

Challenging the Arthurian Myth in Fanfiction: Rethinking Gender and Leadership

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the Arthurian myth challenged in fanfiction. The quintessentially masculine character – King Arthur, is regendered as a woman, thus addressing the representations of power and leadership closely associated with masculinity in the mythological world. However, gender transformation is not just about archaic stereotypes but about the real-world inequalities and the burden of responsibility many contemporary women are trying to balance with their personal lives. The significance of the study lies in scrutinizing the modern female leadership role constructed through reference to old stories. Seventeen stories published in 2007–2020 (fanfiction.net) were analysed through cognitive linguistic methodology. They feature three major pathways the regendering may take: the Warrior, the Queen, and the Mother-nature type being organically woven into the canonical narrative. Fanfiction authors downplay the brutality of the archaic world and bring a hardworking and intelligent ruler to the fore. Many female characters in the stories suffer from the need to conform to the rules of the old trade yet become successful warriors and rulers. We also show that deconstructing one of the core characteristics of King Arthur's image tends to reinforce the others: social position, detailed description of place and time, and following the plot meticulously. The English linguistic repertoire used to describe the regendered character is also reinforced, with keywords commonly used to describe King Arthur being repeated at key points in the narrative.

Keywords: Arthurian myth; fanfiction; cognitive linguistic analysis; regendering; female leadership

INTRODUCTION

Myths have long served as cornerstones of human culture. These “stories about divine beings arranged in a coherent system” (Simpson & Roud, 2000, p. 254) proved exceptionally useful for storing “cognitive schemas, abstract and organized packages of information” (Howard, 2000, p. 368). Within the cognitive framework, myths are defined as “mental models in the minds of individuals in a culture” (Hodge, 2006, p. 8). Humans have always been exceptionally skilled mythmakers, as myths represent efficient tools for communication, clustering meanings and values. Being sensually intelligible, emotionally rich, and symbolically drunk, myths herd individuals into communities: “Any large-scale human cooperation <...> is rooted in common myths” (Harari, 2014, p. 30). However, myths have never been so popular as they are in the 21st century – the presumable age of rationality.

What follows from mythological studies (Eliade, 1968) is that myths bridge the gap between invariant conceptualizations of communities and variable conceptualizations of individuals, allowing the latter to be woven into the collective story. Importantly, old myths energize new narratives.

In the 21st century, they expanded into a new medium – internet fanfiction, the literature democratizing deepwater current. Jenkins emphasized that fanfiction is “the way of the culture repairing the damage done in a system where contemporary myths are owned by corporations instead of owned by the folk” (H. Jenkins, 1992, p. 4). In fanfiction, ordinary people, regardless of their cultural or linguistic background (though many stories are written in English as a *lingua franca*), could amend myths to suit their needs. The readers become writers, the ‘closed’ characters become ‘open’ to innovation, and the pleasures of repetition/recognition mingle with those of destruction or “interest-provokingness” (Nakissa, 2021). Therefore, studying how myths change allows scholars to detect those social changes that might otherwise go unnoticed. Apart from mediating traditional values, myths may “contest them in an acceptable way” (Doherty, 2015, pp. 11–14), including challenging gender ideologies (Caputi, 2004). Meanwhile, the vectors of gender shifts have not been outlined.

Therefore, myths could be studied as a *culturally embedded cognitive phenomenon* stored in human consciousness, disseminated through narratives, with a strong axiological potential. This cognitive perspective becomes essential when studying the development of myth in an ‘experimental’ environment such as fanfiction. Viewing myth as a cognitive phenomenon is not confined to story *retelling*; it's mostly about mental constructs.

The myth with an undeniable impact on culture is the story of King Arthur. It is a ‘living myth’ of the Anglo-Saxon world, operating by the “openness of myth principle” (Dentzien, 2004, p. 24). Emerging as a legend with tangible historical evidence around the 9th century A.D., Arthuriana integrated other subnarratives, such as the story of Merlin or of Tristram and Isolde, to become a complex mythological universe. This myth-legend amalgam punctuated the literary process for centuries, giving rise to various literary forms. Analysing the development of the Grail quest, Campbell stressed that Arthuriana represents the first “secular mythology” and “the central myth of Western Culture” (Campbell, 2020). Moreover, Arthuriana has been accepted by the whole world; through multilingual and multicultural mediums, every culture finds something important in the enduring legend.

