

‘Many a story is but a crooked way to the truth’? Lessons from the Past as Truths for the Present in a Selection of Arthurian Young Adult Disaster Fictions

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Abstract

The myth of King Arthur has been used for many purposes. In post-disaster fiction for young adults, the Arthurian myth has been drawn upon by a number of authors to advocate unity and equality as major factors in creating a just and peaceful world. This article focuses on seven texts set after major global disaster caused by human action has devastated, or is threatening to devastate, the world of the implied present-day reader. The texts for discussion are Ron Langenus' *Merlin's Return*; Janice Elliott's *The King Awakes* and *The Empty Throne*; and Pamela Service's *Winter of Magic's Return*, *Tomorrow's Magic*, *Yesterday's Magic*, and *Earth's Magic*. Although King Arthur is portrayed differently by the three authors, he is presented as a figurehead of unity and peace in all of the texts, and the texts all transpose contemporary values held by the implied author and the implied reader onto what the texts present as 'King Arthur's time', in order to suggest that greed, selfishness, and lust for power contributed to the destruction of King Arthur's society, and are also threatening to destroy the world of the implied reader. Drawing upon Foucault's concept of the regime of truth, this article demonstrates that the forms of the Arthurian myth used in the texts for discussion are, however, inherently gendered and nationalistic, and thus subvert the ideas of equality and unity that the texts seek to present.

Keywords: Arthurian fiction, post-disaster fiction, young adult literature, truth in fiction, presentism, King Arthur, Merlin

Introduction — The Once and Future King Preventing the Once and Future Disaster

Many scholars have observed that literature written for young people seeks to influence its target audience.¹ Fiction about world-changing disasters often (although not always: see

Braithwaite 2010) carries an implicit message to the young reader that it is important to take steps to avoid the disaster in the text from becoming reality, or at least to challenge the views and behaviours that led – or might lead – to the disaster.² Clare Bradford explains that ‘The medieval is a durable element in [post-disaster] scenarios because it is a flexible and recognisable cultural sign, readily invoked as a distant antecedent of post-disaster futures, either dystopian or utopian’ (2015, p. 58). This article will focus on seven texts for young readers, each set after a major disaster caused by human action has devastated or is threatening to devastate the world, and all of which draw upon characters from Arthurian myth. The texts for discussion are Ron Langenus’ *Merlin’s Return* (1993); Janice Elliott’s the Sword and the Dream novels, *The King Awakes* (1987) and its sequel *The Empty Throne* (1988); and Pamela F. Service’s the New Magic trilogy.³ The trilogy comprises *Winter of Magic’s Return* (1985) and *Tomorrow’s Magic* (1987) (republished as a single volume in 2007 as *Tomorrow’s Magic*), *Yesterday’s Magic* (2008), and *Earth’s Magic* (2009).

Helen Fulton writes that ‘Arthurian literature of all ages and in all forms is effectively a site of ideological struggle, a place where competing viewpoints engage in complex dialectics, interrogating contemporary concerns’ (2009, pp. 1-2). This article argues that while the texts draw upon constructions of Arthurian myth to present certain ‘truths’ about the human condition — most notably the importance of unity and equality as ways to maintain or bring about a peaceful world — they draw upon forms of this myth which subvert the ideals of equality that they ostensibly espouse.

All the novels draw on ‘presentism’ – in other words, the imposition onto the past of contemporary values held by the implied author and the implied reader.⁴ The texts rely on presentism in that they present the hypothesis that what destroyed the world in Arthur’s time

(the issue of ‘Arthur’s time’ is discussed more fully below) can still destroy that of the implied reader, and these issues include problems associated with greed, selfishness, and lust for power. Such problems are depicted in the texts as having destroyed Arthur’s society, and it is implied that they have also led to the devastation of the late twentieth/early twenty-first century Western society. In this way the texts fit into ‘continuist understandings’ in that they ‘construct grand narratives which focus on the commonalities and connections between past and present, interpreting past texts, artefacts and events in the light of the *now* in which they are read, viewed and examined’ (Bradford 2015, p. 41, emphasis in original). The ways in which the Arthurian legend is used in the texts for analysis rely on this understanding. Thus, the implication is that lessons can be learned from Arthur’s time not in terms of the actions of one or two individual people, but rather in terms of aspects of human behaviour, which are portrayed as being largely responsible for the disaster. The ‘truths’ from Arthur’s time are therefore presented as lessons for the implied reader to think about in order to prevent the disaster in the text from becoming reality.

What Is Truth?

