignty and of the land itself.

Although these are the original sources of these two Arthurian swords, there are several different representations of that regal object, perhaps in order to convey different values according to the times in which they are portrayed. Thus, when it comes to the series *Merlin*, *Camelot* and *Cursed*, they are no different in this aspect.

BBC's *Merlin* inscribes itself in the Arthurian tradition by including elements that audiences recognize from that story, but it also roots itself in the Fantasy genre, by including elements that are not present in the audience's world. By beginning every episode with the phrase "In a land of myth, and a time of magic [...]", the series detaches itself from historical accuracy, and it reminds the audience that what they are seeing is set in an imaginary world, not a factual one (Sherman 82-83). In this way, the Arthurian legend is transformed into a medieval fantasy for both young and adult viewers, more or less familiar with the Arthurian

tradition. This is also true for *Cursed*, that begins the first episode of the series with the sentence “There is a story lost to the mists of time, of The Sword of Power and the young woman who wielded it”, already telling the audience that what they are about to watch is not a historical narrative, but a fantastical one.

When it comes to the Arthurian swords, in *Merlin* not only these swords are one and the same, but the corresponding moments also appear in a different order: Excalibur first, and the Sword in the Stone second. In episode 9 of the first season, “Excalibur”, Merlin seeks a magical sword that will defeat a wraith called Black Knight, and it is with Geoffrey of Monmouth that he finds the answer in an ancient book called “The Chronicles of Beltane”, in which is written of a “great sword begotten by a dragon’s breath”. The inclusion of characters such as Monmouth and objects such as Excalibur, according to Sherman, “[...] embeds the BBC series in the Arthurian tradition and delights viewers familiar with the legend” (91). However, it also includes fantastic elements, like the importance of magic in the making of a special sword able to kill what cannot, apparently, be killed, as well as a dragon and his ability to imbue objects with magical powers. However, the dragon warns Merlin that the sword must be wielded by Arthur alone. When it is Uther that uses the sword, it causes the anger of the dragon and Merlin ends up throwing the sword into the bottom of the lake of Avalon, where no man can find it.

It is important to notice that the viewer only knows that the sword is Excalibur because of the title of the episode, since the sword’s name is never mentioned. This creates certain expectations, because the audience familiar with the sword’s story knows that it will be wielded one day by Arthur, and it will appear again in the series. It is only when Arthur is ready to be the greatest king of Albion, and when the land needs him the most, that Excalibur is shown again as the Sword in the Stone.

In the episode “The Sword in the Stone – Part 2” of season 4, Arthur seems to suffer from self-doubt after Morgana had conquered Camelot, stating numerous times that he is not fit to be king and that all his decisions had been wrong. Besides, he says things like: “There is nothing special about me; I’m just like everyone else”; “Maybe I don’t deserve to be king”; “I’m good with a sword, that’s all”, which accentuate his need for a boost of confidence in his rightful place as king. Following this, Merlin and Arthur come across a forest glade where

they encounter a sword embedded in a stone that, according to an old legend told by Merlin, can only be pulled by the rightful king of Camelot. The way the sword is presented is similar to the same depiction in Boorman's *Excalibur* (1981), "in the mossy green boulder [...] complete with a similarly soaring orchestral soundtrack" (Stock 76). In this way, this episode is indebted to elements borrowed from other cinematic depictions, more than to the canonical medieval texts from whence it originated (Stock 75). This attracts a crowd that gathers to watch Arthur pull out the sword, and when the sword is freed from the stone Arthur stands amazed and triumphant, as the crowd shouts "Long live the king!", in a scene that also resembles Boorman's version as well as Disney's *The Sword in the Stone* (Stock 76). This is important because the religious aspect of this episode in the medieval texts is removed, transforming the belief that God will make known who the true king of England is, into the belief in Arthur himself. In the words of Stock: "Clearly this Arthur needed help to validate his entitlement to rule Camelot, but the 'faith' necessary to achieve the sword-extraction was not in a Christian God, but in himself" (76). Thus, in *Merlin* the sword not only proves Arthur's legitimacy as king of Albion, but it also represents self-reliance. To a younger generation, the message that is conveyed is of self-confidence if one wants to reach their goals.

