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The Problem with Page to Screen Adaptation: A Case Study of King Arthur and Tristan and Isolt

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The Problem with Page to Screen Adaptation:
A Case Study of *King Arthur* and *Tristan and Isolt*

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Abstract

The legends of *King Arthur* and *Tristan and Isolt* have been popular for centuries, leading to multiple translations and versions of each text. Modern filmmakers have added to this legacy. Though audiences have enjoyed various contemporary film adaptations of these medieval romances, several essential elements are lost while translating the works to screen. This paper identifies a central motif in each work—King Arthur’s Round Table and Isolt’s love potion—that shapes the subsequent love triangle, and by extension, the representation and motivation of honor. While tracing the continued appearance of such components and their importance in the text sources of Geoffrey of Monmouth, Wace, Chrétien de Troyes, Thomas Malory, Gottfried von Strassburg, and Joseph Bédier, this paper will then discuss how each is manipulated by modern filmmakers and the lasting consequences on the legends as a result of such changes.

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I. Introduction

The medieval romances of *King Arthur* and *Tristan and Isolt*¹ have captivated audiences for centuries. It is no surprise that each text has not only multiple translations and editions spanning these centuries, but several modern film adaptations as well. Despite audiences' enjoyment of various film adaptations of medieval literary works, many essential elements are lost in the translation from page to screen. This paper identifies these central thematic elements—in the form of a central motif, a fateful love triangle, and the representation and motivations behind the theme of honor—while tracing their continued presence in text versions and subsequent absence and manipulation in film versions of both *King Arthur* and *Tristan and Isolt*.

The motif of the Round Table as well as the main love triangle between King Arthur, Queen Guinevere, and Sir Lancelot du Lac shapes the theme of honor in Thomas Malory's fifteenth-century *The Morte D'Arthur* as well as in Geoffrey of Monmouth's twelfth-century *History of the Kings of Britain*, Wace's twelfth-century *Roman de Brut*, and Chrétien de Troyes' twelfth-century *The Knight of the Cart*. Though these elements are found throughout text editions, film variations such as John Boorman's 1981 Excalibur and Antoine Fuqua's 2004 King Arthur have manipulated and erased such foundations from their adaptations. Similarly, the motif of a love potion to aid the love triangle of King Mark, Queen Isolt, and Sir Tristan is found in Gottfried von Strassburg's *Tristan and Isolt* as well Joseph Bédier's modern adaptation of *The Romance of Tristan & Iseult*, combining several medieval stories, despite its having been written over seven centuries later. Yet both this keynote and love triangle are changed in later film adaptations. Both Tom Donovan's 1981 Lovespell and Kevin Reynolds' 2006 Tristan & Isolde manipulate and

¹ Though the character is referred to as "Isolt" by Gottfried von Strassburg, "Iseult" by Joseph Bédier, "Isolt" by Tom Donovan, and "Isolde" by Kevin Reynolds, for the purpose of this paper, the general character shall be referred to using Gottfried's spelling as his is the earliest text source used in this discussion.

actively change how the love potion is used regarding the love triangle, thus affecting the theme of honor. These film changes may be deemed necessary for the transition from page to screen, yet these changes also alter characters, storylines, and overarching themes of the original medieval romances.

Modeled on the classic histories of Rome, Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History of the Kings of Britain* offers a twelfth-century version of the King Arthur legend that posits the mythical king as a historical one. Until this point, "the stories of Arthur had largely circulated by mouth" (Barber 10), with Geoffrey's account bringing Arthur and his knights into the literary world. Ultimately, this account serves as the base text that sets the standards for later writers of the King Arthur legends which begin to shape Arthur as a sophisticated, courtly king. Though it does not explicitly mention the Round Table, the central motif of later Arthurian legends, Geoffrey's tale characterizes Arthur's loyal troop of great knights who make up the crux of the Round Table as "a great crowd of soldiers [that] flocked to him" (Barber 13). With this work, Geoffrey inspired many contemporary chroniclers such as Wace whose twelfth-century *Roman de Brut* offers the first mention of the Round Table as well as explains its significance in terms of Arthur's knights' importance to their king:

Because of these noble lords about his hall, of whom each knight
pained himself to be the hardest champion, and none would count
him the least praiseworthy, Arthur made the Round Table, so
reputed of the Britons. This Round Table was ordained of Arthur
that when his fair fellowship sat to meet their chairs should be high
alike, their service equal, and none before or after his comrade
(Mason 58).

Both Chrétien's and Malory's later Arthurian works include this version of a literal Round Table with metaphorical chivalrous attributes in which the knights are loyal to their King. Malory takes the concept a step further, including in his notes within the "Merlin" section of *The Morte Darthur* that the Round Table previously belonged to King Leodegan before becoming the property of Arthur through his daughter, Queen Guinevere, who "brought the Round Table with her as part of her dowry" (Malory 13). In this way, the Round Table itself is irrevocably intertwined with the fate of the love triangle that develops between King Arthur, Queen Guinevere, and Sir Lancelot.