This essay explores the regendering of King Arthur (KA) in fanfiction. This may provide a deeper understanding of cultural shifts and how the collective consciousness challenges the ontological narratives. Gender transformation of the stereotypically masculine character addresses both lacunae in the original image and the real-world inequalities experienced by women taking on leadership roles and trying to conceptualize a modern view of female empowerment. However, what has changed, how it has changed, and what the limits of these changes have largely escaped the scholars' attention.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Here we address the pertinent literature on two major arguments behind this work – the similarities between myth and fanfiction and the role of gender in myth and fan-stories.

Fan stories rely on “characters and story worlds of a single source text or a ‘canon’ of works” (B. Jenkins, 2015, p. 371) or any “identifiable segment of popular culture” (Tushnet, 1997, p. 651). Myth and fanfiction share a narrative thread and mode of functioning. Fanfiction has allowed many stories to be retold in a way different from *prêt-à-porter* marketable myths. Though not numerous, several studies draw similarities between fanfiction and myth (Asimos, 2021; Montano, 2012; Willis, 2016) or fairy tales (Menise, 2019). Firstly, archaic narratives are subject

to diverse interpretations in modern culture, and even more so in fanfiction. Secondly, fragmented fanfiction narratives are not supposed to be complete or coherent; thus, they can be developed from anywhere. This allows for fanfiction to be viewed as "a site of intersection, negotiation, and contestation between different ways of doing myth" (Willis, 2016, p. 2). Fanfiction was also shown to mythologize the non-mythological stories (Mussies, 2021) initially.

While canonical myths tend to be created within a single linguistic-cultural community, fan stories provide a multicultural context for reviving old narratives through individual stories. The research has uncovered that the proportion of female writers in fandom is high (Carreiras et al., 1996; Feehily, 2017). A recent demographic survey of the fan-writers also revealed that most of them are women – up to 87.7% (Solina, 2024). Many nonprofessional writers tend to project their identity onto the character, possibly accounting for many female characters in fanfiction, either taken from the original works themselves or invented. Therefore, female empowerment is among the most significant themes running through fandom narratives (Antoniolli, 2017). This view is strongly expressed by Štambuk viewing fanfiction as relying on “female practices of bonding such as gossip and storytelling” rather than on mimetic practices: “The fanon is, thus, a common mythology created within a culture that accommodates and encourages supplementing the canon” (2015, p. 12).

Since both myth and fanfiction are “image-centred” (Hellekson, 2009, p. 115), their transformations could be addressed through the changes the main character can endure. Once transferred or “poached” (H. Jenkins, 1992), the character becomes a character function “within a spatially delimited story world. Consequently, there is in most, if not all, supposedly in-character fanfiction a certain fidelity to *character* but not *a character*” (B. Jenkins, 2015, p. 372). Regardless of the initial complexity, only a subset of features is played upon, keeping the character recognizable yet different from previous works.

This is especially true of Arthuriana, with multiple interpretations already existing in fiction. King Arthur (KA) is an immortal character type that allows for infinite supplementation, which was rewritten time and again from contemporary cultural frameworks. KA of Celtic tales is different from a noble king of Malory, the romantic leader in Tennyson, or a brutal warrior of historical novels. Arthuriana is an outcome of the hybrid culture with intertextual links: “more than a symbol of the resurgence alone... a hero proper to that age” (Ashe, 2013, p. 63). Moreover, it is difficult to identify one authentic, genuinely true story, but there exist numerous story threads, storylines, interpretations and reinventions, making Arthuriana, in fact, a centuries-old fanfic: “the perfect epicentre for inclusive reimaginings, reinterpretations, and remixes” (Deonn, 2021).

Arthuriana has given rise to such a prolific flow of works that fanfiction *per se* was not the focus of scholarly interest. The earliest attempt to directly argue the need to leave the ivory towers of tradition and study the Internet was made by George (2005). He stressed that Arthur's popularity in the unconventional media is exactly why this myth is a “living tradition”. The argument was essentially in line with (Fathallah, 2017, p. 201): “All derivative and transformative text is, by its very form, both legitimizing and critical of the primacy of its sources”. Arthuriana could be significantly transformed in fanfiction, with place and time (Sharapkova, 2018) being the first key characteristics destroyed, yet new motifs and characters from other myths easily integrate (Sharapkova, 2023).