Starz's *Camelot* is another Arthurian adaptation that claims to be based on Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur*, although the legend as well as its characters is portrayed differently from the medieval texts. This reference to Malory allows the show to root itself in a literary work, conferring a kind of authenticity to the new reworking of the legend. It differs from *Merlin* in the sense that *Camelot* looks at the Arthurian legend from an historical perspective and tries to build a sort of historical-fantasy narrative. A common aspect in both TV series is that they depict a young Arthur trying to fit in his role as king while he is growing into adulthood. However, the figure of Merlin, for example, differs greatly from the BBC series, in the sense that he is an adult with his own agenda and has a darker undertone to it. In this way, *Camelot* is less about the adventures of Arthur and Merlin in a medieval fantasy setting, and more about personal motivations, political intrigue and the fight for power in a pseudo-historical background.

In the opening credits of *Camelot*, as it happens in *Merlin*, there is an image of a sword floating in the bottom of a lake, demonstrating the importance of the sword in the Arthurian narrative as a symbol of sovereignty and identity. The episode of the Sword in the Stone in this series, “[...] owes less to established medieval literary sources or modern literary medievalism than to a generalized version of Arthurian 'legend' and even more to previous film and TV series” (Stock 77). In this way, this sword can be regarded as a homage to its previous cinematic depictions, while also offering a more contemporary approach to an ancient object for a modern audience. In the episode “The Sword and the Crown”, prior to Arthur withdrawing the sword from the stone, Merlin tries to build Arthur’s self-confidence by stating: “A king exists primarily as an idea. If we persuade the people to believe in the idea of you, we can make it a reality”. This notion of the king as an idea in which people believe is a contemporary one, whereas in the Middle Ages the king was a man chosen by God to rule His land. In here, Arthur will become a new idea by doing the impossible: withdrawing the sword from the stone, here located in a waterfall. As a crowd gathers to witness the feat, like in *Merlin*, Merlin also claims “They’ve come to watch a legend born”, thus establishing a conscious dialogue between the series, the legend itself, and the audience that already knows what is about to happen. Moreover, this event bears a past heritage, since the sword is known as the Sword of the Gods, once belonging to Mars, the Roman god of war, and it is said that the one able to pull the sword from the stone will reunite all of Britain. According to Stock: “Despite the reference to ‘gods’, Merlin’s ‘selling’ of Arthur to his subjects is more reminiscent of twenty-first-century political campaigning than the original medieval trope of the sword-withdrawal as the Christian God’s authorization of Arthur’s divinely-legitimized royalty” (79). In this way, there is a confluence of medieval and contemporary elements in this sword, mostly to update its story and to present it to an audience with a different cultural background than the audiences from the Middle Ages.

The episode where Excalibur appears is the most reworked one when it comes to the sword. The episode is called “Lady of the Lake” in a clear reference to Malory’s work, in which Excalibur is given to Arthur by the Lady of the Lake and through the guidance of Merlin. In *Camelot*, the Lady of the Lake appears to be the daughter of the blacksmith that forges Arthur’s sword: she is named Excalibur and her father is Caliburn. However, it is

Merlin that sets out to get the sword, not Arthur, and because of this Caliburn refuses to handle the sword to any other person save Arthur. A chase begins, the girl steals the sword, and Merlin, using his magical powers, ends up trapping the girl in a lake in which she falls. She can only reach the surface by breaking the ice with the sword, and the image of her hand and the sword on the surface seems to be inspired by Boorman's *Excalibur*, after the scene in which Arthur fights Lancelot. Then, Merlin returns to Camelot with the sword and invents a story that explains the name of the sword. He says that he saw a woman who called him, like a mermaid, in the lake, and from inside the lake she stretched her arm with the sword, giving it to Merlin and saying: "This is the sword of King Arthur. This is Excalibur". In this way, the TV series converts the names of the sword in the Middle Ages into the name of the characters directly related to the sword. Therefore, while those familiar with the legend will recognize these names and will be aware of these transformations, new audiences will be alerted to their medieval roots through contemporary changes that rewrite and update the legend to the twentieth-first century.

In this case, *Excalibur* takes a darker symbolism. It represents the political machinations behind the seats of power, here embodied by Merlin. He does everything to obtain the sword in order to consolidate Arthur's position of power as ruler of England, and consequently securing his own as counselor to the king.