In these works by Chrétien and Malory, the fateful love triangle between King Arthur, Queen Guinevere, and Sir Lancelot du Lac is introduced into the legend. Chrétien de Troyes offers the Arthurian legend in a courtly romantic frame with his *The Knight of the Cart*. Andreas Capellanus is believed to have proposed his *Art of Courtly Love* in the same court in which Chrétien found his patroness, Marie of France, Countess of Champagne. Thus it is no surprise that many of Andreas' rules of courtly love find their way into Chrétien's Arthurian writings. The concept of the love triangle in *The Knight of the Cart* falls directly in line with Andreas' teaching of the segregation "of conjugal affection [from] love because there is in it an element of duty or necessity" (Lewis 36). His theory of allowed adultery posits that love is a priority "only our superiors can reward, but a wife is not a superior" (Lewis 36). Following this theme, *The Knight of the Cart* offers the first account of the fateful love triangle that will doom the Round Table throughout all later Arthurian works, characterizing Lancelot as "one who was entirely [Guinevere's]" (de Troyes 5657). Malory's *The Morte Darthur* not only emphasizes this love, but links it directly with the fall of King Arthur and his knights. Whereas *The Knight of the Cart* highlights Lancelot and Guinevere's actions only, the *Morte Darthur* introduces Arthur's own

response to and avoidance of the affair, completing the triangle. Upon learning the extent to which Lancelot's betrayal has injured the Round Table, Arthur is more upset over losing a loyal knight than his Queen, lamenting "for queens [he] might have enough, but such a fellowship of good knights shall never be together [again]" (Malory 173-174). Malory suggests the love triangle between King Arthur, Queen Guinevere, and Sir Lancelot is directly responsible for Arthur's and the Round Table's downfall: "for through [Lancelot] and [Guinevere] is the flower of kings and knights destroyed" (Malory 219). It is the love triangle's influence over the legend's central motif of the Round Table that ultimately decides the honorable classification of the legend in terms of the conventions of classic medieval romance, the element that is most affected through changes in modern film adaptations.

Similarly, the medieval romantic myth of *Tristan and Isolt* follows a similar Arthurian formula in the way the tale is crafted through the ages. Beginning with Gottfried von Strassburg's twelfth-century version of *Tristan and Isolt*, a symbol appears that is continued through later literary and some film versions of the tale is the love potion. As the earliest surviving text, Gottfried's work offers the first appearance of the "love potion of such power and magic that did any two drink thereof they must needs, without will of their own, love each other above all things from that day forward" (von Strassburg 158). The potion is created by Queen Isolt, Isolt's mother, prior to her daughter's voyage to Cornwall in anticipation of her marriage to King Mark in an attempt to ease the difficulty of an arranged marriage. The potion is then entrusted to Isolt's handmaiden, Brangeone, who leaves it unattended when another maiden traveling with the party mistakes the potion for wine and "brought it to Tristan, and he gave forthwith of the drink to Isolt" (von Strassburg 161). From this earliest complete text, it is made clear that the consequential love triangle which develops between King Mark, Isolt, and King

Marks's nephew and heir, Tristan, is no one's fault. Each character remains honorable, as there is no active betrayal independent of the potion as they are "brought under her rule" (von Strassburg 162). Though compiled almost seven centuries after Gottfried von Strasburg's *Tristan and Isolt*, Joseph Bédier's *The Romance of Tristan & Iseult* is comprised of several medieval versions of the tale, yet still gives an almost identical account of the lovers falling under the spell of the love potion due to Bédier's use of several medieval sources. Just as in the earlier account, Iseult's mother brews the potion and entrusts the concoction to Iseult's handmaiden, Brangien, warning her of the potion's power as "they who drink of it together love each other with their every single sense and with their every thought, forever" (Bédier 41-42). And just as Brangeone allows another maiden to mistakenly handle the potion, Brangien becomes too engrossed in helping Iseult cope with her arranged marriage with Mark to notice a serving maid "[looking] about for a drink for [Tristan and Iseult] and finding the pitcher which the mother of Iseult has given to Brangien's keeping" (Bédier 42) containing the love potion. Again, the recurring motif of the love potion and its mistaken administration to Tristan and Iseult highlights the lack of control either lover has over their situation.