Richard Gaskin writes that ‘*all* literature, including literature that is (quite properly) categorized as fictional, has factualist aspects: for example there will be ... truths of a general nature that any work of literature, not matter how outlandish its imaginings, aims to track’ (2013, p. 38, emphasis in original). This article will analyse what ‘truths of a general nature’ are presented in the Arthurian young adult novels and what unexamined assumptions are behind them. However, even in a general sense, the concept of ‘truth’ is notoriously difficult to define. As Jaroslav Peregrin argues, ‘the nature of truth is ... one of the central

philosophical conundrums' and one which has been debated for centuries (1999, p. vii), a debate which has included the assertion that truth by its nature is indefinable (Davidson 1996, p. 265). Joseph Fernandez similarly contends that truth as a term 'has exercised minds over the millennia but still eludes definition' (2009, p. 53).

Defining truth has become even more problematic in our 'post-truth' era (Oosterom 2022, p. 255). Lee McIntyre explains that the concept of post-truth has a long genesis, but that tendencies towards post-truth have been compounded by the changes in the ways in which the public receives news via social media and other modern forms of widespread communication (2018, p. 14). McIntyre writes that post-truth alerts us to the understanding that '*facts are subordinate to our political point of view*' (2018, p. 11, emphasis in original). In other words, politics and truth are unavoidably linked, whether they be party politics at a local, national or international level, the 'body politic', or individually.⁵ As Dryzek et al. explain, "'The political'" tends to connote, minimally, some form of individual or collective action that disrupts ordinary states of affairs, normal life, or routine patterns of behavior or governance' (2006, p. 6).

It is therefore beyond the scope of this article to offer a comprehensive tour of the various meanings, beliefs and understandings that have, over the centuries, been assigned to the signifier 'truth'. The central concept regarding truth for this article will be Michel Foucault's 'regime of truth':

Each society has its regime of truth, its 'general politics' of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is

sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true. (1980, p. 131)

In other words, truth functions in relation to power: what is allowed to be regarded as true in a given body politic; who the people or institutions are that determine what can or cannot be said; and how this creates an illusion of truth which perpetuates the way power operates in that society. Power in this context is understood both as individual agency, and as ‘the right and authority of influencing other people and decid[ing] about them’ (Ricken 2006, p. 543).

The regime of truth is especially relevant to the Arthurian myth given that, as this article will demonstrate, the myth in the various forms it takes within the books tends to have a masculine and British nationalistic bias and thus, despite claims of equality, by its very nature renders some voices lesser. John Stephens writes that ‘[s]ince at least the 1960s, ... the discourse of fantasy characteristically embod[ies] liberal humanist concepts’ (1992a, p. 243), and this article aims to demonstrate the naturalised and unexamined ideologies in the way the Arthurian myth is employed in the texts. Stephens also explains that truth, for ‘advocates of fantasy’ refers to ‘a transcendent entity which imparts meaning to life’ (1992a, p. 242). This article asks in what way is ‘meaning’ presented in the texts in relation to the regime of truth of the Arthurian myth drawn upon in a given text; how does this position the implied young adult audience to consider what problems led to or are threatening to cause the disaster; and how these might be solved in the wider world in an effort to prevent the cataclysm from becoming reality. Additionally, there is the question of what it means to have power and agency: whose voices are listened to or silenced, and what points of view are naturalised or unexamined.

The Once and Future Myth — The Copy Without an Original

The concept of an ‘Arthurian myth’ is difficult to define. Fulton explains:

[T]here is no ‘original’ Arthur and no originary or authentic Arthurian legend [I]t is possible to interpret Arthur as a simulacrum—that is, as a copy which has no original.

The textual Arthurs that survive are reformatted copies of earlier ideas of Arthur, referring always to each other but never to an originary Arthur, since such a person cannot be identified or retrieved. (2009, p. 1)

In historical terms, therefore, there is no ‘true’ Arthur. As Fulton explains, however, ‘There are ... ideas — of leadership, kingship, empire, nation, social identity, religion, power — which, in order to be represented, require corporeal form and have, at various times and in different combinations, realized themselves through Arthurian characters’ (2009, p. 1).

Merlin’s Return, the *Sword and the Dream* novels, and the *New Magic* trilogy all assert that there was a ‘real’ corporeal Arthur, but that he is different from the myths that have grown around him. Fulton’s categories of ‘leadership, kingship, empire, nation, social identity, religion [and] power’, to which I will add ‘gender’, are drawn upon in these books to present solutions to the issue of either the impending disaster or preventing the disaster from eventuating in the world of the implied reader. Hence, the use of Arthurian myth is deeply political, given that it is connected to government, notions of power, and both collective and individual action.