Netflix's *Cursed* aims at representing the Arthurian legend through a different lens: it aims at telling viewers how Nimue got the sword she ended up giving to King Arthur, shifting the focus of a predominantly masculine story to a woman's point of view. Therefore, *Cursed* adds another layer to contemporary Arthuriana, and establishes a new ground to explore lesser known characters while developing a story for them. Nimue, being a magical character connected to the people called the Fey, comes in possession of the sword by means of her dying mother. She entrusts Nimue with the mission of delivering the sword to Merlin, and from the moment Nimue is entrusted with the sword everyone seems to want it. This is because the sword is the Sword of Power, or the Sword of the First Kings, attesting to its ancient lineage connected to the legitimacy to the throne of England, like the Sword in the Stone was in the medieval literary tradition. And although the sword remains nameless throughout the whole season, it is deeply connected to kingship and sovereignty, to the power

of ruling the land, like the Sword in the Stone and Excalibur. Furthermore, the person who is in charge of the sword and its protector is also a woman, Nimue, as it is in the medieval tradition. Moreover, it is through Merlin, in episode 4, that the viewer knows that the sword was forged in the Fey fires, thus having a pagan and magical origin like Excalibur in its medieval sources. Additionally, it is the same episode that hints at Nimue as the Lady of the Lake, as she will later be known as, in a scene where she emerges from a lake wielding the sword and killing several Red Paladins priests.

Another interesting aspect is the connection between Arthur and Nimue. Arthur is here portrayed as a thief and a scoundrel, and is searching for a meaning and a purpose in his life, for honour and justice. Nimue and Arthur start falling in love with each other and in episode 5 Arthur says to her: "What if it's you? What if you're my honour? What if it's your justice I'm meant to serve?". In Malory's work, Excalibur is given to Arthur as a symbol of the union between the King and the Land, representing his protection and fidelity to it. The Goddess of the Land, in her turn, offers the King her protection, as long as he remains loyal to her (Matthews 239-240). Thus, it is the Goddess that chooses her king. This highly symbolic aspect in Malory's work is modified in the television series so it becomes more literal through Arthur's words. He, then, becomes her ally and protector. Moreover, also in episode 5, Gawain says to Nimue that the sword is the sword of their people, their history and their hope. Therefore, just like Excalibur in Malory's text, the sword represents older beliefs and traditions, as well as the land itself and its people. In both representations, Nimue, a person of the Fey, an embodiment of the land, has the power to choose the worthy king.

However, this Sword of Power that echoes both the Sword in the Stone and Excalibur, is also portrayed with a darker undertone. It represents greed and corruption when someone is entrusted with absolute power, an aspect that is discussed when Nimue and Merlin meet for the first time, in episode 5. This element is reminiscent of another Fantasy world where an object of absolute power has a negative influence on its bearer: Middle Earth.

The show's director of the first two episodes, Zetna Fuentes, states in an interview to Brandon Katz that she is a fan of *Lord of the Rings*, and that she sought a visual aesthetic that was inspired by Peter Jackson's adaptation of Tolkien's novels. Therefore, it may not be a stretch to consider that the landscapes were not the only things that inspired *Cursed's*

narrative, and that a part of the portrayal of the Sword of Power was also based on *Lord of the Rings*. This idea, hinted by Hannah Collins, makes sense because the Sword of Power, in *Cursed*, takes the liking of the One Ring as the series progresses and the audience knows more about its story and origin. Both the Sword and the Ring are enormous sources of power and they take a toll on their wearers. In Tolkien's work, Sauron forged twenty Rings of Power and the One Ring to rule the bearers of all the other rings. In this way, the corruptive nature of Sauron would taint all those who would wear the rings, and the Dark Lord would command and dominate them through the power of the One Ring. In *The Hobbit*, Gollum is the first character that is obsessed with the Ring and this shows even in his appearance – he was once a hobbit, and now is a non-human creature that inhabits the darkest places of Middle Earth. In Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, the reader knows the story of Isildur who was not able to part with the Ring, thus bringing doom to his reign. Frodo also feels the terrible weight of the Ring's power clouding his judgement on several occasions, showing the corruptive nature of the Ring and, ultimately, of power. In *Cursed*, the same motif is implied: Merlin, once the bearer of the Sword, was led to murder and to destroy a Roman city, showing the Sword's lust for blood. Now in the possession of Nimue, the Sword seems to be taking a toll on her as well, clouding her sense of justice and her judgment on few occasions, leading both the other characters and the audience to question if she is getting too attached to its power, and perhaps turning into a villain or into a morally ambiguous character.