The second conceptual line behind this study is gender. Gender is a key facet of identity; it is a significant cultural variable in society that determines roles, behaviours, and norms. Since myths generally represent socially acceptable ways to deal with real-world problems, revamping them is a way to address the changing social practices. Female retellings of traditionally male

stories have become frequent in the last decade, as exemplified in Greek myth retellings in female fiction (Dörschel, 2011). More explicit sexuality and romantic relationships between characters flooded fanfiction (Abrahamson, 2020). Even Disney tried to adopt the ecofeminist movement (Hernawati, 2021) and create “a princess of the new generation, and consequently a new contemporary myth” (Menise, 2019, p. 539).

Although giving the full overview of the female treatment of Arthurian myth is beyond the scope of the present article, it is necessary to outline several key ideas. Arthurian fiction, starting with Malory, is largely male-centred, with women playing minor roles, and Morgana and Guinevere being the exceptions that just prove the rule. Knighthood, as it was created in medieval literature, is a world of military worship, battles of power and leadership, embodying the link between heroism, masculinity, and war (Braudy, 2010). Hence, female characters were reduced to objects of love, rescue, and matrimonial play, being “contrapuntal rather than independent” (Fries, 1998, p. 67).

This medieval treatment of women as subordinately ornamental was at odds with the original Celtic substrate of Arthuriana, where women attained a high rank in many spheres. Such characters as Queen Boudica, Medb of Connaught, and Morrigan were legendary warriors, Scathach was a female druid instructing Cuchulainn, and Rhiannon was the queen as supported by the very name is derivative of **rīgan*- role (Ford, 2020). Thus, restoring the active role of women paradoxically feels *in the narrative* and potentially *in character* for Arthurian myth. Davidson (2006) demonstrated a steady rise in a women-warrior type in Arthurian fiction since the 1970s, “drawing, presumably, on the Roman accounts of Celtic women” (Montano, 2012, p. 10).

Twentieth-century writers naturally accepted the challenge of reimagining female characters in Arthuriana, giving voice to many silenced narratives. The prime example is *The Mists of Avalon* by M.Z. Bradley brought female characters into the limelight and presented the archaic story from an active female point of view by exploring “issues relating to female self-determination and power” (Paxon, 1999, p. 114), followed by dozens of other stories with strong Arthurian women. Generally, in novels written for adult audiences, female characters are empowered through mental capabilities, including magic. Those written for a younger audience are more eager to break with the patriarchal stereotypes, make Arthur-lady the main character, and introduce new cultural identities. Meanwhile, there is a clear gap in viewing Arthur as a woman chiselling a new character out of the old narrative. This could be done through regendering.

Regendering is defined as “a deconstruction of gender via the simultaneous examination of the original character” (Baker, 2016, p. 23). It allows the reader to distil the most essential features and uncover contemporary concerns. Regendering embodies the growing need to understand, recognize and conceptualize female power and leadership as a potentially distinct entity, formed not in opposition to/ imitation of the male one (Brottrager et al., 2023). The way female characters are portrayed is important from the sociocultural point of view as fanfiction is essentially a collective activity, thus implying that these interpretations will elicit the necessary response from their audience.

Most importantly, the subordinate role of women as “damsels in distress” in the male world is in stark contrast to the modern sociocultural framework. Since many writers of fanfiction are women, they essentially write about themselves, trying to build a role model of a successful leader. Consequently, the modern treatment of myth in fanfiction gives women prominence, with their personalities nuancedly elaborated. This process, at the basic level, allows the cultural role of the character in the story to be redefined, shedding light on both the original myth and its modern perception.

METHODOLOGY

The stories were taken from fanfiction.net (2023) – the largest archive uniting fans from all over the world but written in English. All stories had to comply with the following criteria: to be written within the broad Arthurian canon (3000 stories) and not a highly specific piece, they had to be finished with the character developed at some length, and not focused on sex only (not PWP). In total, 17 regendered stories out of 30 with Arthur made female were selected. All the selected stories were analysed, yet here we cite the most representative ones. All stories except one (*The Romance of Arthur, Vortigern's Daughter*) are taken from that site, while all illustrations except one are taken from *Tumblr* (2023) – the site where fans post their art.

Previously, the key characteristics of the concept underlying the image of KA were identified using a procedure common to cognitive linguistic, conceptual analysis (Sharapkova, 2023). Among the conceptual characteristics that define KA are space and time, as well as personal characteristics such as the military valour of a commander, physical strength, leadership qualities, nobility, and connection with magic. The keywords used to describe the key characteristics of the concept were: *king, leader, knight, warrior, brave, wise, clever, brutal, and lustful*. These words were categorized into two categories – brutal warrior and social kingly power- and were further identified in the texts analysed. The word frequency, their position in the text, and the interpretation of each story were used to decide which type the regendering referred to.

