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***THE SHADOW UPON THE SCREEN:  
MERLIN (2008-2012) AND THE MATTER OF  
BRITAIN***

**Keywords:** *adaptation; foundational texts; cultural memory; national identity; mythology; the Matter of Britain.*

**Abstract:** *This paper endeavours to explore the relationship between adaptation and cultural memory by focusing on the interplay between foundational texts (canonical literature, national mythology, key historical events, and so on) and the (re-)articulation of cultural identity which results from their adaptation. It starts from the premise that such foundational texts loom so large in a people's cultural memory that any attempt at adapting them must also necessarily entail an attempt at legitimating or contesting the cultural identity of the peoples with whom they are associated, regardless of whether such an attempt is undertaken intentionally. Drawing on the work of such cultural theoreticians as Aleida Assmann, Linda Hutcheon, and Hayden White, this paper intends to examine the adaptational strategies employed by the creators of the hit BBC show Merlin (2008-2012) in their attempt at rewriting the Arthurian cycle so as to better conform to the tastes and norms of modern-day Britain. It aims to show that the ideal of "Britishness" that results from their adaptation is firmly rooted in a conservative understanding of national identity – one that is then projected into an ahistorical past and superimposed upon the narrative so as to suggest an unbroken sense of national continuity.*

If ever I will recall my native kings to songs  
Arthur as yet warring underneath the earth,  
or tell of great souled heroes at their table,  
unbeaten in their alliance — O may the spirit be here —  
and smash Saxon lines under a British Mars.  
(John Milton – "Mansus", translated by Stella P. Revard)

Few narratives have aroused the English imagination as much as the Matter of Britain – that amorphous cluster of histories, poems, fictions and songs, born to the Welsh and soon appropriated by much of Western Europe (from Iceland to the Mediterranean as one critic succinctly put it<sup>1</sup>) – and fewer still have garnered as

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<sup>1</sup> Namely Roger Sherman Loomis (cf. Higham 8). It is interesting to observe, as a matter of historical curiosity, that this roughly matches the span of Arthur's kingdom in Geoffrey's

much symbolic capital in their national discourse, have been remediated time and time again, ceaselessly transmogrified to meet the demands and mores of new audiences. And the inherent difficulty in adapting such foundational texts finds itself here infinitely enhanced by the lack of a firm one-to-one correspondence between hypotext and hypertext; the hapless adapter of the Arthurian Cycle has not but one source text to use as his starting point, but a multitude of them, sometimes harmonious, sometimes inimical, but always refusing to fully cohere. True, she can pick and choose in patchwork fashion which elements of this grand tradition she wants to adapt, yet if she wants to make full use of its symbolic capital for her own ideological needs, she must necessarily position herself before and within this discursive nexus – her work must be understood as legitimately Arthurian by her audience – and to do this, I would argue, she must strive to approximate both the form and the politics that have come to be associated with the Matter of Britain in cultural memory; and her ideology must, of course, have some affinity with the one most commonly gleaned from the canonical cluster: King Arthur as a Marxist revolutionary, for example, would be a bit hard to swallow as legitimate (although were she attempting to contest this entire tradition, this might prove an interesting starting point). It is this feat of foundational legitimation that the BBC show *Merlin* (2008-2012) adroitly enacts – with its powerful merger of conservative form and agenda – and the ways in which it does so, I would argue, merit close and scrupulous attention.

To this end, it might prove fruitful to start with a brief overview of the discursive nexus of Arthuriana and its historical development in Britain. There have been numerous manifestations of Arthur across the centuries, each shaped by the political context of their time and by the ideological demands and expectations of their target audiences. As N.J. Higham notes,

The major constant in these successive constructions is Arthur's usefulness as a means of envisioning Dark Age history from a particular and highly contemporary standpoint, which has had some potential to empower significant figures in the present – the author and his or her audience among them. When all these visions are considered as a group, it becomes clear that questions about ethnicity, group identity and nationality are commonly at issue. To be interested in Arthur is to be interested in how 'Britishness', 'Englishness', 'Welshness', 'Cornishness', 'Scottishness', and so on, have been constructed and successively revalued, both in the present and in many pasts (4).