This lack of agency in their love allows for the love triangle to blossom between King Mark, Isolt, and Tristan in both texts as well as highlights its direct link to their honor and ultimate downfall. Similar to the way in which Malory explicitly links Guinevere and Lancelot's affair to the fall of the Round Table and the ultimate demise of each member of the triangle, Gottfried foreshadows the ultimate consequence of the potion. While it may offer them love, the potion is described as "bitter pain and enduring sorrow of heart, of which the [pair] at last [will] lay dead" (von Strassburg 161), hinting at the damage the subsequent and unavoidable love triangle will cause. Likewise, Bédier's account also includes a rather harrowing depiction of the

love potion as causing “Passion and Joy most sharp, and Anguish without end, and Death” (Bédier 43). The question of whether the affair is truly courtly arises once the couple is forced to love under the influence of the love potion. Under its effect, Isolt’s love cannot be considered a “reward freely given” (Lewis 36), yet Tristan does not act in a dishonorable fashion as he is also under the potion’s effect. Though the potion causes both Tristan and Isolt’s compliance in the affair, it remains a false and unreliable form of consent, bordering the line of modern consent concepts. This lack of a courtly nature of the affair in either account of the tale allows for the unavoidable death of all parties involved in the love triangle, just as the lack of loyalty on the part of Lancelot brings about the fall of the Round Table, at least partially a consequence of his affair with Guinevere.

As each tale includes a betrayal, whether actively committed or as the consequence of magic, of a king by his most trusted knight, there is a discernable link between each tale’s motif and its influence over the love triangle and affair concluding with a theme of honor, or lack thereof. The motivation of this honor is shaped by the motif and love triangle, and its later absence is what ultimately leads to the downfall of both the Round Table and the familial bond between King Mark and Tristan. The motif allows these stories to remain tales of courtly honor and awe, in which there is even honor in betrayal. Yet the very elements that allow for this are often manipulated in modern film adaptations of the stories of both King Arthur and Tristan and Isolt as filmmakers alter the plots and themes set forth by these source texts and ultimately the consequences of these changes in terms of characters, storylines, and overarching themes of the original medieval romances. Entire storylines integral to the source texts, such as the symbols outlined here and their influence over the love triangle and sense of honor in each tale, are changed—or perhaps, lost in translation—in the move from page to screen, therefore changing

the entire landscape of the myths from which the films are adapted. Aided by the inclusion of various historical inaccuracies along with multiple anachronistic features, these changes form, and by nature, change the morals, themes, and character motivations that are at the core of these texts, thereby changing the stories themselves. This disregard of source material and literature is expressly evident in the film adaptations discussed in this paper.

II. Central Motifs of the Legends

As mentioned in the introduction, the central motif of the *King Arthur* myths is the Round Table. The Round Table is not only the physical representation of King Arthur's loyal knights, but is comprised of the knights themselves. It is through the Round Table that Arthur is betrayed by his most trusted knight, Lancelot, and with its destruction, he himself is ended. Ultimately, the Round Table is where King Arthur's reign and the age of Camelot begin and end.

John Boorman's Excalibur (1981) offers a vision of the Round Table that is quite true to the source texts. The Round Table exists both physically and metaphorically throughout the film. Lancelot is introduced as Arthur's champion, whom Merlin prophesies will bring about the death of Arthur and the fall of the Round Table. Additionally, other key actors in various Arthurian episodes are included true to form, such as Perceval on his quest for the grail and Gawain in his faithfulness to Arthur and the institution of the Round Table. While certain knights integral to the texts, such as Sir Bedivere, are not included in this film, their actions are not simply excluded as in other film adaptations, but taken up by other knights that are written into the film. Due to this fix, the plot itself is not truly altered, and by extension neither is the greater landscape of the legend in Excalibur.

Antoine Fuqua's 2004 King Arthur, takes quite a different approach to the concept of the Round Table than the literary and film precedents discussed previously in its attempt to act as a type of origin story for King Arthur and his knights. While the Round Table exists physically, the motif itself almost disappears entirely because of its manipulation by the filmmakers. The historical adventure film posits King Arthur as a Roman officer, drawing from the Sarmatian theory, its basis in the historical figure of Lucius Artorius Castus and his traveling warriors, and its parallelism with the Arthurian legends. This theory suggests that the "deeds of Lucius Artorius Castus and the Sarmatian warriors lived on in the form of tales and legends that were seeds from which the stories of Arthur emerged" (Matthews 112). With no real historical information or literary precedence for this theory, King Arthur puts forth an image of the Round Table that is entirely new and quite different than those of Geoffrey of Monmouth, Wace, Chrétien de Troyes, and Thomas Malory. The knights themselves become subject to changes in characterization in the films, as well, causing a shift in the overall metaphorical motif of the Round Table.

While the Round Table exists physically as a meeting place for the strategizing Sarmatians in the 2004 film, the symbolism is altered almost entirely as the knights' characters are changed from those in Geoffrey of Monmouth's *The History of the Kings of Britain*, Thomas Malory's *Morte Darthur*, and Chrétien de Troyes' *Knight of the Cart*. The main change is physical in the inclusion of only seven knights: Arthur, Lancelot, Tristan, Gawain, Galahad, Bors, and Dagonet. Though various medieval texts provide various numbers from one hundred and fifty, to twenty-five knights of the Round Table, there are typically many more knights than the seven included in this film. The most striking consequence in connection with the Round Table's characterization is the film's exclusion of key actors from the relevant surviving

