

Once and Future: Adaptations of Camelot in Non-Arthurian Television Narratives

By Shawn Edrei

Despite the lack of a cohesive and authoritative canon, the legends of King Arthur have endured for centuries, adapted countless times across a multitude of media ranging from graphic novels to cinema to video games. Bert Olson claims that these adaptations and recontextualizations are significant in terms of gauging the enduring power of the Arthurian story: "The variety and frequency of the uses of Arthurian themes in television shows confirms how deeply these legends are embedded in the Western psyche and culture."¹ But while the earliest literary examples featuring King Arthur consist of disjointed fables, many adaptations have attempted to impose a linear and causal narrative structure onto the mythos (such as the *Lancelot-Grail Cycle* and Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte D'Arthur*). Modern versions similarly exist within their own milieu: Marion Zimmer Bradley's *The Mists of Avalon* focalizes its narrative through female perspectives (Morgaine, Viviane, Ygraine, etc..) while the specter of the Second World War is inescapable in T.H. White's *The Once and Future King*. However, despite the varying socio-cultural and historical contexts that surround and influence each adaptation, certain "core" components of the Camelot mythos persist. Specific characters appear in every variant, modified to suit the sensibilities of the target audience: these will inevitably include Arthur as king (though not always in the role of protagonist/focalizer), Guinevere and Lancelot as forbidden lovers, Merlin as the wizardly mentor, Morgan le Fay as the conniving adversary, the Knights of the Round Table as Arthur's trusted followers, and Mordred as the destroyer of Camelot. Similarly, certain iconic moments and events are preserved: Arthur draws Excalibur from a stone, Guinevere and Lancelot engage in an illicit affair, Merlin develops an ambiguous relationship with Nimue, and Arthur and Mordred slay each other on the battlefield, bringing about the downfall of Camelot. While the specific circumstances may change from version to version, their occurrence within the narrative is commonplace; these components function as anchoring points in the creation of a broadly homogenous narrative structure which supersedes classic sources such as Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae* in popular culture. The most recent television adaptations, the BBC's *Merlin* and Starz's aborted *Camelot*, serve as apt demonstrations of the ways in which these anchors may be used to generate a sense of familiarity for the viewers, and thus offset any aesthetic and creative divergences from the norm, such as the titular protagonist in *Merlin* being depicted as a teenaged novice rather than an older voice of experience guiding Arthur throughout his journey.

However, these patterns of repetition are not limited exclusively to direct adaptations of Arthur's story. In recent years, Arthurian imagery has been appropriated by television series that bear no ontological or generic relationship to Camelot. In science fiction, urban fantasy, superhero stories and even Japanese anime, references (both explicit and implicit) to the Arthurian repertoire create complex relationships between seemingly unrelated texts. According to John Fiske, such references are possible because they do not require any detailed knowledge of the legends themselves: "The theory of intertextuality proposes that any one text is necessarily read in relationship to others [...] these relationships do not take the form of specific allusions from one text to another and there is no need for readers to be familiar with specific or the same texts to read intertextually."² This essay will examine six television series – *Xena: Warrior Princess*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Code Geass*, *Babylon 5*, *Justice League* and *Gargoyles* – in terms of how they adapt and incorporate Arthurian elements into their respective fictional worlds, and why such incorporations are employed to begin with. These series will be divided into two categories based on the method used to access materials relating to Camelot: "connoted adaptation" restricts itself to inference and subtext, relying on the viewer's general knowledge to establish cognitive associations while avoiding any direct validation of the legends, while "denoted adaptation" explicitly implants Arthurian characters and symbols into the ongoing narrative, creating a sense of linear continuity extending from Camelot into the present. In other words, non-Arthurian series which use connoted adaptation will establish connections via metaphor and allegory while relegating Camelot itself to myth; conversely, denoted adaptation confers a historical or "real" status onto King Arthur, folding Camelot and all its associated legends into the pre-narrative history of other fictional worlds. These expressions of intertextuality are, as Fiske suggests, a natural product of the way we consume fiction, and are not exclusive to Arthurian materials: for example, the children's film *How To Train Your Dragon* features a character who refers to a monstrous dragon as the "bride of Grendel" – a connoted adaptation of *Beowulf* which relies on reference and context, without appropriating the specific world represented in the poem. By contrast, the appearance of Sherlock Holmes in an episode of *Batman: The Brave and the Bold* serves as a thematically relevant use of denoted adaptation, transplanting a specific character from one text into another and thus amalgamating the different fictional worlds into one ontological structure.