The process of analysis takes procedures from cognitive stylistics (Semino & Culpeper, 2002, p. ix), that emerged from traditional literary analysis and grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 2009, p. 1). This approach allows us to first analyse the texts from the bottom-up approach and then to study them again from the outlined structures emerging – top-down. No initial hypothesis was embedded in the analysis, and major themes emerged from extensive reading of the chosen stories.

DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

ARTHUR MADE FEMALE

For heuristic purposes, the material is presented under several themes that emerged from the analysis, though they are usually mixed in one story: warrior-type, masculine and female leadership, and the Mother Nature type (FIGURE 5).

The name change, signifying identify shift, occurs almost in all stories. King Arthur is changed to *Arthuria, Arthora, Arthoria, Regina*; though there are a few exceptions, where the original masculine name is retained. The name is an important part of character's identity and is usually preserved to be *in character*; this is the detail that connects fanfic to canon.

The second theme peculiarly recurrent in fandom is changing the hair colour to blonde. Regardless of the type, the character is made beautiful but not explicitly sexy, as the male role is played by a woman who usually hides her identity. For instance, in the fanfic *Fate Singularity (FS)*, we find the following description: "*The **blond woman** in front of me had her back only shown, so I couldn't see her face. Her name was **Artoria Pendragon**.*" In another story, *The Life and Tales of King Arthur (LTKA)*, we are brought to the crucial moment when the promised child is born. Igrain and Uther realize that their first child is a girl and describe her, pointing at her future life as a king and a warrior:

She will be blonde like her mother ... It is too bad that she'll keep it covered under a helmet... She has her father's green eyes, a sign that she will grow to be a good and wise leader like you.

The story *burden of a King (BK)* opens with the following description: “*In the dark of night, the blonde King of England stood before a basin of water, staring at her blood soaked reflection.*”

Merlin is not happy with this gender 'complication', as it ruins his plans, yet his role as a counsellor is largely within the canon. In *BK*, he tries to dissuade the young lady-knight from pulling the sword, but she insists on taking this responsibility: “*Are ye certain of your choice, young knight?*” “*I am King.*” So, he left Arthur “*to do what she was destined.*” In *The Legend of Artoria (LA)*, Merlin is unsure whether she would be accepted as the true leader: “*I wonder, does that make her Queen, or will they still call her King?*” The opposition clearly lies in the preexisting stereotype: Arthur is the king, a masculine leader in the archaic world where women have no right to power. In *My Queen, You Are My King (MQYK)*, “*Altria is a queen ruled by no king.*”

In *LTKA*, the kingdom is surrounded by the Saxons, so the girl must be brought up in full awareness of her future fate: “*What is done is done, and now we have a girl who must grow to become a king.*” All three stories end abruptly, but the possibility of making Arthur a girl living in the Dark Ages and struggling with the Germanic intruders augments the lack of strong female characters in the post-malory treatment of the original myth. The main characteristics are described with the words *leader* and *king* repeated several times. The readers are convinced that the woman can be and will be a good leader of her people.

The gender limits are explored through the opposition of the female and male, form and function, role and emotion. Notably, the kingly function itself almost blurs the boundaries between genders, making the character panhuman, which is explicitly expressed in some stories through the symbolic act of gaining the sword – the artefact of power. In one story, Artoria Pendragon describes it herself: “*Her duty completed, she had allowed herself to become a human rather than a King*”; “*She had tried to let go of being human when she became King, but sometimes emotions leaked through anyway*” (*BK*). Lastly, drawing the sword from/near water is more frequent in stories than pulling it from the stone, indicating the strong connection with Lady of the Lake.

A FEMALE WARRIOR

King Arthur is essentially a manifestation of heroic (warrior-type) leadership. Wheeler explicated it through a close link between gender and heroism: “King Arthur is arguably the secular hero of medieval and post-medieval Western civilization” (1992, p. 1).

Therefore, changing gender implies fitting a woman into the warrior role both ornamentally and essentially. *FS* and *LTKA* and several other stories supported this by all the necessary attributes: oaths, fidelity, loyalty, swordsmanship, and enemies. “*As your sword, I have defeated all your enemies and have protected you. I am glad that I have been able to fulfil this oath*” (*FS*).