medieval texts, such as Mordred and Sir Bedivere. Mordred, as King Arthur's traitorous nephew, is continually portrayed as directly responsible for Arthur's—and by extension, the Round Table's—demise often beginning once Arthur leaves him as temporary ruler as he is away for battle. Geoffrey begins this tradition with Mordred placing “the crown upon his own head...[and] living adulterously and out of wedlock with Queen Guinevere” (Barber 27) while Arthur is away at battle with the Romans. It is in his efforts to retrieve his kingdom and queen through battle with Mordred that Arthur “was mortally wounded and was carried off to the Isle of Avalon” (Barber 28) to recover, handing off his crown to Constantine. This sequence of events is continued in Malory's *Morte Darthur*, as Mordred's usurpation of the crown is directly linked to Arthur's death. Sir Bedivere is also an active figure in this cycle, as the knight responsible for returning Excalibur to the Lady of the Lake. Prior to his departure for Avalon, Arthur bids Sir Bedivere “take... Excalibur, [his] good sword, and go with it to [the] water's side...[and] throw [his] sword in that water” (Malory 212).

Sir Bedivere is then torn over his allegiance to Arthur and his own emotions as it takes his three attempts to return it to the lake before he was met with “an arm and a hand above the water” (Malory 213) which returns it to the Lady of the Lake. Excluding these characters allows no direct connection between Arthur's Round Table and his death to arise in the film. Perhaps filmmakers were attempting to create a franchise that was to continue to King Arthur's death. This idea, however, still cannot be carried out truthfully to the text with the early death of Lancelot in the film and its consequences for the love triangle at the center of the Round Table's fall.

While the film's claim to be an origin story for King Arthur's Camelot would account for the exclusion of characters such as Mordred or Sir Bedivere, it does not truly explain the changes

made to the exclusive list of knights still included. Each of the knights included—Lancelot, Tristan, Gawain, Galahad, Bors, and Dagonet—is altered in characterization from their literary representations. While Lancelot’s relation to the film’s love triangle will be discussed in following portions of this thesis, his characterization is the most altered as his death is included in this film prior to Arthur’s coronation as King and before there are any relations between himself and Guinevere. Though this is the starkest alteration, the other knights are also portrayed differently than in the text. For example, Bors has a literary history of purity, celibacy, and triumph over temptation which aids him in his witness of the Holy Grail. He is only tempted once during his quest, mentioned as having solely one child: “all for women Sir Bors was a virgin save for one, that was the daughter of King Braundegoris, and on her he gat a child which hight Elaine” (Malory 78). Fuqua’s film offers a completely opposite view of the character of Bors, as having a large number of illegitimate children, noting that only one of the children is named as “it’s too much trouble [to give them all names], so we gave the rest of them numbers” (King Arthur 00:39:17). Furthermore, Lancelot and Galahad are only portrayed as friends and knights from different villages rather than as father and son, as set forth in the literature. Through these alterations, the Round Table itself is altered as it no longer maintains the characterization put forth in the texts.

Similarly, the Round Table in the King Arthur films, the love potion, and its repercussions, is altered and excluded across various film adaptations, with consequences for the entire storyline. Tom Donovan’s 1981 film Lovespell does include the love potion in its narrative, though it is not taken in error as in the texts. Bronwyn, Isolt’s servant, gives the potion to her lady with the hope that Isolt will share the potion with King Mark to save herself from the disgrace of an ill-advised love affair with Tristan. Isolt, however, intentionally shares the potion

with Tristan on the voyage to Cornwall, igniting the same love triangle and consequences set forth in the literary works of Gottfried von Strassburg and Joseph Bédier. It has been noted, however, that “the role of the ‘love potion’ in the love affair, or the nature of the relationship between Mark and Isolt, are elements open to a variety of interpretations and permit significantly varied structures...depending on the characterizations” (McMunn 216). For example, this film focuses mainly on the forced marriage between King Mark and Isolt rather than the love potion’s effects for the remainder of the film.

Kevin Reynolds’s modern 2006 adaptation of Tristan & Isolde alters this motif to a much larger degree. Rooted in the tradition of myths, familiar in basic plot to many, this film still pulls back on the elements of magic wielded in the literary precedents order to attempt a more quasi-historical production. The film omits the element of magic to move away from a fantasy label, erasing not only the mythical creatures often found in the Celtic myth, i.e., the dragon and magic dog, but completely removing the love potion shared between the lovers—the central motif upon which the legend is based. This exclusion of the love potion has consequences for the entire landscape of the film, as “the removal of magic from the story grounds it as a realistic power struggle” (Ebert) rather than a mythical romance. Due to this change, the characterization of all three main characters—Tristan, Isolde, and King Marke—is dramatically altered from the literary tradition set forth by Gottfried and Bédier. Without the elements of magic, both Tristan and Isolde have free agency over their decisions and therefore share the blame and ultimate shame of their affair; they are no longer inactive, passive actors in the subsequent love triangle. Additionally, the exclusion of the love potion makes it very difficult for audiences to then categorize King Marke as a hero or villain, or even simply a pawn used by the larger forces at play within the myths, leaving him to be categorized in the film as either a jealous and

embarrassed husband, cuckolded and dishonored by both his wife and heir, or the sole figure standing in the way of the true love that unfolds between Tristan and Isolde. While this change is detrimental to the legacy of the Tristan and Isolt texts, an audience's familiarity with a story of forbidden love and ill-fated lovers is quite alluring for filmmakers, possibly allowing for the acceptance of the exclusion in the film in order to achieve a film which follows similar romantic tropes found in period, and many contemporary romantic films; thus the earlier source texts are reduced in order to add a set formula to the film.