Although we should be careful to only extend this route of inquiry to works created for a British audience – continental Arthuriana tends to denude the narrative of its ethnic dimension and to focus predominantly on the more general themes of courtly love and chivalric honour – it nevertheless evidences one of the most important and often ignored features of the Arthurian cycle: ever since its literary/historical adaptation in the *Historia Brittonum*, a 9<sup>th</sup> century purported history of the British people which, drawing on Welsh oral tradition, imagines

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*Historia Regum Britanniae*, the pseudo-history that helped popularize the Matter of Britain on the continent (cf. Lupack, Oxford 24).

Arthur as a “dux bellorum” (Hutton 22), a war leader doing battle against the Saxon invaders, Arthuriana has existed as a site of identity politics avant la lettre: constructing or reinforcing various oppositional identity configurations within the greater British framework. *Historia Brittonum* has to be read as a response to the ecclesiastical writings of Gildas and Bede, which portrayed the British as dissolute and feeble, and the Germanic invasion as an act of God meant to rid the world of their decadence (cf. Higham 9); instead, the pseudo-history offers Arthur as the exemplary Christian warrior – “dux bellorum” is also the title given to Joshua in the Bible (cf. Hutton 22) – bravely resisting the (pagan) Saxon scourge. This oppositional construction of Britishness (Welshness) and Englishness (Saxonnness) is the result of what N.J. Higham has described as the Welsh “investment in ‘British’ identity [...] a fundamental part of the political and cultural resistance to English conquest and Anglicization” (9).

Writing half a century after the Norman invasion, Geoffrey of Monmouth, a Welsh cleric seeking Norman patronage, greatly expands upon the *Historia Brittonum* in his *Historia Regum Britanniae*, probably the single most influential piece of Arthuriana. Here, the British dux bellorum is reimagined as ruling over a vast continental empire, from Iceland to the gates of Rome. This new cosmopolitan Arthur, who once held court in Paris itself, allows for the political legitimation of England’s new Norman elite, who, unlike the Anglo-Saxon usurpers, are seen as the descendants of Arthur’s continental adventures (cf. Fulton 48). But there is nevertheless a certain ambivalence to Geoffrey’s writing as he cannot resist employing the Welsh motif of Arthur’s messianic return – the belief that the great king would come back and restore British sovereignty over the whole isle – an ambivalence that could be seen as potentially contentious at a time when Norman hegemony over England was by no means secure<sup>1</sup>. The Galfridian Arthur nevertheless becomes the dominant manifestation of the legend and Geoffrey’s treatise is accepted as the official history of England and used to legitimate the territorial pretensions of the crown both in Britain and on the continent (cf. Higham 232). As Arthur and his conceptualization of Britishness is appropriated by the English elites – a thing most visible in the royal cult of Arthur with its round tables, Excalibur replicas, and associated pageantry, inspired by the French adaptation of Geoffrey into the romance tradition of fin amour and chanson de geste – the Welsh element which served as the initial impetus for the whole endeavour becomes more and more marginalized.

After humanist historians such as Polydore Vergil point out the gross historical inaccuracies present in Geoffrey’s work, much of the power of Arthur evaporates and he is reduced to a mythological figure of questionable historicity (cf. Lupack, *Companion* 340). The protestant reformation – especially in its Calvinist manifestation – sees little use for the high pomp traditionally associated with

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<sup>1</sup> Helen Fulton sees such a political riposte in the contemporary critiques of William of Newburgh and Gerald of Wales. The latter claimed to have been present at the exhumation of Arthur’s remains discovered at the monastery of Glastonbury – most likely a ruse by the monks to attract pilgrims, but nevertheless one that served to prove both the historicity of Arthur and the impossibility of his messianic return from the isle of Avalon (cf. 49).