One potential reason for the enduring popularity of the Arthurian mythos and its ongoing multiplicities of adaptation is that the core narrative offers an alternative to a prevalent literary pattern in the fantastic genres: the Hero's Journey. This pattern is explained in Joseph Campbell's *Hero with a Thousand Faces*, which puts forth a theoretical structure meant to encompass all permutations of the heroic quest narrative:

The standard path of the mythological adventure of the hero is a magnification of the formula represented in the rites of passage: *separation—initiation—return*: which might be named the nuclear unit of the monomyth. A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man.³

The pattern of the monomyth often serves as the backbone of serial television narratives in the heroic/fantastic genres, and while many postmodern texts have rebelled against the repetitive nature of this cycle, it is the Arthurian mythos that offers a clear and accessible alternative to the standardized formula. The constructed narrative of Arthur and Camelot (assembled from various sources and variants due to the absence of a centralized canon) diverges from the monomythical structure at the point of Arthur's rise to the throne of Britain. Prior to this stage, the sequence of events broadly corresponds to Campbell's paradigm: Arthur begins as an everyman who must depart from home and embark on a quest in order to claim extraordinary powers, here embodied in the sword Excalibur. However, the final stage of Campbell's monomyth requires "*the return and reintegration with society* [author's emphasis], which is indispensable to the continuous circulation of spiritual energy into the world, and which, from the standpoint of the community, is the justification of the long retreat."⁴ Here the Arthurian narrative diverges entirely from Campbell's paradigm, as the story of Camelot is one that typically ends with destruction: the kingdom falls, Arthur dies, and Excalibur is lost, signifying the end of the "golden age." In some versions of the legend, the possibility of renewal is implicit, with Arthur taken to Avalon until the time of his restoration, but for all intents and purposes the Camelot narrative concludes with an irreversible finality, which stands in stark contrast to the cyclical structure of the Hero's Journey. As a result, non-Arthurian series that incorporate components or references relating to Camelot are able to subvert the more formulaic configurations of heroic story patterns.



Still from *Xena: Warrior Princess*

In a television series rife with anachronisms – where David and Goliath, Helen of Troy, Julius Caesar and Jesus Christ all share the same time/space– it should come as no surprise that *Xena: Warrior Princess* also contains a connoted adaptation of Camelot. A popular fantasy/adventure series that ran from 1995 to 2001, *Xena: Warrior Princess* is set in a fictional version of Greece presided over by the Olympian Gods, who regularly interfere in mortal affairs. The protagonist travels the land in the tradition of the “wandering hero,” accompanied by her companion Gabrielle. Initially, episodes took place primarily in Greece, but Xena’s adventures eventually expand to encompass much of Europe and Asia, with artistic license liberally applied to dismiss the obvious spatial and temporal discrepancies. One such discrepancy occurs in a third-season episode called “Gabrielle’s Hope,” in which Xena and Gabrielle travel to Britannia during a war between Boudica and Caesar.⁵ Seeking refuge in a nearby castle, the protagonists encounter a group of knights who refer to themselves as “The Round Table” and later share their story with Gabrielle:

Our last king, before the Romans came, he struck that sword into the stone. No one’s been able to move it since. [...] Our tradition states that one day, a great warrior will be born to our people. He will become our king, and lead us in our fight against the barbarians. And we’ll know who he is because only he will be able to pull out the sword (III.5).⁶