III. Fateful Love Triangles

The love triangle between King Arthur, Queen Guinevere, and Sir Lancelot is considered one major cause of the death of King Arthur and Round Table. Though not included in Geoffrey of Monmouth's twelfth-century account of *The History of the Kings of Britain*, the love triangle becomes central to the King Arthur texts which later build upon these earlier traditions. Malory directly connects this motif to the fall of the Round Table and the end of King Arthur's reign. John Boorman's 1981 Excalibur is fairly truthful to the text by including this love affair as central to the plot. Fuqua's 2004 King Arthur, acting as a type of origin story rather than true literary adaptation, completely disregards the affair beyond a handful of glances and mild flirtation, resulting in a significantly altered vision of King Arthur and the Round Table.

Boorman's film shows the love triangle developing and its consequences for the Round Table. Upon his defeat at the bridge, Lancelot pledges his love and loyalty to Arthur. He pleads with Arthur to make him his "champion" (Excalibur 00:54:17), pledging "muscle, bone, blood, and the heart that pumps it" (Excalibur 00:54:30) while swearing "eternal faith to Arthur, King" (Excalibur 00:56:12). Upon later invitation to sit with Arthur and Guenevere, Lancelot is

persuaded to stay in Camelot for the wedding feasts that will follow. It is as they are first left alone that Lancelot admits he “would swear [his] love to [Guenevere]” (Excalibur 00:59:33), though he also admits and seems to understand that he “cannot love as a woman the lady who will be wife to [his] King and [his] friend” (Excalibur 00:59:35). This speech is, however, accompanied with his kissing his queen’s thigh, an obvious sensual act foreshadowing the depth of the love triangle that later develops.

The romance between Lancelot and Guenevere becomes directly connected to the Round Table in this film, as Lancelot actively avoids the Round Table to hide his shameful feelings. A drunken Gawain begins to question publicly whether there are deeper feelings between Lancelot and Guenevere, accusing the Queen of being the main factor behind Lancelot’s absence, “driven from [the Round Table] by a woman’s desire” (Excalibur 01:10:57). Even more explicitly, it is upon finding Lancelot and Guenevere lying together that Arthur is impaled upon Excalibur and captured in Morgana’s spell during which time Mordred is incestuously conceived. This event as a direct consequence of the love triangle between Arthur, Guenevere, and Lancelot thus ultimately sets off a chain reaction that will destroy Arthur and cause the fall of the Round Table.

While Excalibur offers a direct link between the love triangle and the fall of the Round Table, Fuqua’s 2004 King Arthur takes a dramatically different approach. Just as each of the knights undergoes a change in character, Guinevere is altered. She is no longer the woman of Roman nobility as put forth by Geoffrey of Monmouth, nor is she the daughter of Leodegrance, Uther Pendragon’s loyal knight entrusted with the safekeeping of the Round Table. Rather, Guinevere is characterized as a Celtic warrior—referred to as a “woad” in the film—and represented in a quite primitive light. Rather than having been given to Arthur by her father, Guinevere is saved by Arthur as he discovers pagans have been imprisoned within the estate of a

noble Roman family whom he and his knights are sent to protect. As they begin to spend time together, Arthur and Guinevere develop feelings for each other that do not allow for a love triangle to be thematically successful. Since they are not yet married, their love falls in line with the rules of courtly love set out by Andreas Capellanus; as such, their relationship remains within the confines of romantic love.

By presenting Guinevere as an independent woman, not a portion of a king's dowry, Fuqua removes the aspect of adultery and arranged marriage central to courtly love in the Middle Ages. Therefore, there cannot truly be a love triangle in this rendition. Fuqua also omits all connection with the eventual fall of the Round Table—though that fall is also not included in this retelling. While attempting an origin story, Fuqua seemingly concludes the Round Table will not eventually fall, or not as according to earlier literary works, by securing the idea of a lack of love triangle through the inclusion of the death of Lancelot in the film. Though Lancelot dies with Guinevere hovering at his side, a potential nod by the filmmakers to the absent fateful love triangle, this occurs before there are ever romantic feelings between the two. It is because of this filmmaking decision that it becomes unclear whether this is to be taken as an origin story. As previously mentioned, how can there be a fall of Arthur and the Round Table without its cause? If we are to understand this film in the context of its purported historical basis around the Sarmatian theory and wars with the Saxons, historically the Saxons will win following the events of this film. Perhaps the marriage of Arthur and Guinevere at King Arthur's conclusion is only a pause before the continued fall Arthur and the Round Table?