Arthuriana, while Enlightenment thinkers such as John Locke find its legitimation of absolute monarchy and feudalism distasteful (cf. Higham 240). The Anglo-Saxon cult of Alfred the Great replaces the Matter of Britain as the nation's foundational narrative (in part due to the rhetoric of Anglo-Saxon racial superiority, which underscores the British imperial project). Arthuriana does make a return in the 19<sup>th</sup> century – as part of the larger Victorian revival of Medievalism – in the post romantic poetry of Tennyson and Swinburne and in Pre-Raphaelite painting, which has had a profound impact on the visual representation of the Arthurian cycle, but it is not quite enough to dislodge the still dominant Alfredian narrative – for that it would take the Second World War, the decline of Germanism, and the collapse of the British Empire (cf. Higham 271).

In their wake, a number of Arthurian live action and animated movies surface, the most popular of which are: Richard Thorpe's *Knights of the Round Table* (1953), the first major Hollywood film to adapt the Cycle, Wolfgang Reitherman's *The Sword in the Stone* (1963), an adaptation of T.H. White's eponymous novel, and John Boorman's *Excalibur* (1981), the first film to have a British director and cast. All three are largely inspired by Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur* and follow the French romantic tradition, rather than the English/Galfridian historical tradition: in point of architecture and weaponry, they offer the viewer a setting more in tune with the High Middle Ages (the period that is probably the most easily discernable as *medieval* to the lay audience – and the one famously framed as Arthurian by the Pre-Raphaelites); in point of social context, lip service is paid to the chivalric code and to the feudal system, but scant references are made to the political or ethno-national dimension.

This has been an inescapably simplified overview of the Arthurian Cycle's discursive nexus and history of remediation; to my mind, no other narrative cluster is as ample or as diverse – in fact, so great is its breadth that I would argue that we could apply Aleida Assmann's conceptualization of cultural memory solely to its domain; for Assmann,

Cultural memory contains a number of cultural messages that are addressed to posterity and intended for continuous repetition and re-use. [...] This aspiration, of course, cannot be realized for all artistic artefacts; only a small percentage acquire this status through a complex procedure which we call canonization. At the other end of the spectrum, there is the storehouse for cultural relicts. These are not unmediated; they have only lost their immediate addressees; [...] As part of the archive, they are open to new contexts and lend themselves to new interpretations (99).

For the Matter of Britain, the canon would represent the now dominant rendition of the cycle – the romantic tradition as framed by Hollywood (with its bevy of viewer expectations: Arthur as the valiant hero; Merlin as the wise, old councillor; Morgana as the manipulative villain; the sword in the stone; the late medieval setting; the tragic, yet redemptive ending; and so on), while the archive would represent the totality of Arthurian memorabilia: the oral traditions, the chronicles, the prose cycles, the songs, the poems, the painting, the adaptations, all in sundry languages and styles. Drawing on the archive, an adapter could actualize

any of its myriad elements – see for example the 2004 film *King Arthur*, which, inspired by the *Historia Brittonum*, attempted to offer a grittier – purportedly more historical – version of the legend; depending on its success with the general public, such an endeavour could result in a restructuring of the canon, although that has not been the case with *King Arthur* – which represented, perhaps, a move too far away from the familiar interpretation. Instead, I would argue, that *Merlin*, with its much more reticent revisions – many of them engendered by elements already in the archive – has become in many ways the new focal point of the Arthurian canon. To my mind, this presupposes at least two things: a large audience, which the show had for the duration of its five seasons (cf. BBC News) and which has stuck by it and formed one of the largest wikis dedicated to a television programme (cf. [merlin.wikia.com](http://merlin.wikia.com)); and a marked influence on the Arthurian artistic products that follow in its wake. As there have only been a few months since *Merlin*'s cancellation, this last criterion will have to be revisited at a later time, although for now, there have been promising signs: the 2011 Starz miniseries *Camelot* also focused on a younger Merlin and its aesthetics can be read as the antithesis of the BBC version: gritty and sensual vs. family friendly. Perhaps this might prove a fruitful time to segue into questions of form.