These texts all suggest that certain truths from the past can be used to improve the present and protect the future, mainly in relation to notions of unity and respect for others. The concepts of ‘past’ and ‘present’, however, take on notable complexities in futuristic fiction, given that the implied reader’s present is the past of the text. As John Stephens writes:

[P]ost-disaster fiction evokes a deep past which usually approximates to the reader's present, and hence its moral and political lessons are cast back to the moment at which the text is being *read*. ... [B]ecause the message of such a book applies at the moment of reading, then the possibility of a new beginning is also displaced into the moment of reading, so that history always begins *now*, rather than *before*. (1992b, p. 126, emphasis in original)

With Arthurian texts, there is an extra layer of the past, namely the past that is constructed as being Arthur's time as well as that of the implied reader's 'now' which is the 'history' of the text in terms of its narrative chronology. Diana Wallace writes that:

In reading any historical novel we are engaging with at least three different historical moments. There is the period in which the novel is set, the period in which it is written, and the period in which we are reading it. (2013, p. 211)

While the novels for study are not technically historical novels given that there is no evidence of a real Arthur, they nonetheless present Arthur as a historical figure in some way, and so therefore 'Arthur's time' becomes the first of Wallace's three periods of time. However, as de Groot explains, historical fiction has a central paradox, namely: 'the consciously false realist representation of something which can never be known' (2009, p. 113). This is especially true of Arthurian fiction given the lack of agreement about whether Arthur in fact existed. The attributes given to Arthur, though, are consistent: he is a symbol of unity, of leadership, and the desire for a better world, which can explain the relevance of that particular trope for fiction seeking to advocate a more positive future: Arthur is ostensibly a figurehead for a more just and equitable way of living (although, as will be argued below, the forms of Arthurian myth used are inherently limited in the extent to which they promote equality).⁶

The presentism is very clear in Langenus' *Merlin's Return*. The novel is set in a fictionalised 1995 and involves a six-year-old Merlin, who, after having been kept in an enchanted sleep, materialises at Stonehenge. As in T. H. White's *The Once and Future King* (1958), Merlin lives backwards, and thus has the wisdom of his previous life. His task is to save the world from polluting itself into destruction, and he is successful in this mission with the assistance of a group of young people who work with the reawakened Knights of the Round Table. Towards the end of the novel, a nuclear bomb is revealed to have previously been detonated but, instead of destroying the world, that bomb sent the earth spinning backwards until it came to a standstill, after which it rotated again in its usual direction to create the 'Second Time', in which the book is set. When Merlin explains what destroyed Camelot, his explanation also expresses problems of the twentieth-century world:

'Arthur gave [Mordred] command of the army [and] hoped that in this important function, Mordred would grow into a better and more contented man, but he was wrong. ... Arthur had made a mistake: not Excalibur — power — was the symbol, but the scabbard, in which power is kept in check. One cannot make a better world without power, but its abuse must be prevented by knowledge through instruction and education, respect for the planet on which we live and who is indeed our mother, and for our sun, the all-father standing in the sky, and for all living creatures who are brothers and sisters'. (Langenus 1993, p. 47)

This description thus puts the reason for the end of Arthur's reign less at the hands of individual people, although Mordred's greed clearly contributes, and positions the reader more to see the demise of Camelot as caused by human self-centredness and disrespect for the planet. This same self-centredness and environmental disrespect are also by the schoolboy

Wizzo, as the cause of the threat to the world in the late twentieth century: ‘This contamination of nature is our common enemy, which must bind together all people, regardless of race, colour, nationality, political persuasion or religion, before it is too late’ (p. 154). The reader is thereby positioned to see Merlin’s theory about the destruction of Arthur’s reign, and Wizzo’s ideas about the reason for the threat facing twenty-first-century life as ‘true’ because of the alignment in the text between them: there is no sense of one being fiction and the other ‘truth’.