Just as the shaping of the love triangle in film adaptations of the King Arthur affects the portrayal of the Round Table and its fall, the love triangle between King Mark, Tristan, and Isolde in both Lovespell and Tristan & Isolde is shaped by the love potion, or lack thereof, and affects

the way in which the characters are perceived. Lovespell wields the love potion as an active agent in the love triangle, directly setting the characters on their doomed paths, yet the subsequent love triangle does not become the main focus of the film. Though Isolt knowingly gives Tristan the love potion, the filmmakers choose to remain engrossed in the marriage between a much older Mark and young Isolt rather than the affair between Isolt and Tristan. When taking into account the reversed ending of the film, with Mark raising black sails incorrectly signaling to Isolt that Tristan is dead causing it to be Isolt who falls from the cliffs as the lovers both die on the shore, perhaps this film could be seen as a critique of the state of marriage in the mid- to late-twentieth century, rather than a true adaptation of a medieval romance.

Kevin Reynold's 2006 Tristan & Isolde explores the opposite telling of the legend. With the complete exclusion of the love potion, Reynolds gives audiences a familiar picture of a forbidden love between doomed lovers. This aspect sets the film apart from Tristan and Isolt-based texts and other film adaptations, such as Lovespell, where the potion remains a pivotal point in the relationship and following events. With no love potion to act as a cause of the lovers' romantic feelings and subsequent affair, the lovers themselves are at fault for having an affair and disregarding the marriage vows between Marke and Isolde. Tristan and Isolde actively deceive Marke with their continued affair following the arranged marriage, though the film also suggests Isolde continues a physical marital relationship with Marke simultaneously. This removes any connection between the main motif of the literary legends and the film's adaptation of the love triangle and lovers' end.

IV. Honor: Characterization and Motivation

The characterization and motivation of honor in the literary and film adaptations of both King Arthur and Tristan and Isolt are shaped by the connection between the legends' central motifs, the Round Table and love potion, and the love triangle. John Boorman's Excalibur, a film which remains quite faithful to the texts, allows for honor to be manipulated by the film's sequence of events. From the beginning of the romantic feelings between Lancelot and Guenevere, it is obvious both characters attempt to thwart the feelings due to their honor, as discussed in the previous section. Nevertheless, as "the law forbids it...[and] love demands it" (Excalibur 01:25:50), the pair falls victim to their feelings and consummates their love in the glade even after Lancelot acknowledges it "will destroy Arthur, and [them]" (Excalibur 01:30:05). Even in his attempt to thwart Guenevere's advance, Lancelot throws his sword down in not only an effort to save Guenevere's hands from being sliced, but as a clear symbol of his discarding of his knightly honor in respect to Arthur and the Round Table.

Upon waking this disregard for his knightly honor in the form of not only his own sword on the ground, but Excalibur between him and Guenevere, Lancelot begins to mourn the loss, as does Guenevere over her own honor in marriage. Because the love triangle is motivated by true courtly love, as set forth in the rules by Andreas Capellanus, however, the lovers are able to reconcile their sense of lot honor. By retaining Excalibur during her time away from Arthur, Guenevere is able to earn back honor in connection with her affair's disrupt of the Round Table. This is furthered by her explicit explanation that she "loved [him] as King" (Excalibur 01:57:43), and clearly within the confines of proper courtly love. Similarly, Lancelot is also restored to his former glory as he arrives at the final battle just in time to turn the tides in favor of Arthur. Lancelot only falls victim to his own self-inflicted wound, a wound that is a product of his own

guilt over the betrayal of his king. Thus, both he and Guenevere are given honorable ends as a result of conducting their love affair and the fallout of the resulting love triangle, within the structure of defined medieval romance.

While Boorman includes clear character arcs allowing for this sense of honor to be retained by both Lancelot and Guinevere, the entire concept is altered in Fuqua's King Arthur. Due to the lack of love triangle or focus on the Round Table—or one true to the literary motif—this film merely focuses on the honor of Arthur. This clear break with the text over the lack of love triangle goes beyond adding a romantic plot to the film. While Arthur and Lancelot's saving of Guinevere, a pagan in Roman lands, can be viewed as honorable, that is the only connection between the classic love triangle and honor in the film. Other shows of knightly honor are included in Arthur's disobedience to the Roman officers in his fight against the Saxons, one which he was ordered to ignore in order to evacuate the Roman estate at Hadrian's Wall only.