Linda Hutcheon famously argued for adaptation as a form of “repetition without replication” (7) – we thrive on the comfort of a good ritual duly repeated, but ultimately desire more out of the cultural products we consume: we desire to be surprised; without variation, the tension on which all narratives – or at the very least all heroic narratives – subsist evaporates and our interest remains unspiced. When we adapt foundational texts what we are searching for is indeed an old product in a new guise – but this new guise is not meant to destabilize the foundational core of the text, but to reinforce it, to offer a fresh twist that will refamiliarize the audience with it<sup>1</sup>, an audience weaned within a society that has – by and large – a partially vague cultural memory of it (foundational texts are not, generally, adapted with a specialized audience in mind). The major twist offered by the BBC series is the reconceptualization of the relationship between Merlin (Colin Morgan) and Arthur (Bradley James) – no longer one of mentor and mentee, but one of servant and master. This apparent inversion of the traditional power relation is then revealed as a narrative feint: Merlin is in fact the scion of the Old Religion whose destiny is to protect and advise Arthur – still the once and future Messianic king of Albion – in a world where magic has been banned by his authoritarian father Uther (hence the need for the feint). This thematic doubling is enacted on a narrative level as well, as the show is alternatively emplotted as a satire and as romance; the ironic mode is used to defamiliarize an audience used to the traditional mediation of the Arthurian cycle, while the romantic one is used to reassure that same audience that their conventional expectation was right all along: Merlin must first play the part of the bumbling underling – berated by an ignorant Arthur – so that his reveal as the wise protector will prove more potent in the end. The narrative tension of the main plot is

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<sup>1</sup> A topsy turvy approach may be used, of course, with an antifoundationalist agenda in mind, deconstructing the discourse of text, evincing its incoherencies, ambivalences and sheer historicity.

engendered by this modal variation – the destabilizing ironic mode pitted against the regenerative romantic mode, until the former gives way in the very last episode (so as to prolong the pleasure created by the tension) and the show ends on a highly romantic note (the wizened Merlin awaiting the return of the once and future king in modern Britain so that he may finally fulfil the prophecy of uniting the entire island (cf. “The Diamond of the Day, Part II”).

As Hayden White has observed, satire and romance are fundamentally incompatible forms of representing reality:

[Romance] is a drama of the triumph of good over evil, of virtue over vice, of light over darkness, and of the ultimate transcendence of man over the world in which he was imprisoned by the Fall. The archetypal theme of Satire is the precise opposite of this Romantic drama of redemption; it is, in fact, a drama of diremption, a drama dominated by the apprehension that man is ultimately a captive of the world rather than its master [...] Romance and Satire would appear to be mutually exclusive ways of emplotting the processes of reality (9-10).

*Merlin* does not attempt to fuse the two, but rather alternates between them, giving viewers the pleasurable illusion that the show might swerve either way – an illusion with which we are complicit (both the plot of the show and the burden of history heavily intimate the triumph of the romantic mode), but which we nevertheless accept because we derive enjoyment from it, from the tension thus engendered. Perhaps the show’s great narrative triumph is that it enacts on a formal level our own psychological anxieties and misgivings about foundational texts – our tendency to view them with scepticism – but then reveals such attitudes as unfounded. This serves to reconcile the show to the canon of Arthuriana and, as I have suggested before, to become its premier contemporary manifestation.

If, on a modal level, the tension between the romantic and the comic is what drives the main plot forward, on a tropological level, the narrative is largely emplotted in the key of metaphor; and it is not merely the characters that perform this function, but the entire setting; as the abstracting layer of fantasy enables the viewer to form a coherent allegorical reading of the text, the Camelot of the then is supplanted by the Britain of the now. Ahistorical signifiers of the middle ages – weapons and armours from different centuries, castles unthinkable in the period traditionally associated with the Arthurian cycle – and of fantastic fiction – creatures from different mythologies, mock religions with scant basis in British history – contrive a powerful potpourri of images that are at once familiar and recognizably foreign (which is to say familiarly unfamiliar). The sheer banality of the show is what allows viewers to project themselves back into this ahistorical past and imagine the characters they encounter as essentially British.