Merlin’s Return works hard to establish its construction of Arthurian myth as true, and to involve the reader in this. It begins with an introduction directly addressing the implied young reader: ‘Did you ever hear about King Arthur?’ and then speaks of how Arthur was ‘a very special king’ who lived in the fifth century, ‘the first [in his country] who tried to put justice in the place of might [and who] believed in fair play for everyone’ (Langenus 1993, p. 5). The reader is thus positioned to believe that King Arthur truly existed and is aligned with the implied author against those people who argue that Arthur, Guinevere, the knights of the Round Table and Merlin ‘could never *really* have lived’ (p. 5, emphasis in original). The final paragraph in the introduction begins, ‘This is a true story, written straight from Merlin’s mouth. I made up nothing’ and is signed ‘Ron’ (which is the author’s first name) (1993, p. 6). This positions the young reader to side with the implied author, in the sense of ‘it’s you and me against those people who wrongly claim that King Arthur, Guinevere, Merlin and the Round Table knights did not exist’. The metafictional statement that ‘this is a true story’ combined with the subsequent list of ‘elves and fairies, dragons and giants’ as creatures who ‘*almost* died out’ (p. 6, emphasis added) foregrounds the suspension of disbelief. This juxtaposition of what is clearly fiction (the ‘true story’) with the fantastical creatures who by

implication are still existing given that they ‘almost died out’, along with the first name of the author, creates a space for the reader to consider what might be true in the book, and in what ways it might be true.

The description of the people of fifth-century England regarding Arthur as the ‘bright light shining in the darkness’ (p. 5) presents Arthur as a type of Christ figure.⁷ Several times in *Merlin’s Return* there are references to Christian discourses: on his arrival, Merlin says, ‘As Lazarus said: “Here I am, back again”’, a reference to Christ’s raising of Lazarus from the dead (John 11: 39-46). The cryptic letter explaining how to find Camelot contains a clue referring to ‘the son of our Father and his Mother’ (p. 53), which is revealed to be Jesus. It also contains a reference to the Jesus Oak (p. 53). In his explanation to his mother, Yentl, about when the atom bomb that was expected to obliterate the world but instead sent it spinning in the opposite direction was detonated, Merlin poses the question: ‘*Did that bomb hit a geologically sensitive spot? Was it the hand of God himself that gave the world a terrible blow to punish and to save it?*’ (p. 166, emphasis in original). These references to Christianity are presented in such a way that the reader is presumed to be both familiar and comfortable with them, and hence they form a ‘regime of truth’ in terms of mainstream Christian discourse, with which Arthur is aligned. In this regime of truth, non-Christian voices are silenced, and Christianity assumed to be the dominant discourse.

Further authority is attributed to Arthur in the scene in which Merlin reads *Twenty Centuries of Civilisation: The Facts*. Merlin is moved to tears as he encounters references to events such as Bloody Sunday, on which peaceful protesters in the city of Derry were fired upon by the British Army, with fourteen of those protesters dying as a result (Dawson 2005, p. 151); ‘30 January 1972 [on which] the army of Scowaleng shot dead fourteen citizens of

the Emerald Island, who were taking part in a peaceful demonstration', and also the street urchins of '*the City of Sao Paulo, in the south of the West*' and the extermination '[d]uring the Second World War [of] six million innocent Jewish people' (Langenus 1993, pp. 94-95, emphasis in original). The events and situations depicted in the book could all be verified according to a late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century 'regime of truth' if a reader were prepared to research the places towards which the city and country titles gesture. The inclusion of real-world examples of profound injustice perpetrated on innocent people is another technique by which the implied reader is positioned to see the story as 'true'. Merlin's lament about how Arthur's dream for the future did not come true links the wisdom of the fifth-century Arthur with the implied reader's present, as if to suggest that — had the world learned from the mistakes of Arthur's time — none of the tragic events listed in *Twenty Centuries of Civilisation: The Facts* would have happened. Notably, the book title itself is fictitious, but the sub-heading 'the facts' reminds the reader that the events contained therein actually happened.

The Ordinary Becomes Extraordinary — We Can Play Our Part

One of the 'truths' in *Merlin's Return*, is that ordinary people can achieve great outcomes through being industrious, not through having particular talents. The importance of Arthur being an ordinary, hard-working person – not someone with special innate powers, except perhaps higher than average intelligence – contrasts with the legends that Merlin explains and then discards:

It says in the books that his father was the former King Uther Pendragon, but that is incorrect, although I am responsible for that bit of fabrication myself. I spread it about

because I believed that the knights of Scowaleng would more readily accept Arthur as their leader, because he was of royal descent. However, his father and mother were slaves, who worked on the land of that same King Uther.

...