Similarly, Lovespell offers a view into the “psychological motivations and emotion [that] are prominent in romance narratives” (McMunn 216). In the same way Excalibur's Lancelot and Guenevere knowingly put their honor in question in order to start their love affair, Lovespell's Tristan and Isolt act on their love both with the use of the love potion—taken knowingly—as well as prior to using it. This puts their honor in jeopardy as “Isolt knowingly gives Tristan the love potion to keep him from leaving her [even though] they have [already] consummated their love without need of this magic device” (McMunn 213). This human misjudgment, rather than a device, allows for the love affair to begin. The balance of the film later moves away from this affair and love triangle to focus more on the marital relationship between Mark and Isolt, shifting the characters' honor, or lack thereof, with it. Because there is less of an emphasis placed on honor, it is easily won back as King Mark allows the lovers to reunite on the shore in their dying

moments. It is inferred that he understands the love potion's work in the scope of the film's events and with that understanding comes the clarity of the lovers' choice over the affair after taking the potion.

By excluding the love potion altogether, Tristan & Isolde moves away from supplying an overarching, all-encompassing motivation for the characters to push aside their sense of honor and therefore compels the characters to accept their fates as their own doing. Just as the exclusion of the love potion makes it difficult for audiences to characterize the lovers and the cuckolded King Marke as honorable, it may still allow for the love triangle to become somewhat honorable when read through the lens of courtly love. But as Guenevere and Lancelot abide by the rules set forth by Andreas Capellanus, so too do Tristan and Isolde. Yet it remains understood that the erasure of the potion changes the landscape of the film from one of magical medieval romance in which a pair of lovers falls under a love potion's spell and cannot help what the magic causes to a love triangle existing within the confines of medieval courtly romance and caused perhaps in part by the arranged marriage. The medieval aspect of the story that is retained is the arranged marriage which is politically motivated—aligning Isolde's Irish kin with Marke's Cornish—by the film and in the medieval texts. The film further explains the love between Tristan and Isolde as beginning before Isolde meets Marke or is set to become his bride. Tristan then returns at the end of the film in order to redeem himself and show honor to his lord, his uncle Marke, rather than simply returning to his beloved as the texts say. He must aid his uncle in defeating Irish attackers before succumbing to his wounds, allowing him still to have an honorable death. The film seemingly states that it is Isolde's disappearance rather than redemption that ultimately becomes altered due to the simple exclusion of the love potion in the film. The filmmakers do not allow for her to regain any honor lost in her affair with Tristan,

choosing to simply have her disappear altogether, with the final screen of the film reading “Isolde laid Tristan beneath the ashes of the Roman ruin, planted his grave with two willows that grew forever intertwined...and disappeared.” Without a love potion acting as a motivation for her dishonor in her affair with Tristan, and taking into account the fact that Tristan has actively earned back his lost honor before his death, Isolde can no longer exist in the frame of the film without redemption and is quite simply removed. This ending offers a much bleaker view than the medieval literary predecessors where the lovers are reunited and die together on the same day.

V. Active Inclusion of Historical Inaccuracies and Anachronism in Film

The disregard and manipulation of literary texts is further evident in the inclusion of various historical inaccuracies and anachronistic elements in the film adaptations of both King Arthur and Tristan and Isolde discussed in this thesis. This serves as another element altered in the move from page to screen. Furthermore, this erroneous history often blends elements of different cultures and time periods to create a more aesthetically pleasing picture of assumed history for modern audiences, perhaps to supply what modern audiences would think is authentic which is actually ahistorical.

Boorman’s 1981 Excalibur is adapted as intentionally anachronistic to the time period in which the King Arthur legends are written as having taken place as well as the period in which they are written. Britain itself is never mentioned, cited simply as “the Land” in the opening titles. Furthermore, the time period is described as “the Dark Ages,” a problematic label that has come under objection by modern medieval scholars. Though the Dark Ages and the Middle Ages were commonly thought to mean the same thing, “they have come to be distinguished, and the

Dark Ages are now no more than the first part of the Middle Age, while the term [medieval] is often restricted to the later centuries...the age of chivalry [and] the time between the first Crusade and the Renaissance” (Ker 1). Setting this film before the technical age of chivalry is problematic considering the key role chivalry plays in the film. Chivalry remains at the heart of both the previously discussed Round Table and love triangle within Excalibur, its link to the original source texts, yet setting the film in the Dark Ages implies that this perhaps was not the case in the film. Nevertheless, director John Boorman was aware of the anachronism and tried to keep it to a minimum, working with a necessary level of inaccuracy to retell the myth. In an interview with American Cinema Paper, Boorman is adamant that “the essentials that make [the myths] popular, the *romances*, remain the same” regardless of historical truth as myths are a “body of stories completely homogenous and interrelated, yet also completely flexible.” This flexibility allows for the film to remain episodic in nature like the legends themselves. Additionally, the film’s locations—revivalist castles because many medieval castles exist today mainly in ruins—and costumes are still able to bring this sense of approximate medievalism to the minds of audiences, without being completely historically accurate.