The sword itself is never named, but viewers will instantly recognize it as Excalibur. As the knights speak, Xena – herself a warrior of legendary status – nonchalantly pulls the sword from the stone, examines it, and returns it to its place with a simple comment: “Nice blade.” (III.5) Intended as a humorous moment, compounded by the knights’ flabbergasted reactions, Excalibur’s appearance is trivial in the greater context of the episode, as neither the knights nor the sword resurface throughout the remainder of the series. Instead, the reference is meant to forge a cognitive association in the mind of the audience: the image of Arthur drawing Excalibur from the stone is inextricably bound to the perception of Arthur as a hero. Thus, the intertextual inference is that Xena is equal to Arthur in her own heroism. At the same time, her decision to discard the sword is also significant, as an implicit acknowledgement that she is not being positioned to shape or participate in the Arthurian narrative in any way. In fact, the protagonist’s dismissive attitude towards the sword and the humorous tone of the scene carries with it a cynical undercurrent: in returning Excalibur to the stone, Xena rejects the role and identity of Arthur in favor of her own.

Similar symbolism is featured in an episode of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003), an urban fantasy/horror series about a teenage girl empowered to fight demons and the forces of darkness. Having contended with master vampires, snake demons, infernal gods and human malevolence, the seventh and final season pits Buffy Summers and her friends against the First Evil, a cosmic entity purporting to be the incarnation of evil itself. In the penultimate episode of the series, “End of Days,” Buffy is led to the location of the Scythe, an ancient weapon meant to aid her in her struggle. The Scythe is not Excalibur, nor is it a sword in shape or function, but the weapon has been embedded within a natural rock formation and resists all attempts to remove it. Much like the corresponding scene in *Xena: Warrior Princess*, the protagonist’s ease in claiming and wielding the Scythe is a humorous moment, later described by Buffy as “when [she] King Arthured it out of the stone.” (VII.21). But unlike Xena, Buffy does not discard the Scythe to symbolize a distancing of her own narrative from that of Camelot. Rather, the connoted adaptation of Excalibur-related imagery is meant to strengthen the parallel between Buffy Summers and King Arthur. Both begin their heroic journeys as “everyman” protagonists chosen by fate to play out grander roles, both rally around mystical weapons bequeathed to them as symbols of their authority, both are surrounded by trusted and loyal allies who function as extensions of their power, and both are ultimately elevated to positions of leadership by the same proof of their “worthiness” (their ability to do what no one else can do in claiming the aforementioned weapon). That the town of Sunnydale is destroyed in the concluding moments of the series, signifying the end of an era, only further emphasizes the thematic links to Camelot (though Buffy – unlike Arthur – leaves the site of her final battle alive).

As interest in this particular mythos is not exclusive to Western culture, connoted adaptation may also be found in Japanese anime such as *Code Geass: Lelouch of the Rebellion* (2006-2008). Set in an alternate history where Britain defeated the American Revolution only to fall to Napoleon, *Code Geass* follows Lelouch Lamperouge and Suzaku Kururugi, who are separately working against the Holy Britannian Empire, which now controls much of the world. The series belongs to the popular “mecha” genre, in which physical confrontation between human combatants is replaced by battles between large mechanical constructs designed to mimic humanoid forms. The narrative of *Code Geass* quickly introduces a prototype weapon meant to secure Britannia’s power: a giant anthropomorphic robot named Lancelot. The choice of nomenclature is not a coincidence, as the elite knights of the Empire are referred to as the “Knights of the Round” and other robots introduced later in the series are named Mordred, Galahad, Percival, Gawain and Tristan. Even more to the point, a stray cat named Arthur constantly harangues the pilot of Lancelot, Suzaku Kururugi. As with the use of Excalibur parallels in *Xena: Warrior Princess* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, the connoted adaptation of Arthurian names has a specific purpose: to frame the central conflict of the narrative within a broader mythical context. However, *Code Geass* inverts the traditional associations of this context, as the Knights of the Round and the machines named after Arthurian heroes are predominantly aligned with the antagonistic Empire, casting the rebellious Lelouch as an underdog. The association of Britannia with Camelot only makes the moral decay of the Empire that much more evident, as it stands in stark contrast to popular pseudo-utopian depictions of Arthur’s kingdom. In a world dominated by Britain, the invocation of legendary British heroes is a subtle accusation, an illustration of how far the Empire has fallen from the traditions and ideals espoused by King Arthur. At the same time,

