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The Formation of the Arthurian Children's Canon

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Introduction

It is clear to readers of the Middle English *Morte d'Arthur* that Sir Thomas Malory's romance is not meant to be a children's book, yet, between 1862 and 1910, children's writers published an influx of stories based on Malory. James Knowles, Sidney Lanier, and Howard Pyle popularized the Arthurian legends for the 20th century, but they also simplified Malory's themes. Arthurian literature, once a complex and nebulous medieval myth, became synonymous with children's literature at the beginning of the 20th century through new work that synthesized an Arthurian canon. These new works aimed at juvenile readers function both dependently and independently from *Le Morte d'Arthur*. The morals pushed by 19th and 20th century writers, reshaped the figure of Arthur into a powerful exemplar for young readers. Themes of power, perfection, and chivalry were so successful in early 20th century Arthurian fiction that adapting Arthur outside of children's fiction has become difficult. The Arthur most readers know today is not the medieval Arthur, but an Arthur synthesized in the early 20th century.

Thesis

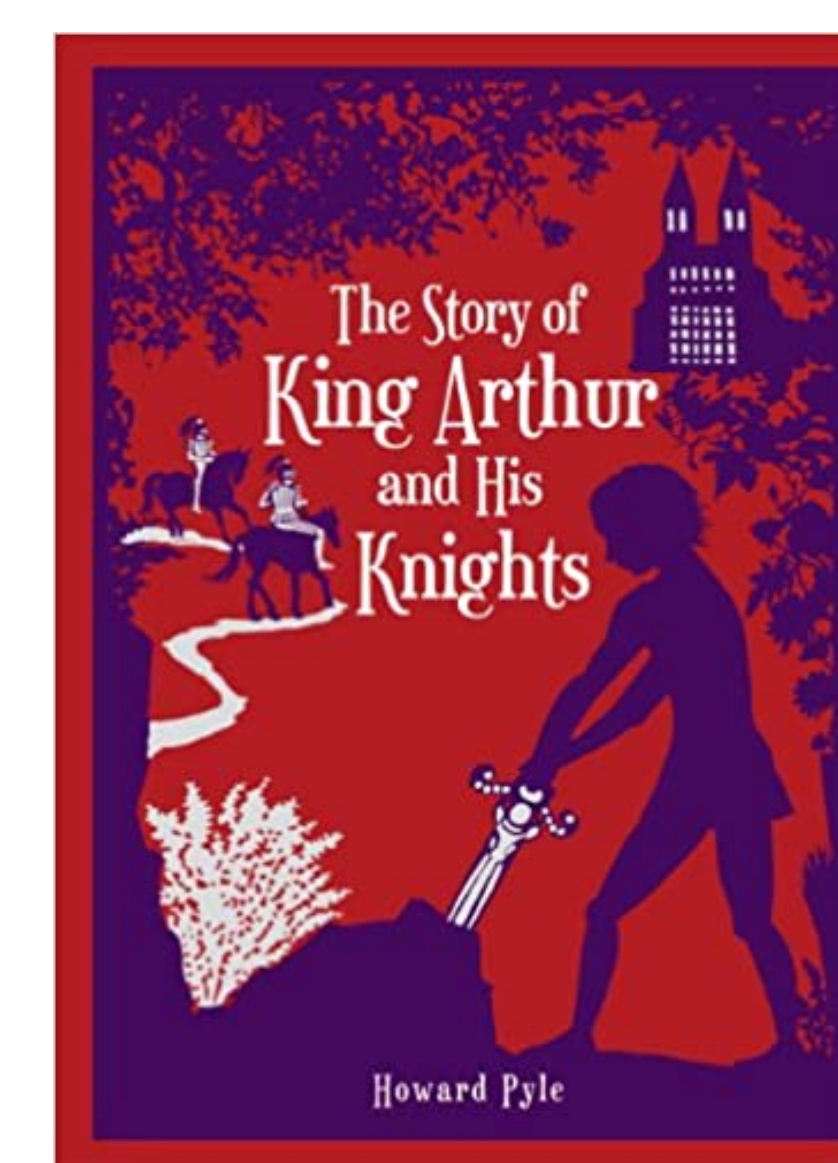