Setting the film prior to the fall of Rome, and therefore prior to the beginning of the Middle Ages, in accordance with the Sarmatian theory, Antoine Fuqua’s 2004 King Arthur posits itself as a historical account of the true King Arthur. Despite this, there is no historical literary precedence for a Roman King Arthur. The characters of Arthur and Guinevere are reversed in their lineage, as the literary Guinevere is the one of Roman blood and Arthur of Celtic origins. Furthermore, there are various historical inaccuracies in the film’s inclusion of the Romans and the Saxons, especially in the costuming. By setting this film in the problematic “Dark Ages,” Fuqua also falls victim to problems with historical clarity. The Dark Ages

encompassed the time following the Roman Empire's removal from Britain, over half a century earlier than the time in which the film takes place. Additionally, by the year 467 A.D., the year listed at the opening of the film, the Saxons already claimed land past Hadrian's Wall, the move toward which is a focal point in the film's final battle. While it is unclear whether these inaccuracies are intentional or not, this may be due to the lack of solid and clear scholarly basis for the Sarmatian theory upon which the film is based.

Like Boorman's Excalibur, Donovan's 1981 Lovespell offers a somewhat accurate portrayal of the Tristan and Isolt myth while remaining within the confines of modern filmmaking. The film "emphasizes the Celtic cultural setting of the legend...[with a] script [that] contains frequent references to Irish history and folklore" (McMunn 212-213). The film's historical accuracy becomes problematic, however, with the "intrusive psychological...dialogue supplied for all the major characters" (McMunn 213) that does not resemble the language used in any of the texts. This historical and modern confusion results in a "sense of anachronism that makes the medieval settings and costumes seem extraneous" (McMunn 213). This anachronism begins to overtake the myth itself as "even actions based on the medieval narrative are placed in a context which undercuts the mythic tragedy" (McMunn 213) of the love triangle. For example, the love potion is used, though the couple has already consummated their love. It seems in this light that the love potion—a major motif across numerous Tristan and Isolt texts—may only be included to remain a link to the earlier texts, with little context in the historical framing of the story, one without any other magic.

Though Kevin Reynold's 2006 Tristan & Isolde removes the love potion altogether, what remains is a romanticized and action-based period piece grounded in similar mythologies that tend to conclude with cultural and/or mythological erasure. The film remains rooted in the

tradition of the myths, familiar in basic plot to many audiences, yet pulls back on all elements of magic, while replacing period-appropriate components with those rooted in the common idea of or imagination of the so-called “Dark Ages” in order to connect more fully with the expectations of audiences. Despite its obviously high production value, Tristan & Isolde has numerous issues with historical validity and synchronicity. One of the most blatant examples of the film’s anachronism is Sophia Myles’ Isolde repeatedly reciting John Donne’s seventeenth-century poem “The Good Morrow,” despite the film’s taking place in the seventh century, and the Tristan and Isolde texts not originating until the twelfth century. This may fall in line with the concept of modern audiences’ tendency to blur the lines between the Middle Ages and Renaissance. Additionally, there are several inconsistencies in the representation of religious ceremonies. First, following the Irish siege, Tristan, thought to be dead, is set afloat on a boat set aflame as it drifts away. This is more in line with a Viking-typical funeral than Christian burial. Though this type of funeral was present in Britain, it is now more firmly attributed to Nordic culture. Secondly, Isolde and Marke’s wedding is portrayed as pagan, yet their coronation that follows is in Latin while located in either a Church or what appears to resemble an early Christian place of worship. Taking into account these inaccuracies, it is no surprise this film is regarded as more of a romantic period piece than historical adaptation.

VI. Conclusions

Filmmakers more often than not seem to struggle with adapting literature to the screen. One sometimes wonders how much these filmmakers actually read of the original medieval texts, though Boorman and Donovan seem more familiar with the original stories when compared to other contemporary retellings. These later versions are filmed in an age where many popular

ahistorical adaptations are willing to move away from literal interpretations of a myth or even true history in order to offer audiences a view of the plot with which they have become familiar, such as the earlier Braveheart which was earning Oscars despite its blatant ahistorical biography and Showtime's The Tudors which was airing on television simultaneously with the filming of both King Arthur and Tristan & Isolde. Less emphasis is placed on truthful storytelling and historical accuracy than on appeal to an audience's familiarity with the assumption of the source material. In doing so, there is often a loss of the key elements at the center of beloved myths and legends, and a subsequent change to the overall landscape of the tale. The manipulation of key motifs of the King Arthur and Tristan and Isolt legends has led to adaptations such as John Boorman's 1981 Excalibur, Antoine Fuqua's 2004 King Arthur, Tom Donovan's 1981 Lovespell, and Kevin Reynold's 2006 Tristan & Isolde in which the legends themselves are forever altered. By changing these key features, filmmakers are often not looking ahead in order to understand how the resulting plot, characters, and themes of the legends are manipulated as a consequence. Themes such as honor and courtly love are thus deployed in ways sometimes completely opposite from their function in the original source texts simply in order to appeal audiences' ideas about a certain time period and the erroneous image of these legends.

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