Lelouch himself is firmly cast as an anti-hero whose revolutio is prone to dangerous excess – rather than presenting a straightforward binary opposition of good versus evil, the central conflict in *Code Geass* is morally ambivalent. The tone of this particular adaptation is almost unique in its open, if indirect, criticism of Arthurian representations. While earlier incarnations of Camelot contain elements of moral ambiguity (Arthur’s unwitting act of incest with Morgaine/Morgause, Guinevere’s infidelity, the malicious actions of knights associated with the Round Table such as Lamorak and Agravain), most Western adaptations cast Arthur, his knights, and his kingdom in an overwhelmingly positive light, ostensibly the result of nostalgic affection for the heroic conventions associated with the mythos. Cultures without that deeply embedded affinity are able to produce interpretations of Arthur that veer from traditional uses of the milieu and can contain explicit criticisms of Western values and traditions.

But allusions and references are not the only tools that can be used to evoke Camelot. Through denoted adaptation, recognizable Arthurian figures may be inserted into other fictional worlds, whether said worlds are based on realistic, scientific or fantastic principles. Series that make use of this device feature physical manifestations of Arthur, Merlin and associated characters, and their presence creates an implied linear continuity with Camelot – if this character exists in the present-day, then all events pertaining to said character in relation to Camelot actually occurred in the pre-narrative history of that world. This constitutes a more direct approach to adapting Arthurian iconography, and establishes specific juxtapositions with popularized conceptions of the Arthurian tales.



Still from *Gargoyles*

An example of this process appears in *Gargoyles* (1994-1997), an animated series which applies denoted adaptation on a scale that both includes and exceeds the Arthurian legends. The plot revolves around a clan of gargoyles who, having been petrified in the Middle Ages, are released in present-day New York. Though initial storylines focus on the Gargoyles’ attempts to orient themselves in contemporary life, the second season features an extended storyline where the clan encounters a multitude of characters drawn from various mythologies. The phrase “All things are true,” uttered by several characters throughout the series, is borne out as Odin, Anubis, Anansi and other mythical figures interact with the Gargoyles and have a measurable effect upon the setting. In “Avalon Part 2” (II.22), references are made to a Sleeping King who lies dormant in the heart of Avalon, an island that has been mystically separated from the rest of the world; the following episode reveals the Sleeping King to be Arthur Pendragon, who agrees to aid the Gargoyles against their enemies. Once the conflict is resolved, Arthur chooses to explore the modern world on his own; he reappears once more in “Pendragon” (II.35) to reclaim Excalibur and recruit the first of his new knights. Though not a central character in *Gargoyles*, Arthur carries with him certain implications that affect the viewer’s interpretation of this fictional world, the most obvious being that the events broadly recognized as the Camelot narrative are historical fact in this series. Moreover, the initial discovery of the Sleeping King and his subsequent integration into the contemporary world suggest a pattern of continuity: while *Gargoyles* itself is not an Arthurian narrative, “Pendragon” implies that the reconstituted Knights of the Round Table will perform some greater good in the world, however tangential this may be in relation to the primary plotlines. The confluence of multiple mythologies also changes the way Camelot itself is viewed – in a world where all legends carry a kernel of truth, Arthur is equated with Thor, Hercules, and other heroes whose very existence is tied to foundational mythologies of Western civilization. Furthermore, the alignment of Arthur with the Gargoyles, however temporary, crystallizes the viewer’s perception of the titular protagonists as Arthurian-style heroes on par with the mythical figures surrounding them.