It was my intention to make the secret of the sword, and also of Arthur's origin, known to all once he had proved his worth as a king; when it would be clear to everyone that the new idea of equal justice for all was indeed workable. But I did not have sufficient time for it then. (Langenus 1993, pp. 36-37)

What is important about Arthur, therefore, is that he is not someone endowed with great gifts or born to rule. The sword, Excalibur, had no magic power, but instead it was the strength that Arthur had gained through many hours of working in the fields as the son of slaves that gave the illusion that the sword had its own agency. Thus, in terms of Fulton's list of 'kingship, empire, nation, social identity, religion, power', Arthur's agency comes not from hereditary kingship but from hard work and the intelligence that led him to think of the Round Table. The reader is therefore positioned to see Arthur as a human to be admired, not a king with superhuman abilities.

Although the text works hard to establish Arthur as a leader, ultimately the solution to the environmental threat to the world comes from Wizzo — one of the young people who has travelled to Avalon with Merlin to awaken Arthur and his knights. The knights are presented as a kind of United Nations, each from a different country. The solution to the problem of environmental damage to send these knights back to their respective countries to:

teach your people that a tree is worth more than a pot full of money. When this story will be made known, you shall ... become celebrities, national heroes. Use your fame

to save the world under the guidance of the Arthur, the Eternal King, the king who is the land. (Langenus 1993, p. 154)

The power here does not belong so much to Arthur as to the young people who find the answer. As Margot Hillel argues: ‘Children’s literature contains recurring tropes, and among these is that of the child as savior, a figure that necessarily implies inadequate adults’ (2003, p. 67). Arthur may be the figure that stands for unity, the adult who has the power to effect change in the wider world, but the impetus for altering practices presented as leading to disaster has come from the children, led by Merlin, who has both the power of being a child and the wisdom of having lived for centuries. Although the knights can use their fame to save the world, the idea has come from an ordinary child, not so very different from the implied young adult reader.

This idea of the ordinary being important also manifests itself in Janice Elliott’s *Sword and the Dream* novels. They are set several generations after nuclear disaster known as the Catastrophe. *The King Awakes* is set in a quasi-medieval time and centres on teenager Red, who is forced to leave his village along with his mother, Bron, and baby sister, Rowena. Red’s father dies early in the narrative after giving Red a horn to blow in times of great danger to summon Arthur. When Red and his family travel to the far-off Isles of the Blest, Arthur goes with them. On the Isles of the Blest, the mystery of the Forbidden Knowledge is uncovered, which ultimately proves to be science. At the climax of the novel Arthur saves Red, Bron, Rowena, and their friends from the evil Haldred the Hunter and his supporters.

In the second novel, *The Empty Throne*, Red’s friend Joss travels to ‘Jerusalem’, as the capital of Britain is now called, and takes control of the city and the country. Red, Bron and Rowena

travel with Joss. In the final conflict with Haldred, Arthur appears on the Abbey throne and, after Haldred refuses Arthur's call to 'Let Britain heal!' (Elliott 1988, p. 166), hands his sword to Red, who kills Haldred in a one-on-one fight. The novel ends with Joss married to Gwen who is Red's sister, crowned King and Queen of Britain, and Red with an implied future with Rosie, Joss' sister, with whom he is in love. Arthur has gone, but the harsh weather has softened, and there is hope for the future.

Elliott's treatment of the Arthurian legend is notably different from the other texts in that Arthur in his first incarnation was a Keltoi soldier (1988, p. 118), rather than a British king, and was the father of children with his wife, Jenyfer (1987, p. 15). Although Arthur is a peacemaker who guards Britain, he cannot stay on earth. He is vulnerable in a way that the Arthurs in the other novels are not, in that he is at the mercy of a power larger than himself. Nonetheless, he remains the symbol of a strong and moral unity. Although the texts are less overtly didactic, clear messages to the reader are evident, such as Arthur's injunction to young protagonist Red that the world 'will be what you make it' (1988, p. 172), and Bron's warning to Red on the dangers of hungering for power (1988, pp. 19-20).

In this conception of the world, Arthur describes himself as a soldier. When Red asks if the sword of Britain was given to him by a wizard, Arthur replies, 'No wizard. I had it from a Druid' (Elliott 1988, p. 180). Just as in Langenus' *Merlin's Return* the solution to the world's problems is thrown firmly back on people, not the paranormal, so too in *The Empty Throne* does Arthur say that he cannot stay 'Because this world is yours, not mine' (1988, p. 172). Nonetheless, in *The King Awakes*, when he is attacked by Haldred, Red blows his horn and a 'magic army' appears: 'Kay, Bedyver, Gareth, Bors, Percyval, all those soldiers of old Britain filling the whole sky, their weapons shining' with Arthur at their head (1987, p. 183). Arthur

himself, however, does not understand entirely what is happening. At the end of *The Empty Throne*, he is unable to explain why he cannot stay with Bron, with whom he has fallen in love: ‘I can’t tell you that any more than I can say how it was that I died and slept and woke again, because I don’t know myself’ (1988, p. 180). Even though he may be a symbol of unity, Arthur is nevertheless at the mercy of a force greater than himself. He now he realises that although he can guide and inspire Red, ultimately he is not of this world, and ordinary people must make the future.