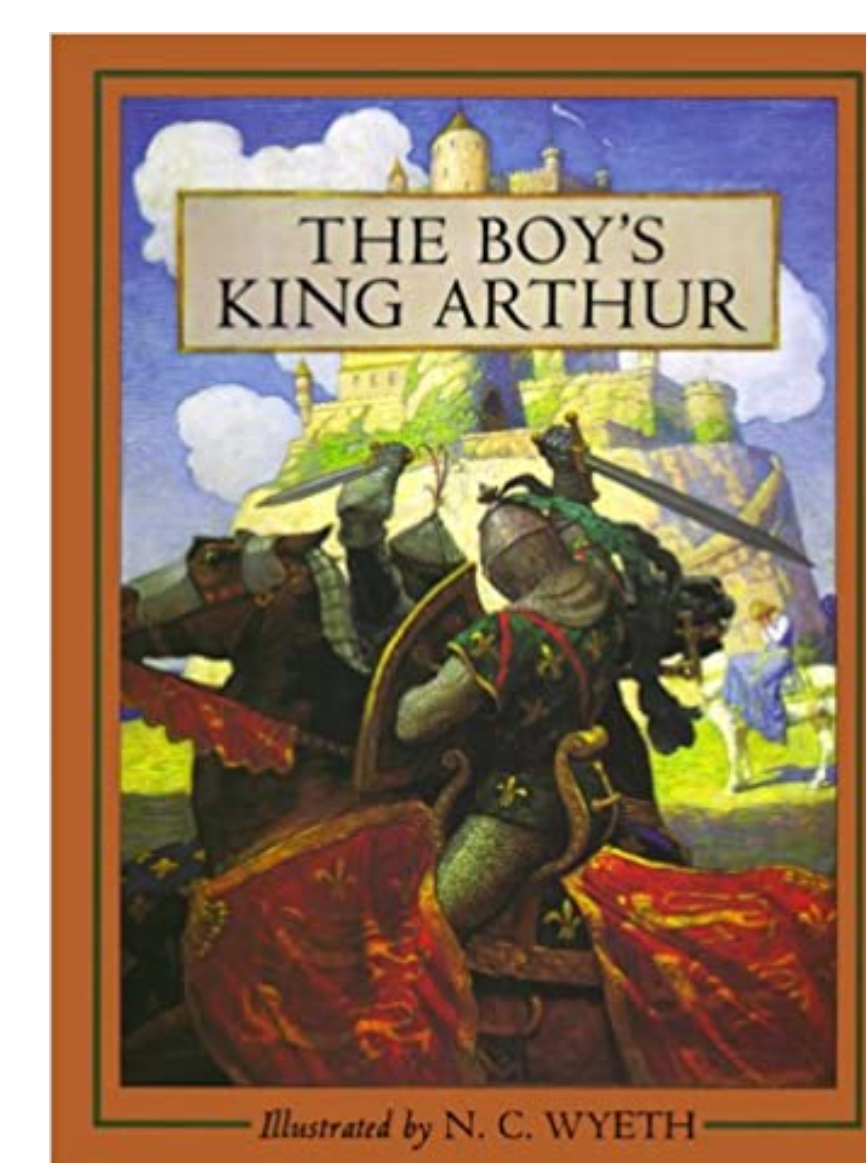
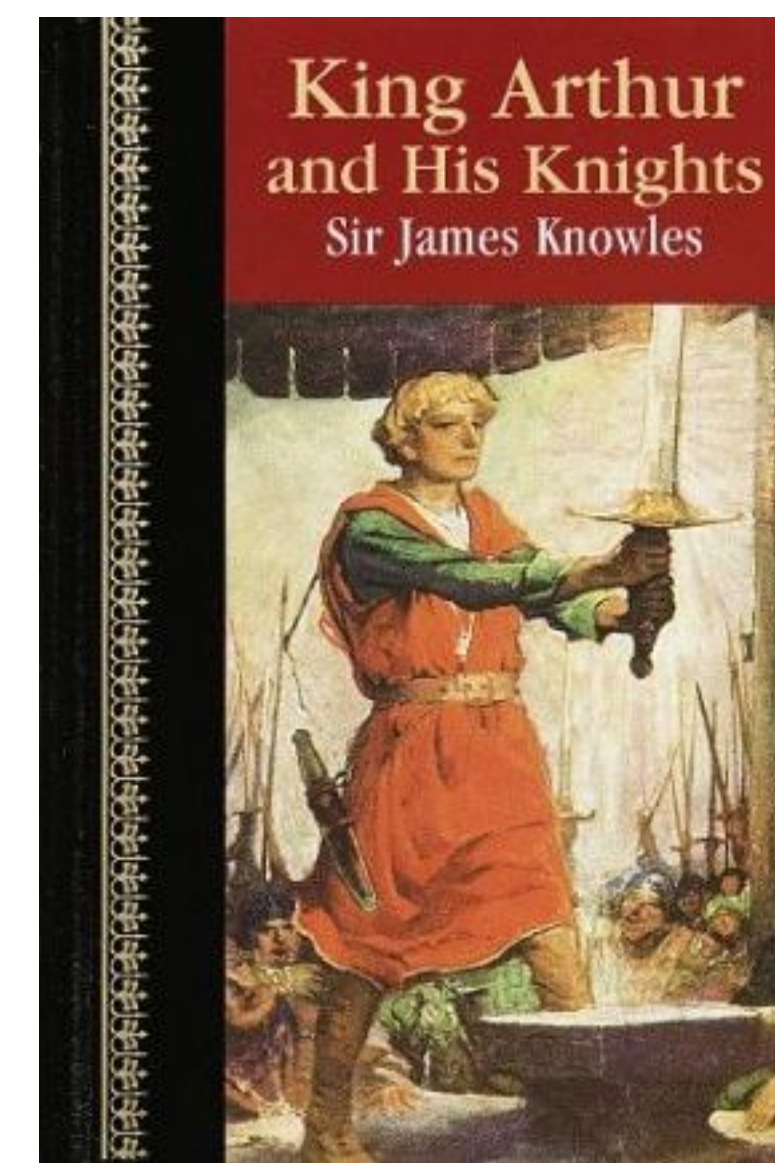
In the nearly one hundred years between the publication of Knowles' *The Story of King Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table* and the release of Disney's *The Sword in the Stone*, Malory's complex, adult folk tale was adapted into a simplified and cohesive moral story. Knowles, Lanier, and Pyle lifted plots from Malory, but removed contradicting threads and intricacies of Malory's voice that marked the book as a collection or compilation. Children's adaptations redefined Arthurian stories into a body of work for children and drove the newly formed canon into a creative dead end.