The core opposition addressed is between heroic qualities needed in a brutal world and female emotions, the impossibility of becoming happy while feigning identity in a masculine world demanding tough decisions. The superhuman-warrior stereotype of having no emotions does not comply with modern sociocultural interest in the inner world: “*King Arthur doesn't understand human emotions,*” “*A great King wouldn't have any, but Arthur was not a great King. Things affected her far more than she let on*” (*BK*).

Abstract ideas are embodied in fanfiction through vivid physical images very much in line with embodied cognition. For example, the metaphor of armour restricting her movements and causing pain is recurrent in fanfiction, yet armour is necessary to fully take on a male role,

inevitably dismissing the emotive, feminine part. Thus, it is reflected in the lexical items like *trapped*, *caught*, *imprisoned*, and *captured*: “While her armour was more flexible than most, her body still hated being **trapped** in it for days on end” (BK). The female body may not perfectly fit for the warrior’s role, yet it is for the king’s one: “the king’s heart when **caught and tangled in a woman’s body**?” (*The Romance of Arthur, Vortigern’s Daughter*). A more direct treatment of this physical discrepancy is given in *It’s King Arthur (IKA)*, where the myth is brought into a modern world where still only a male can be the true heir to the throne. So, the daughter of Uther, Regina becomes transgender to suit the crown’s needs, undergoing a physically painful transformation to finally become a true and lawful King:

Merlin smiles contentedly and takes his place at Arthur’s side as they fight to rid the kingdom of ridiculous prejudices and inequality. Once again, King Arthur sits at his round table, on equal footing with the people who champion a greater world (IKA).

This element is mostly present in those stories where KA should be primarily a warrior type. This trend to direct embodiment of emotions has been recognized by Hautsch:

If we understand our cognitive system as the integration of mind, body, and emotion, we can see fans’ so-called bad reading practices as drawing attention to what is often overlooked in other approaches to thinking, reading, and composing: the role of feelings and embodiment in our reception and creation of texts.

(Hautsch, 2023, p. 2)

Enveloped in a rationale provided by a myth, these stories represent the opposition between inner and faked identity and develop the theme of sacrifice to make it.

Fanlore includes not only stories (fanfics) but also images (fanart) created under the influence of narrative canon. A warrior type is depicted with a sword or in full armour, again emphasizing the unconscious need to make the image recognizable through signs of power and leadership (FIGURE 1). This image has become so stereotypical that it is even reflected in some memes comparing KA and other warrior characters like (FIGURE 2). One of the popular films directly exploiting the archetype of a female warrior and superhero is *Wonder Woman* (2017), featuring a Diana-goddess. One meme explicitly compares the two heroes. It may have been triggered by the fact that another film about KA was released the same year: *King Arthur: Legend of the Sword* (2017).



FIGURE 1. Some illustrations of King Arthur being a woman warrior.



FIGURE 2. The meme plays upon the similarity between two heroes bringing the female character into the limelight and Lady Pendragon (by Matt Hawkins).

The story developing this tension in nuance is *The King's Hound (KH)*. Here, the story opens with a scene with a little girl, Arturia Pendragon, supposedly the future KA, reading an old book about Celtic mythology. She is being taught by Merlin after her father's death, and the plot unfolds traditionally:

*Arturia was the spitting image of her father, **the king of their land**. She was **supposed to ascend to the throne** by taking the **king's word from the rock** he was placed in long ago when she was older, as the legends bade all kings of England do.*

She lives far away from Camelot, in the forest with Merlin, and once, she meets a strangely familiar ghost. When the girl grows up, she returns to the city to pull the sword out, pretending to be a man because only a man can become the king: "*If you take the **sword**, Arthur. You **might no longer be human**...*" This momentous act ultimately transforms her character; she abandons her femininity, devoting her life to serving her role as a warrior and king.

She also becomes eternally young, a notable peculiarity verbalized in this story yet running a thread in many fanfics. Arthur is never represented as old or ageing, pointing to the immortal mythological character. Here, I may refer to two insightful quotes addressing the dichotomy of life and death of a character in the narrative world. "To give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing" (Barthes, 2006, p. 44). "To become whole is not only to become complete and meaningful but also cease to exist in the world" (B. Jenkins, 2015, p. 373).