Pamela Service’s New Magic trilogy also suggests that it is possible for ordinary people to have power even without superhuman abilities. The trilogy is set primarily in Britain 500 years after a nuclear war referred to as the Devastation, and centres on three teenagers, Heather, Welly, and Earl, the Merlin character of the Arthurian myth. After various encounters with the evil Morgan, the young people journey to Avalon, where King Arthur is awakened to be brought back to the post-disaster world to save it from threatened destruction. In *Yesterday’s Magic*, Heather is kidnapped by Morgan, who wants to draw on Heather’s magical powers, and the battle at the end of the novel between good and evil is won by Arthur and his supporters. The world remains divided, however, and the final novel – *Earth’s Magic* – finishes with Arthur taking up the suggestion of the Russian Baba Yaga to create an international council for discussion (Service 2009, p. 226) rather than fighting, a notion not dissimilar to the solution at the end of *Merlin’s Return*. The texts set up an opposition between power expressed through manipulating people, and power expressed through love and compassion. Merlin explains to Morgan that ‘[t]he strongest new magic comes from *people*, not things. It comes from their hopes, their fears, their ties with each other’ (2007, p. 426, emphasis in original) and that, far from being a weakness, Merlin’s need to love others

— whether it be in the first Arthurian time or in the post-disaster world — is in fact a strength. Fears and hopes and communication with other people are common human experiences, which means that the young reader by implication can be part of the ‘new magic’ and help to make a better world.

The Myth of Equality — Matters of Race and Gender

In what is implicitly a message to the reader to see all people in the world as equal, Baba Yaga in Service’s *Earth Magic* says: ‘Now that we all know there are lots of mortals and immortals still around, we got to talk, not fight. Sure don’t want things to end up like they did before with folks blowing each other to smithereens’ (Service 2009, p. 225). Baba Yaga is a figure from the folklore of Eastern Europe, who can be either benevolent or dangerous (Johns 2010, p. 3), but in the New Magic trilogy she, like Arthur, is a character with physical manifestation. She is compassionate rather than threatening. Where the first book in the trilogy is set in Britain, the last two books feature the protagonists travelling the globe and becoming more at ease with the ‘new magic’ that is coming into the world. Having the solution for the world’s problems suggested by a figure from Russia is a gesture towards the kind of unified world that the text presents as the way forward.

How equal that world is, however, a matter for conjecture. The texts suggest that it is important not to judge people’s morals or skills on the basis of skin colour or other aspects of their appearance. This includes discriminating against, or being frightened of, ‘muties’, whose ancestors had experienced genetic mutations because of the nuclear disaster (see Service 2007, pp. 8-9). As Merlin explains to Heather:

I don't believe muties are much different from other people [. . .]. Most people are leery of them, I suspect, simply because they are different. They aren't automatically evil.

(Service 2009, p. 51)

Heather suggests that 'everyone alive today, except [Merlin] and Arthur is something of a mutie [because] it was darker skin that helped our ancestors survive the radiation' (2009, p. 52). This implies that dark skin is a mutation, and white skin is not. When Merlin points out that Morgan's skin is white, Heather responds that this is 'more proof that evil and good have nothing to do with mutation or skin colour' (2009, p. 52). Implicitly, the texts are operating in a regime of 'truth' that sees white skin as preferable with Morgan's 'moon-white' skin as part of her 'perfect beauty' (2008, p. 68). Including Morgan's pale skin as one of her defining physical characteristics does little to disrupt the value of white skin.