Still from *Babylon 5*

This is not to say that Arthur's appearances are uniform in their intentions and methods. As with *Code Geass*, some denoted adaptations of the character have been used to subvert epic/heroic associations. Set on a space station in the mid-twenty-third century, *Babylon 5* (1994-1998) focuses on the lives of the titular station's crew and citizens, and contains many recognizable hallmarks of the science fiction genre: encounters with anthropomorphized alien species, time travel, advanced technology and so on. While seemingly incompatible with conventional depictions of the legends, Raymond H. Thompson makes a case for science fiction's suitability in creating credible representations of Camelot:

Since science fiction is concerned with the impact of change upon humanity, one would imagine that it would find the cyclic pattern of Arthurian legend a fertile field to explore. The kinds of change that science fiction is most interested in, moreover, are caused by social, political, and technological advances. That these advances are inherent in Arthurian legend is demonstrated by historical fiction which has, for example, pondered the impact upon Arthur's wars of such developments as the *comitatus* and the stirrup.⁷

In the season three episode "A Late Delivery From Avalon," an armored man wielding a medieval sword arrives on the station and claims to be Arthur, son of Uther Pendragon and King of the Britons. When questioned, he exclaims: "Galahad is dead. Lancelot is dead. Guinevere and Percival, even Mordred, all of them are dead! I have been gone a long time, a very long time, but I am not mad!" (III.13) Throughout the episode, Arthur relates first-hand accounts of Camelot and its destruction, situating *Babylon 5* as a distant but linear continuation of the mythos. This is particularly relevant given that, at this point in the series, the station is caught in the midst of a civil war between Earth's totalitarian government and its colonies, a fitting pretense for the return of a legendary savior. As he wanders the station, Arthur begins to intervene in the lives around him, correcting injustices while drawing allies to him. Interestingly, the first person to declare loyalty to Arthur is an alien warrior named G'Kar, who is then inducted into the king's service as the Red Knight. In her article "Knights in Space: The Arthur of *Babylon 5* and *Doctor Who*," Kristina Hildebrand points out the importance of an established character siding with Arthur: "G'kar's decision to join Arthur's side both emphasizes his own movement towards enlightenment and establishes Arthur as a warrior for good. G'kar's subsequent knighting by Arthur is consistent with his increasing understanding of honor and responsibility."⁸ Thus, the audience's familiarity with G'Kar lends credence to Arthur's claims – a reversal of the standard formula where it is Arthur's presence that lends a heroic context to the world around him.

However, inconsistencies begin to mount as the crew examines Arthur more closely. Chief Medical Officer Stephen Franklin is the first to point out a discrepancy: "He is not Arthur. His speech patterns are too contemporary, his vocabulary's all wrong." (III.13) Arthur begins to experience flashbacks that are wholly inconsistent with the medieval setting from which he claims to originate. The mystery is resolved when Dr. Franklin runs a DNA test and discovers that "Arthur" is in fact David McIntyre, a soldier whose actions triggered a previous interstellar war that devastated humanity. This follows Thompson's assertion that "since Arthurian legend is rooted in the past, it is approached by science fiction authors in one of two ways: either they return to the past to offer a technological explanation for certain features of the legend, or else they create characters to re-enact Arthurian roles in a society set in the future."⁹ McIntyre resists the revelation, feverishly reciting the events of the Battle of Camlann (in which Arthur and Mordred slew each other) even as his traumatic memories of the true events bleed through. As fact and fantasy collide, McIntyre hallucinates a black knight – representing Mordred – who stabs him in the back, causing him to lapse into catatonia. He recovers only when Dr. Franklin allows him to complete Arthur's narrative by returning McIntyre's sword to the "Lady of the Lake" – an alien woman who participated in the same battle.