By the end of episode 7, Nimue finally assumes her power and position as protector of the Fey, delivering a powerful speech that also concerns the sword she carries: "In this blade lies the connected powers of our ancestors. This is our courage, our light in all of this darkness. Our hope in all of this despair. I will be your shield, and by the gods I will be your sword. [...] Some call this the Sword of the First Kings. But I claim it... As the Sword of the First Queen!". This ties in with the opening of the first episode, when the viewer is told about the origins of the story of this sword: "They called her a demon. Sorceress. Saviour. Before Arthur the King, the Sword of Power chose a Queen". Therefore, this sword becomes even more connected to a woman and only afterwards to a man: Arthur. It demonstrates the significance of a woman in the making of such a powerful sword that would bestow the right to rule the land, but also the importance of a female figure in the making of a legend, of a

myth. This allows female characters to have more agency in the Arthurian narrative through the most emblematic object associated to Arthur's kingship: the sword Excalibur.

The series ends with the sword in the possession of Merlin and Nimue falling down through a waterfall and into a lake, presumed dead, perhaps finally becoming the Lady of the Lake.

CONCLUSION

In all of these television series, the sword remains a central motif in the the Arthurian legend, but it reflects "[...] the cultural concerns of their own decades [...] rather than the historical Middle Ages" (Stock 80). Both the Sword in the Stone as well as Excalibur are associated with Arthur's identity and with his sovereignty of England, as it was in medieval texts, but its symbolism and portrayal are transformed to fit the values and issues of contemporary audiences. Moreover, the three series have fantastical elements, even though *Camelot* aims at a more pseudo-historical representation of the legend. This roots *Merlin*, *Camelot* and *Cursed* in a world reminiscent of the Middle Ages, but not a literal Middle Ages. In this sense, what matters and what is significant is not if they depict the Middle Ages or the Arthurian legend faithfully, according to the sources, but the existence of medieval and quasi-medieval signs and symbols that allow audiences to recognise this narrative as a neomedievalist one. Thus, the Middle Ages presents itself as a set of icons that are more important than the representation of the historical Middle Ages.

In *Merlin*, both swords have magical properties that come from the dragon's breath, making their depiction closer to fantasy, a genre that deals with the impossible and depicts what is not plausible in the audience's world. Therefore, they symbolize a more contemporary motto: to believe in oneself. It serves present-day audiences by being adapted to a new meaning, representing Arthur's confidence in himself, in believing that he is the rightful king of Camelot.

In *Camelot*, the swords have a more political meaning, in that the Sword in the Stone represents Arthur's legitimacy as rightful king of England, and Excalibur embodies the idea of the construction of a legend associated to a kingly object. They are far from the fantasy aura in *Merlin*, and they seem an evolution and actualization of a medieval legend, by playing with the audience's knowledge and expectations about both swords.

In *Cursed*, the same thing is true. It conveys a narrative tailored to both those who are already familiar with the Arthurian legend and those who are not, but who want to be engaged in a Fantasy story. This television series conveys a narrative tailored to both those who are already familiar with the Arthurian legend and those who are not, but who want to be engaged in a Fantasy story. In here, the sword even becomes more associated to Nimue than Arthur, as it is traditional, reinforcing a female perspective and agency in a legendary world that, in its origin, is mainly masculine. The sword also symbolizes both positive and negative values, offering a more nuanced and perhaps realistic view on power and its potential for corruption: the sword brings destruction and death, but it also symbolizes hope and the history of a people.

Thus, the sword remains a central motif in these series, shaping the modern imagination about such an important legendary object. It introduces the characters, symbols and objects of the Arthurian legend with which audiences are already familiar with, and reworks them in order to shape contemporary ideas about Arthurian narratives. Therefore, it expands the Arthurian canon by rewriting it and introducing new points of view and ideas to a story that is a thousand years old.

Telegraphy

“Excalibur”. *Merlin*, directed by Johnny Capps, season One, episode Nine, BBC, 2008.

“The Sword in the Stone - Part Two”, *Merlin*, directed by Johnny Capps and Julian Murphy, season Four, episode Thirteen, BBC, 2011.

“The Sword and the Crown”, *Camelot*, directed by Ciarán Donnelly, season One, episode Two, Starz, 2011.

“Lady of the Lake”, *Camelot*, directed by Jeremy Podeswa, season One, episode Four, Starz, 2011.

“Nimue”, *Cursed*, directed by Zetna Fuentes, season One, episode One, Netflix, 2020.

“The Red Lake”, *Cursed*, directed by Daniel Nettheim, season One, episode Four, Netflix, 2020.

“The Joining”, *Cursed*, directed by Daniel Nettheim, season One, episode Five, Netflix, 2020.