*Merlin*’s politics prove ultimately just as conservative as its form (in relation to its canonical expectations). At a time when only one third of white Britons choose to describe themselves as British rather than English, Welsh or Scottish (cf. Social Trends 4), *Merlin* proposes an ahistorical fantasy of primeval Britishness – one that, much like its medieval courtly counterpart, is denuded of its Celticness and offered instead an English genealogy; it is not merely that the characters speak standard British English (this could be waved off as a simple

translation convention), but that the show goes to great lengths to portray Anglo-Saxon, the language of magic and of the Old Religion, as its earlier form – even to the extent that this violates the show’s own narrative logic (the Saxons appear as enemies of Arthur and speak standard British English<sup>1</sup> (cf. “Arthur’s Bane, Part I”). The other language of magic spoken by Merlin is Homeric Greek, which he uses to impose his will over dragons – this is a possible reference to the Galfridian historiography, which placed the Trojan Brutus, a close relative of Aeneas, as the founder and first king of Britain (hence its name) (cf. Higham 125). Old Irish – the third language of magic – is marginalized and othered within the narrative: it is not used by human characters, but by nefarious magical beings from Irish folklore, the *sidhe* and the *pixies* (cf. “The Changeling”). No mention is even made of Welsh.

This English-centred configuration of British national identity is to spread over the whole island, as Arthur is destined to unite it and rule over it, a prophecy intoned and expected since the very first episode: “Arthur is the Once and Future King who will unite the land of Albion,” sayeth the dragon Kilgharrah, Merlin’s first mentor into the ways of magic (“The Dragon’s Call”). The show deftly ends with Arthur seemingly dead and this prophecy unfulfilled – only to jump forward in time to a wizened Merlin awaiting his liege’s messianic return. The distinction between past and present is dissolved and the show’s conceptualization of Britishness is proposed as a panacea for a still fractured island.

There are a few more characteristics of Britishness here that I would be remiss not to mention. It is understood as post-racial (Guinevere is played by a person of colour, and so are her immediate family), but only to the extent that skin colour is never mentioned – identity politics as such are completely glossed over, and the show adopts a curious don’t ask/don’t tell mentality that is present also in the homoerotic relationship between Arthur and Merlin, which is never allowed to veer into overt homosexuality. Gender roles are by and large firmly entrenched, with the men doing the fighting and the women taking their traditional place as damsels in distress (the villains are allowed, of course, to transgress this rule, as long as they are punished for it: Nimueh, Morgause and Morgana all die by the end of the show for daring to use magic or steel to destabilize the social order in their favour). On the more progressive side, there is a marked emphasis on social advancement: Arthur marries the lowborn Guinevere and three of his Knights of the Round Table are similarly not of noble birth – although social advancement is nevertheless controlled by the will of the king, whose authority is understood as absolute. Religion is altogether absent (its presence could perhaps be intimated only by the existence of an *old* religion) – which perhaps should be seen as an attempt at appealing to the mores of a British population that is becoming less and less Christian.

The BBC show *Merlin* stands as an edifying example of how to adapt a foundational narrative. By adroitly positioning themselves within the discursive

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<sup>1</sup> The same paradox is present in John Milton’s poem “Mansus”, which I have chosen as the motto of this article, and which hopefully serves to show that this line of thought is not endemic to *Merlin*, but is an integral part of its discursive nexus, one re-actualized by the programme along with its English-centred configuration of British national identity.

nexus of the Arthurian cycle and drawing on its sundry manifestations (both canonical and archival), the creators of the programme develop a clever strategy of canonical legitimation – which mirrors our own psychological attitude towards foundational texts – by alternatively emplotting it as a satire (and thus evincing the threat of illegitimacy) and as a romance (and thus revealing the same threat as altogether unfounded). Drawing on the same Arthurian tradition, *Merlin* puts forward its own (re-)configuration of British national identity, which, much like its late medieval predecessors, posits Englishness as its defining feature. With its massive popularity and clever tweaking of convention, *Merlin* might very well become the new focal point of the Arthurian canon, the remediation by which it is best known in popular cultural. All that remains to be seen is whether it will exert the necessary artistic influence in the years to come.

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