At first, the denoted adaptation used in *Babylon 5* appears to be literal: much like his counterpart in *Gargoyles*, this Arthur is cast in the role of a dormant hero who awakens in a new world and is meant to save it. But the erosion of this concept begins almost immediately: in stark contrast to the youthful, imposing Sleeping King seen in *Gargoyles*, this variant of Arthur is middle-aged and physically unassuming, unable to defeat a small group of thieves without assistance. He is a man out of time whose prime is long past, and his identity is ultimately revealed to be the product of a traumatized mind. This severely undercuts the heroic contexts so strongly embedded within the Arthurian legends, subverting any associations the viewer may have formed at the beginning of the episode: not only is Camelot proven to be fiction, but it becomes the subject of simplistic escapist fantasy. And yet, despite the revelation, it is the physical presence of "Arthur", rather than indirect reference, which sets off the transformative chain of events on the station. Without a physical representation of Arthurian values, "A Late Delivery from Avalon" could not provide its counterpoint to the criticisms offered by *Code Geass*; where the latter uses Arthurian iconography to demonstrate how far removed Britain has become from the values associated with its mythos, it is precisely those values which come to the forefront on *Babylon 5* once the presence of "Arthur" becomes common knowledge. That McIntyre bases his identity on this legend should come as no surprise, as it allows the traumatized soldier to see himself as a flawed figure who remains a symbol of hope, renewal and rebirth, even in the twenty-third century.

Of course, while Arthur is the most visible of Camelot's cast of characters, he is not the only iconic figure to be transposed into a non-Arthurian series. *Justice League* (2001-2004), an animated superhero series based on the popular characters of DC Comics, presents another example of denoted adaptation: in "A Knight of Shadows" (1.20-21), the League – comprised of such iconic characters as Batman, the Flash, Green Lantern and Superman – battle Morgaine le Fay and her son Mordred. As a series, *Justice League* is based on several pre-existing concepts, specifically the narratives and histories of its various members (distilled from decades of published adventures), but this universe also features a curious mix of science and fantasy: Superman, an alien being, shares the same ontological space with Wonder Woman, an Amazon descended from Greek mythology, and with Batman, an urban vigilante whose "normality" does not prevent him from participating in more esoteric stories. This allows for a much smoother integration of Camelot into the history of this world. "A Knight of Shadows" begins with a prologue set in the distant past, as Morgaine and Mordred lead their inhuman armies against the last defenders of Camelot. Jason Blood (a character native to DC Comics rather than the Arthurian mythos) betrays his king for love of Morgaine, and is bound by Merlin to the immortal demon Etrigan as punishment. Though the opening moments of the episode are completely removed from the established temporal/spatial setting of the series and feature none of the main characters, there is no inherent generic paradox such as that which makes Arthur's presence in *Babylon 5* so disruptive (such as an implicit confirmation of the existence of magic in a world defined by scientific discourse).

Centuries later, Etrigan seeks out Batman and reveals that Morgaine le Fay and Mordred have survived to the present day and are seeking the Philosopher's Stone: "According to legend, it was a gem from the hilt of Excalibur, and the true source of the sword's fabled power" (1.20). Morgaine's goal is to "resurrect" Camelot and place her son on the throne – in essence, she intends to rewrite the familiar narrative so that events unfold in her favor. In the initial stages of the conflict, Morgaine has the upper hand due to the League's inexperience in combating magical opponents; this allows the Arthurian villain to complete her primary objective and obtain the Philosopher's Stone. She then performs a ritual that converts all of London into a massive medieval castle, meant to serve as Mordred's capital. In keeping with the tropes and conventions of the superhero genre, both Morgaine and Mordred are eventually defeated, only to escape and swear revenge. Where *Babylon 5* was compelled by its own generic guidelines to disprove any possibility that Camelot could have truly existed, *Justice League* is able to manifest Morgaine le Fay and her son as implants taken directly from a version of the Arthurian canon.

Having established various methods by which non-Arthurian series may temporarily adapt narrative patterns and symbols associated with Camelot, the question remains: what is the purpose of these adaptations? Why do fictional worlds with little or no generic connection to King Arthur make use of this repertoire? Thomas Cousineau offers one possible answer in *Ritual Unbound*, where he suggests a modern desire to deflate classic mythical sources:

Modernist fiction [...] frequently features a protagonist beneath whose ostensibly realistic adventures we detect perceptible mythic resonances. [...] Each of these figures, in obedience to the conventions of novelistic realism, is placed in a reasonably plausible story that is not overtly related to primitive rituals. At the same time, however, the authors of these novels often disturb their realistic surfaces with incongruous details that suddenly allow us to glimpse their mythic substrata.¹⁰