“Bring Us Good Ale”, *Cursed*, directed by Jon East, season One, episode Seven, Netflix, 2020.

“The Sacrifice”. *Cursed*, directed by Sarah O’Gorman, season One, episode Ten, Netflix, 2020.

Works cited:

Collins, Hannah, “Cursed’s Sword of Power blends Excalibur with Lord of the Rings’ One Ring”. *CBR.Com*. 26th of July, 2020, <https://www.cbr.com/cursed-sword-of-power-excalibur-lord-of-the-rings-one-ring/>

Coote, Lesley, “A Short Essay about Neomedievalism”, in *Studies in Medievalism XIX: Defining Neomedievalism(s)*, ed. by Karl Fugelso (Cambridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2010), pp. 25-33.

Eco, Umberto, “Dreaming of the Middle Ages”, in *Travels in Hyperreality*, trans. by William Weaver (San Diego: Harcourt, 1986), pp. 61-85.

Elmes, Melissa Ridley, “Episodic Arthur: *Merlin*, *Camelot* and the visual modernization of the medieval literary romance tradition”, in *The Middle Ages on Television: Critical Essays*, ed. by Meriem Pagès and Karolyn Kinane (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2015), pp. 99-121.

Grewell, Cory Lowell. “Neomedievalism: An Eleventh Little Middle Ages?”, in *Studies in Medievalism XIX: Defining Neomedievalism(s)*, ed. by Karl Fugelso (Cambridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2010), pp. 34-43.

Higham, N. J., “Introduction”, in *King Arthur: Myth-Making and History*, (London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 1-9.

Katz, Brandon, “How ‘Cursed’ Director Zetna Fuentes Pulled Off the Pilot’s Epic Long Take”. *Observer*, 17th of July, 2020. <https://observer.com/2020/07/netflix-cursed-trailer-zetna-fuentes-interview-nimue/>

Kaufman, Amy, “Medieval Unmoored”, in *Studies in Medievalism XIX: Defining Neomedievalism(s)*, ed. by Karl Fugelso (Cambridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2010), pp. 1-11.

- Malory, Sir Thomas, *Malory: Works*, (1470), ed. by Eugène Vinaver, 2nd Edition, (Oxford University Press, 1983).
- Marshall, David M., “Neomedievalism, Identification, and the Haze of Medievalisms”, in *Studies in Medievalism XX: Defining Neomedievalism(s) II*, ed. by Karl Fugelso (Cambridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2011), pp. 21-34.
- Matthews, Caitlín, *Arthur and the Sovereignty of Britain: King and Goddess in the Mabinogion*, (London: Arkana, 1989).
- Mayer, Lauryn S., “Simulacrum”, in *Medievalism: Key Critical Terms*, ed. by Elizabeth Emery and Richard Utz, (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2014), pp. 223-230.
- Monmouth, Geoffrey of, *The History of the Kings of Britain*. (1136), trans. and intro. by Lewis Thorpe, (London: Penguin Books, 1966).
- Pagès, Meriem and Karolyn Kinane, “Introduction”, in *The Middle Ages on Television: Critical Essays*, ed. by Meriem Pagès and Karolyn Kinane, (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2015), pp. 1-11.
- Selling, Kim, “Fantastic Neomedievalism: The Image of the Middle Ages in Popular Fantasy”, in *Flashes of the Fantastic: Selected Papers from The War of the Worlds Centennial, Nineteenth International Conference on the Fantastic in the Arts*, ed. by David Ketterer, Praeger Publishers. 2004. 211-218.
- Sherman, Jon, “Source, Authority, and Audience in BBC’s *Merlin*”, in *Arthuriana*, 25, 1 (2015), 82-100.
- Stock, Lorraine. "Reinventing an Iconic Arthurian Moment: The Sword in the Stone in Films and Television". *Arthuriana*, Vol. 25, Nr. 4. 2015. (66-83)
- Tolkien, J. R. R., “On Fairy-Stories”, in *Tree and Leaf*. (London: Unwin Books, 1966), pp. 11-70.
- Toswell, M. J., “The Simulacrum of Neomedievalism”, in *Studies in Medievalism XIX: Defining Neomedievalism(s)*, ed. by Karl Fugelso (Cambridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2010), pp. 44-57.

¹Examples of this scholarship on movie medievalism are works like *A Knight at the Movies* (2003), *The Medieval Hero on Screen* (2004), *The Reel Middle Ages* (2006), and *Cinematic Illuminations: The Middle Ages on Film* (2009).