In *Orientalism*, Edward Said writes that the 'Oriental' is '*contained and represented by dominating frameworks*' (1978, p. 48, emphasis in original), and the dominating framework in the New Magic series is white, Anglo-centric, and anthropocentric. This is true of all the books discussed in this article, given the valorisation of Arthur as a symbol of unity, but is especially prominent in the New Magic series. Not only is white skin implicitly valued more than darker skin (even though Welly and Heather have dark skin, the much more powerful Merlin and Arthur have white skin), but despite the help that other creatures have provided to humans in the defeat of Morgan, the human is still regarded as the norm. Although Arthur thinks Baba Yaga is 'amazing,' he is excited by the other creatures:

But we had even stranger types here. Your black Chinese dragon ... and there were glowing people with lots of arms; a couple of giants; folk that were half horse, half man;

Eldritch; trolls; people with animal heads; and a really fierce golden bird. (Service 2009, p. 226)

The adjective ‘stranger’ is revealing, indicating that Fulton’s ‘site of ideological struggle’ is evident in the clash between a discourse of white, human, Anglo supremacy, and one that sees all beings as equal.

Gender is also an area of ideological struggle. As various critics have noted, the Arthurian legend tends to have a ‘masculine bias’ (Pugh 2003, p. 70), and although the texts under discussion attempt to challenge this, ultimately the reader is likely to be left with a sense that the real agency belongs to the men.⁸ Although Merlin’s mother, Yentl, in *Merlin’s Return*, has the power to send Merlin to live in a different time, that power comes from being his mother, not through any agency of her own as an independent character (Langenus 1993, pp. 166, 174). The final image in the novel is of the new, cleaner world brought about by the (male) Wizzo’s plans and led by Arthur and the knights of the Round Table (1993, p. 175). Similarly, the notion of ‘the Eternal King, the king who is the land’ (1993, p. 154) also suggests that agency and control belong to a male monarch, never a female. This view of the ‘king who is the land’ also links Arthur the king to the way of preventing ecological devastation, which Chase-Dunn and Lawrence note as one of the major impending crises of the twenty-first century (2011, p. 137). This resonates with the link between Arthur and the environment which T.H. White establishes in *The Once and Future King*, in that Merlin educates Arthur in the workings of nature.⁹ It is ‘this idea of ecologically sound principles of cooperation [between humanity and nature] that Arthur seeks to establish’ (Knight 2012, p. 41). Although nature is often aligned with the feminine, it is the masculine who is in focus here; the nod to the feminine cited earlier, namely ‘the planet on which we live and who is

indeed our mother' (Langenus 1993, p. 47), is secondary to the idea of the (masculine) 'king who is the land'.¹⁰

Elliott's *The Sword and the Dream* books also suggest that real power belongs to men. Although Bron is able to communicate telepathically to some extent and has knowledge about the time before the Catastrophe, as well as the knowledge of the legends of Arthur, she is ultimately left vulnerable through her love for Arthur, who cannot stay on this earth. Her son Red has been given the 'true sword of Britain' by Arthur, who leaves for the other world and asks Red to retain Arthur's vision of 'Britain whole again. At peace. ... People in their homesteads and their cities, living without fear' (Elliott 1988, p. 156). Arthur, by virtue of having lived before, and therefore knowing the 'truth' of what has happened in various eras is also able to correct the views that Bron and others have about the myths surrounding Arthur himself. For example, when Bron tells of the 'gallant king and his knights, the sword from the stone, the magical Grail, the sorcerer, the wicked Modret who killed his father', Arthur responds 'A good tale but a tall one' (1987, pp. 121-122). Even though Bron's explanation that '[M]en make the stories they need' (1987, p. 122) may seem reasonable, Arthur still is depicted as knowing what actually happened. Within this 'regime of truth', Arthur's word – drawn from having lived before, which has come about through his privileged, supernatural, and masculinised position of power – is valued above Bron's.

Similarly, despite the power of Heather's magic in the *New Magic* trilogy and her agency in defeating Morgan, the final images in the trilogy are of the power of men. The pregnant Queen Margaret is rendered ill with morning sickness, and the hippopotamus goddess says to Arthur, 'Your queen's doing her job, you do yours' (Service 2009, p. 227). The queen's part in the preceding battle is forgotten; her 'job', it is suggested, is to produce an

heir, and Arthur's is to 'start running this little country of yours' (2009, p. 227). The power of the masculine is also reinscribed at the end of the novel, when Arthur declares, 'And even when all of our names are lost in myth, this time that we have lived together will be remembered!' (p. 228). At this point, Heather is quietly walking with Merlin, and says, 'It's an odd thought ... becoming a myth to people living in the future. ... But then, I guess that's not a new experience for you' (p. 228). In other words, (female) Heather's impact is less than the male Merlin's: the 'regime of truth', therefore, is one in which the female must take second place, even though the presence of the female is crucial for notions of chivalry. This reflects the point that Dorsey Armstrong makes about gender in Malory's *La Morte d'Arthur*, namely that 'the homosocial knightly masculine community depends on the feminine for definition—acts of service to ladies help identify knights as legitimate participants in the Round Table community' (2003, p. 17). Women are important, but largely so that they can legitimise and enable certain behaviours of men. If it is necessary for Arthur and Merlin to be brought out of their mythological slumbers to help the world in the text's present, then they cannot help but be given the status of (masculine) saviours.