The story unfolds canonically, resembling Malory's plot. At first, the nobles do not accept his/her rights and want to prove military might and bravery in war: "*He walked across **the battle field**, fearless, and offered the **sword** to the nobles who were against him. <...> **The boy**, now considered **a man despite how young he was**."*

In the first short chapter, Arthuria is accepted as the true king, who restores the castle, regains full power, and brings the best knights together. The new hero demonstrates all the necessary qualities: bravery in battles, nobility, and honesty. Thus, the core qualities of KA are preserved, and the lexical items typical of Arthurian description are preserved as well: 1) "*He's a **legend** to our people all over Ulster. He's a national **hero** because of how much **he fought** for that*

which he believed in"; and 2) "*Weeks turned to months, months into years, and Arturia ruled as a good king should, conquering the other lands of Briton and bringing them into her kingdom.*"

To complete the identity transformation, Arthur marries a young girl, Guinevere, and the opposition between female identity and the role played is materialized. She/he starts seeing the ghost resembling the one she saw long ago while she was brought up by Merlin. The ghost knows Arthur's secret. Here, quite an interesting dialogue, revealing the supremacy of the core conceptual characteristics, is found in the text: kingly power is over gender. 1) "*I am not a woman; I am King.*" 2) "*I am no woman and you are not welcome, sir ghost*" 3) "*A king by trade, but a woman by nature.*" This opposition is further developed in many other scenes, showing that women had no place in that archaic world; masculine power is not accepted by women, either. But Arthuria proved to be a good king for his lands: "*Because men will not follow a woman. Because women will not trust a woman leader, and the men will fall behind them with the same sentiment.*" The construction of power and gender is explored further, acknowledging the complexity of things for women in their older years: "*Yes, but especially because you are a woman. As such, you are prone to worse problems than any man around could ever experience.*" Male and female roles are skillfully clashed on the linguistic level through contextual antonyms and balanced sentences.

The ghost haunting Arthuria is Cuchulainn, the great Irish hero who has fallen in love with her and is trying to win her love. The king is gradually filled with emotions not allowed within the warrior-king frame. The story of a ghost falling in love with a king explains well the tension between Launcelot and the canonic affair, as he understands that Guinevere, the Queen he loves, is Arthur's queen only for show.

This story, as well as several others, features a subtle change of names. At first, the girl is called Arthuria, then Arthur, then Arthur Pendragon, then Arthuria Pendragon, and then back to Arthur, when she is given a magic potion making her a man to undergo some intimidating checking, and finally back to Arthuria, when she accepts the love of Cuchulainn. These identity changes are hugely important; she must accept the true male identity, at least for some part of the narration. After the final gender transformation, Cuchulainn ceases to be a ghost and is reborn as a boy, eventually knowing his past life and wishing to find Arthuria and prove himself as a good warrior. After several years, he comes to Camelot to be knighted and to be close to the woman he fell in love with as a ghost. However, the passion between Arthuria and Cuchulainn may destroy the entire kingdom, the embodiment of true power and ideal government: "*The dream of the king is too great a thing for me to destroy it.*" There is a growing tension between the desire to be loved and the duties of a king.

The canonical plot unfolds, with Morgana and Mordred wishing to take the kingdom and kill Arthur. Merlin tries to save Arthuria and Cuchulainn, sending them to a place they would never be found through a magic ribbon he had received from Hogwarts, creating an interesting amalgam of mythological references.

This is a light and romantic story, demonstrating that there is a lot to change when turning a male character into a female one. However, the plot is meticulously preserved, and the core characteristics of the original concept are made even more explicit. Interestingly, the stories exploring romantic relationships usually pair female Arthur with other heroes from different mythological systems. Other unfinished stories feature relationships between Arthur and Gilgamesh, or Batman, or Alfred the Great. The warrior-woman can be with a man no less than herself.

A FEMALE LEADER AND WARRIOR

The story *The Romance of Arthur, Vortigern's Daughter (RAVD)* by J.P. Soath is the only one in which the author is not just an anonymous fan but an Arthurian scholar. It is an unromanticized story that makes Arthur a female named Ardora, living in the Dark Ages with little magic and brutality. The preoccupation with neomedievalism in the 21st century is not only about romances but also about disgust at violence, ignorance, and barbarism. Ardora faces the unfairness of a male world based on the right of the strongest. After being raped and bearing a child, she is no longer welcome in her own family and is sent to the camp of Aurelius Ambrosius and Uther Pendragon.