Though Cousineau focuses specifically on the realistic fiction of Virginia Woolf, many of the aforementioned adaptations perform this exact function of subversion: for Xena, Excalibur is an afterthought, symbolizing her own decision (and that of the series' writers) to move away from the formulaic identity of the Arthurian hero. David McIntyre's heroic aspirations ultimately amount to nothing more than a safeguard against his guilt, a revelation which demystifies the character, if not the King of Camelot; and while many inhabitants of Babylon 5 are willing to accept "Arthur" for who he is (as he espouses ideals of honor and chivalry that are desirable in the more cynical future setting), McIntyre's actions only confirm that Arthur never existed, and could not have existed, in this world. Finally, the references in *Code Geass* are similarly tainted by their association with the Britannian Empire, which proves itself utterly incapable of living up to Arthurian ideals.

These uses of Arthurian patterns have a distinctly negative context, as they are designed to diminish the heroic themes broadly assumed to be inherent in the Camelot mythos. The desire for subversion cannot account for every act of adaptation, however, as many direct and indirect uses of Arthurian symbols are cast in a positive light: the Sleeping King is an honorable friend and ally to the protagonists of *Gargoyles*, while Buffy's reenactment of Arthur's ascension promotes her from solitary hero to legendary leader. Here Thompson suggests an alternate motivation, in that the manifestations of these patterns "deepen our understanding of the legend by allowing us to view it from an unfamiliar perspective."¹¹ In other words, while these series are not centered on Camelot and its inhabitants, they may still invoke echoes of the legend as tribute rather than critique, and the viewer is able to understand and appreciate these series differently when viewed through Arthurian contexts (for example, the members of the Justice League are all the more impressive for having thwarted an opponent as mythical as Morgaine le Fay).

Whether the intent is subversive or affirmative, adapting the Arthurian milieu is a deliberate and specific choice, one motivated by something more than the relatively simple desire to pay homage to a widely recognized and popular legend. By creating explicit and implicit links to Camelot – links that are temporary, spanning one or two episodes at most – these serialized narratives are able to briefly distance themselves from the overly familiar Campbellian structure of departure/initiation/return without compromising their own premises. Whether these adaptations uphold Arthurian values or dismiss them, their very presence suggests that the concept of Camelot provides a strong and fertile alternative for the construction of heroic narratives.

NOTES

1. Bert Olton, "Was That in the Vulgate? Arthurian Legend in TV Film and Series Episodes." *King Arthur in Popular Culture*. ed. Elizabeth S. Sklar and Donald L. Hoffman. Jefferson: McFarland, 2002, p. 97.
2. John Fiske, *Television Culture*. New York: Routledge, 1987, p. 108.
3. Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2004, p. 28.
4. Campbell, p. 34.
5. This represents another example of anachronism, as the two historical figures lived nearly a century apart.
6. All television series are referred to by season and episode number.
7. Raymond H. Thompson, "Arthurian Legend in Science Fiction and Fantasy." *King Arthur Through The Ages*. ed. Valerie M. Lagorio and Mildred Leake Day. New York: Garland, 1990, p. 223.
8. Kristina Hildebrand, "Knights in Space: The Arthur of Babylon 5 and Dr. Who." *King Arthur in Popular Culture*. ed. Elizabeth S. Sklar and Donald L. Hoffman. Jefferson: McFarland, 2002, p. 104.
9. Thompson, p. 224.
10. Thomas J. Cousineau, *Ritual Unbound: Reading Sacrifice in Modernist Fiction*. Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2004, p. 15.
11. Thompson, p. 235.



Author bio:

Shawn Edrei is currently pursuing a doctorate at Tel-Aviv University, focusing on interactive narratology and the literature of the digital age. His most recent essay on evil physicality in video games was published in Praeger's *A History of Evil in Popular Culture*. Shawn will also be wading into the uncharted waters of creative writing later this year with his short story collection *Tales from Sunny Vale*.



Once and Future: Adaptations of Camelot in Non-Arthurian Television Narratives by Shawn Edrei is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nd/4.0/)

ISSN 1558478X