Arthur and Merlin's existence in an earlier incarnation also gives them added authority in terms of the text, an authority which Heather does not have, despite having magic that seems more appropriate for the new world than Merlin's (Service 2007, p. 255). When Heather, Welly, Arthur and Merlin are about to leave Avalon, Arthur wonders if he can cope with the pain of kingship, 'taking on other people's pains and problems, being responsible for their lives and happiness and sacrificing your own' (2007, p. 205), as well as the agony of the betrayal he suffered and the pain of seeing what he built destroyed (2007, p. 205). Other voices are silenced, however, the assumptions that Arthur was right in thinking that he knew

what other people needed and whether this model of kingship is accurate are never interrogated. Merlin responds that:

You didn't relish coming back, because you knew what you were in for. But maybe, because we *do* know what we're in for, we can do better this time. We know our mistakes and the ones made after us. Maybe we can see the danger signals. Maybe we can set things on the right road so this doesn't happen again. (2007, pp. 209-210, emphasis in original)

Merlin reinscribes both himself and Arthur as the judges of the 'right road', by virtue of their experience, but there is no interrogation of whether their conclusions are correct.

Whose Truths?

Unity and — at face value — equality are the kinds of truths presented in these texts as the way forward for a more just and equitable world. The texts suggest that ordinary young people can help make the world a better place: no special talents or skills are needed, just the desire for a better future for all and the willingness to work hard and take appropriate risks. Just how equal that future world will be, however, when its inspiration is taken from a nation-centric, military or royal, masculinist symbol, is open to question. Although the Arthurian myth presented here espouses equality and fairness and is therefore a suitable trope for works that advocate a better world, the myth operates within a regime of truth that keeps many voices lesser: most notably anyone who is not male, British, and able-bodied. By not interrogating the Arthurian myth but rather transferring late-twentieth-century and early twenty-first-century concerns onto the Arthurian characters, the texts reinscribe the intrinsic inequity of the myth. Despite strong female characters such as Bron in *The Sword* and the

Dream books with her courage, intelligence, determination (and nascent telepathic ability); Heather in the New Magic trilogy with her close connection with nature, and Yentl in *Merlin's Return* with her capacity to send her son back and forward in time, the enduring power belongs to men as agents and leaders of change. Furthermore, these men are Western, Anglo men who are part of a hierarchical structure which the books infer is intrinsic to the Arthurian myth in its various forms. The texts therefore imply that the 'truth', however the term is defined, is that genuine equality can only ever be a dream.¹¹

Notes

1. See, for example, Stephens 1992a, p. 8; Nelson 2014, p.15; Gruner 2009, p. 216; Bradford 2015, pp. 11-12.
2. See Stephens 1992b.
3. Elliott's novels are also known as the Sword and the Dream novels.
4. See Power 2003, p. 425.
5. 'Body politic' is a much-contested and debated term, but I am going to skirt the battlefield here and take the Merriam-Webster third definition (2023) of 'body politic' as 'a people considered as a collective unit'.
6. As various critics have noted (see Glazer 1986, p. 87; Braithwaite 2007, pp. 87-89), the disaster depicted in post-disaster fiction is commonly attributed to flaws in general human attitudes (such as greed, selfishness, lack of respect for the world) rather than the actions of a particular person or group of people. For example, in post-nuclear fiction, whether the detonation of nuclear weapons came about intentionally or by accident is often unclear, and

the texts indicate that it is irrelevant who fired the first shot, or whether it was intended: the aftermath is most significant, and how people struggle to survive in the post-disaster world.

7. Christ speaks of himself as ‘the light [which] has come into the world’ (John 3: 19).

8. See also Aronstein 1995 and Kellogg 2003.

9. See, for example, when Merlin turns Wart — Arthur — into a fish, and Wart feels the beauty of swimming underwater in this guise, but also the threat of attack by the large pike in White’s novel (1939, pp. 63-73).

10. See Liu et al. 2019.

11. The author of this paper would like to thank Associate Professor Tony Eaton, Associate Professor Ray Misson, and the anonymous reviewers, for their feedback on earlier versions of the manuscript.

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