This story, apart from presenting original regendering ideas, follows Ardora's journey from a victim to a formidable leader; it highlights the enduring struggle for righteousness in a world fraught with conflict. This turn of the plot grounds the basic characteristic of Arthur's reign: he was a just and peaceful ruler. Suffering so much personally, she seeks to protect the weak. It also clarifies the potential for knightly leadership to evolve in a woman's personality through pain and disgrace. The story consists of three parts, reflecting the main stages in the character's evolution: *Ardora and Ardurius*, *The Cup and the Sword*, and *Morte de la belle Artu*. It should be noted that the names of the parts correspond to the canon: the name Ardurius recalls the Roman origin prototypical of the myth, the sword and cup hark back to Excalibur and the Holy Grail, and the French resembles the name of Malory's famous romance, *Le Morte D'Arthur*. Three parts indicate the gradual identity transformation of the female version of Arthur: from a young girl experiencing her own dishonour to an unknown avenger and finally to the King of England. The heroine changes her appearance, learns to ride a horse, and becomes a good swordsman.

Here, Lancelot is a positive character: her friend, brother-in-arms, and ally. Ardora is described by characteristics true to the core of Arthur: *virtue, vengefulness, wisdom, and the heat and violence of the king's heart*, which are introduced one after another. The canonical Arthur is cruel, vindictive, and – less likely – merciful. Having decided to change her role in the male world, she also changes her name to Arthur and departs with the army, where she proves to be quite useful: “*She spoke many British dialects, her mother's Germanic tongue, French, Latin, and the Alan tongue as well-and in her mastery of weapons and horsemanship.*” This might seem like an example of the warrior type, but the image is more complex – it is a rare example of an intellectual Arthur since there is no Merlin in the story to take the counsellor function.

Discussing the ideal Britain with the wives of Uther and Ambrosius, she imagines a peaceful life free from hatred and evil. Together, they design a knightly ideal of protecting the weak: “*the Britain they longed to see: a land at peace, where every man offered his protection to every woman, where lords sat at peace with each other instead of building towers in which to hide from each other.*” She reveals unworthy actions to Ambrosius's wife and shows her how to verify the truth: the wound she gave him when he raped her will not heal, so Eopa poisons her husband. Upon envisaging the possibility of becoming a ruler with her grown sons and other noble ladies, she receives a sword that was previously owned by Uther, Ygerne's husband, from her own hands in the church near the lake. In fact, the idea of receiving a symbol of power from a woman, prominent in the medieval interpretation of the legend, is transformed into the motif of revenge embodied in taking the power symbols back (FIGURE 5). It is provided with another explanation and placed in another context, yet one changed pronoun still creates a pattern of similarity with the canon: “*Now they dressed Arthur as befitted a king, not a wandering tinker, and indeed she looked like a king, young and shining with her new purpose. The sword given her by the lady at the lake hung at her side.*” This story abounds with cross-references to the original narrative, and numerous links between the known plot and the novel interpretation are established. The court is in Camlan,

having obvious historical and literary associations.

The questions of true identity and “faking it till you make it” arise. Looking like a real king, she finally becomes the real king – Ardora rises to prominence as a powerful ruler and champion of peace and justice in Britain. The images of Ardora and Arthur finally blend into an ideal – embodiment of function without any gender characteristics. Victorious in battles, she is eventually recognized as the new king by both Arthur’s allies and enemies, and “*an era of peace ensued.*” She establishes herself as an active and just ruler, as is demonstrated by the use of action verbs: “*made a good treaty, collected the remains of the army, began to fight against, fought a battle.*”

The important political and personal dilemma introduced by Malory was preserved in this story, with one of her children brought up in the North. The child named Moderatus (Moderatus or Morther – the name given by Ardora) grows up hating the King of Britain. His advisor is Morgan, the daughter of Ambrosius, who was killed through the poison given by Ardora. Inspired by Morgan, Moderatus asks Arthur to fight with him, not knowing that the King is his mother. So, the canonical plot and the original dilemma are preserved yet explained by other motifs. She does not want to kill her son, but in an attempt to parry a blow, she inevitably does. Nearly killed by her grief, she reveals her female identity and, taken away from the field by Lancelot, kills herself that winter. People decided that their king died, taken away by Lancelot to be buried. Everything seems to be perfectly in line with the classic legend, except for the gender-guided motivation behind the actions, making the plot even more captivating.

Arthur's prototypical conceptual characteristics and linguistic features remain close to the canon in both stories. The core comprises verbs of active action, manifestations of cruelty, the wisdom of the ruler, and the ability to fight in battle, while the periphery includes fame, the desire to create a knightly ideal, peaceful rule, and linguistic skills. The stories differ in their treatment of romantic elements: some allow the female king to be happy, but this one doesn't.