Elementary Education and The Necessary Formation of Arthurian and Children's Canons

Beginning in the 1860s, there was a revival of Arthurian literature for children. In 1915, A. Smith suggested that a young reader "'should be recognized for what he is: a being who is repeating in little the history of his race' and thus who should, at age nine, be reading 'Norse, Greek and Arthurian legends, Mallory, ballads, epics...'" (Marsh 252). Views similar to Smith's persisted into the 1940s, when the British Board of Education suggested the creation of a children's canon to be used in primary education. The Board specifically mentions the Old Testament and Arthurian legends, and states that they "are part of our national heritage" (Marsh 252).

The concept of a "literary canon" restructured the way English was taught in schools, from the university level to children just learning how to read. As the "national folklore of Britain," the Arthurian legends were inherently a part of the literary canon, though split up across various fragmented medieval romances. Arthurian legend was novelized in order to instruct children and to continue the Arthurian tradition into the present day. Overwhelmingly in children's literature, the audience of the "informal social education" were middle class boys. Lanier's adaptation, *The Boy's King Arthur*, defines the work's audience clearly in the title, and Pyle's work also addresses boy readers. In the essay, "Howard Pyle's *The Story of King Arthur and His Knights* and the Bourgeois Boy Reader," Julie Nelson Couch explains that in the early-20th century, "American children's literature had embraced and developed the association of virtue with social class, specifically the ascendant white Protestant middle-class and its capitalist and imperialist priorities" (39). Essentially, Pyle embraces the idea of the "young American noble" and writes specifically for that audience in the way that he links his readers with Arthur and the knights of the Round Table.

Morality and Virtue in the Work of Knowles, Lanier, and Pyle



Knowles thought of Arthurian stories as inherent children's literature, mourning that in the 1860s, Malory was, in general, "a treat for scholars rather than for the general reader, who would find it too long, too monotonous, and too obscure. Still less is it fitted for boys, who would probably become the principal readers of the Arthur legends in popular form" (Parins 97). In Knowles' own words, at the time he was writing, Arthurian stories had fallen out of style because "since the days of cheap books, [Arthurian legend] has never been modernized or adapted for general circulation" (97). Knowles adapted complex scandals into a series of adventure tales for protestant Anglo-American "nobles" of the mid-19th century.

In Lanier's 1880 *Boy's King Arthur*, there is no affair between Launcelot and Guenever because it would reflect badly on Arthur and what his character represents. By removing large chunks from Malory while simultaneously describing himself as an editor, Lanier changed and recreated Arthurian legend into a new form, separate from the form it took in Malory's work. *The Boy's King Arthur* is still a popular children's edition of Malory, and "for perhaps half a century dominated the popular children's versions in America" (Parins 129). In fact, it was Lanier's work that "helped popularize a new trend of juvenile retelling of Arthurian stories" (Ferguson 2).

Pyle was publishing his Arthurian work, *Le Morte Darthur* was looked to as a model of "gentlemanly behavior" ("Book Illustration (American)" 55), which Pyle clearly promoted by constantly attempting to compare his readers to King Arthur (Couch 40). For instance, "Arthur himself was 'the most honorable, gentle knight who ever lived in all the world'" ("Juvenile Fiction in English" 310). It is in this way that Pyle speaks down to his child readers, addressing them as "[men]-to-be rather than as...perpetual [boys]. Arthur is set up as the standard of behavior, the 'looking-glass of chivalry' for...the reader to imitate" (Couch 45 – 46). Like many American authors on the early 20th century, Pyle romanticizes the medieval period in much of his work. He implies that the virtue he describes "can only be found in a remote medieval past" (Couch 45), and Pyle's Arthurian work "viewed history as a moral education for children" (Fox-Friedman 84).

The influx of moral tales published in the 19th and 20th centuries quickly became many readers' first experiences with Arthurian legend. In this sense, the expectation of who Arthur was as a moral figure was completely redefined, and later adaptors found it difficult to separate characters from concepts of power, chivalry, and perfection. In the essay "*Le Morte Darthur* for Children: Malory's Third Tradition," Andrew Lynch argues that *Le Morte Darthur* "is somehow particularly suitable for children yet can only be made so by strenuous adaptation. It has been a text both loved and feared, deeply entrusted and distrusted with cultural labor. Through our double compulsion to give the story to children yet to change it radically for that purpose, Malory sets a revealing test for each generation, each writer, who adapts and retells him" (Lynch 1). Lynch makes reference to how the stories and content of *Le Morte D'Arthur* have survived so long, but are so often very heavily edited.

Conclusion



The Arthurian canon was synthesized in the Victorian and Edwardian periods. Because of the way interest in Arthurian legend grew with the interest in crafting a children's canon, King Arthur remains a hero in children's fiction. Writers and readers have been encountering Arthurian tales as children since the 1860s as it was collections like Knowles' and Pyle's that entered the "children's canon" used in education throughout the 20th century. Arthurian tales can and should be shared with audiences of all ages, but to define a canon out of an expansive and contradicting body of work is to put narrow definitions on it and to limit its readership.

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