The running theme is the clash between male and female identity. It is clearly expressed in the climax of the story: “*Who shall measure **the heat and violence of the king’s heart when caught and tangled in a woman’s body?***” The author explores the limits of women’s power and the possibility of reshaping the gender-biased image of the king. The issues about women’s rights, violence and abuse are raised indirectly. The antonyms support the contextual contrast: *heart – body, king – woman, heat/warmth – cruelty*. Yet though Ardora (more warrior type) and Arthuria (more strategic leader type) were as successful as Arthur, they could not change their female identities and suffered, trapped in a female body in a male world.

This is the type of a female leader construed in fanfiction: not brutal but strong, noble, and keeping her oaths. This role is seen more as Prime Minister or President: “*She is **the hardest working citizen in her kingdom, and nothing could stop her from continuing her strive to make her kingdom a better and safer place and giving her people the happiness she has promised them as their ruler.***” (MQYMK). However general it might seem, these female leaders gain power through adaptability, strategic thinking, and empathy rather than by brutality alone. These qualities enable her to win allies and pursue her goals with determination and integrity.

In Fanart, she is depicted with key symbols of power: a throne, a sword, and a shield, but the character's posture is not aggressive (FIGURE 3).

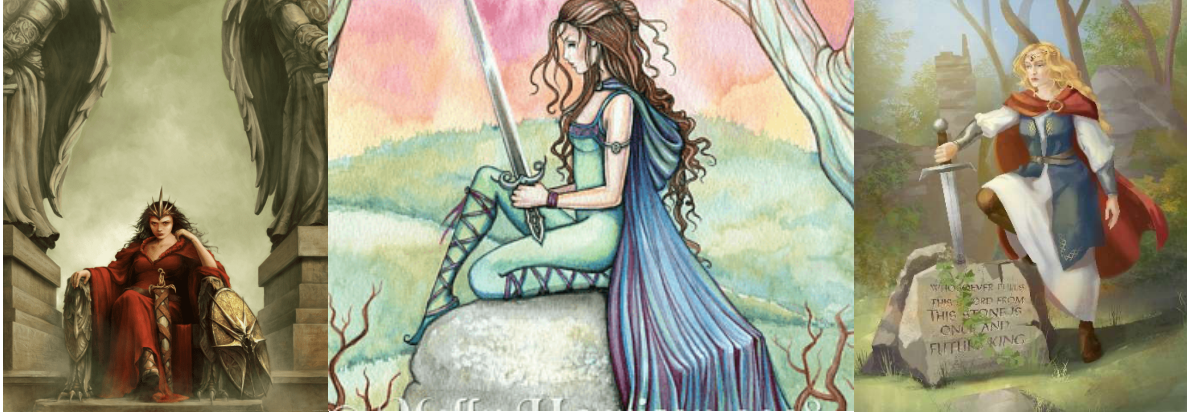


FIGURE 3. An image of a female King Arthur enthroned, after pulling the sword. The picture on the right is fan art by a Polmaria artist

BACK TO NATURE TRANSFORMATIONS

An interesting yet rather underexplored theme in Arthurian regendering is blending Arthur with traditional female Arthurian characters such as Guinevere, Nimue, Morgana, or the Lady of the Lake, having much of Celtic myths preserved in their images. These stories feature an infrequent concept of leadership through magical wisdom. In these stories, Lady Arthur takes a nurturing and caring approach, prioritizing the well-being of her people and the land and, through wisdom, stopping the devastating war. Interestingly, in many fanfics, a female Arthur usually gets the sword from the water or the stone near the lake, featuring water as a mythological symbol and the source of magic power. (FIGURE 4).

In *Flora and Fauna Magic* (FFM), the girl coming to save Camelot is Moselle, rescued from the invading soldiers, put in a basket, flown down the river, and protected by Melusina, the goddess of rivers. This version of KA is connected to the natural world and has a profound understanding of the land and animals as she talks to wolves. The girl is brought up in a monastery, where she learns to read and write in several languages and control her magic. The story ends on the moment she leaves her monastery for Camelot, where she would know her lineage. She comes to rescue the male world from constant war, bringing care and law, thus becoming a leader of *the legendary land that united under one king* (FFM). The key ideas and the lexical field repeated throughout the text are *unity, united, unanimous, and undivided*.

In this case, the opposing evil is not invaders but either dark forces of industrialism destroying nature or dark magical creatures. In the tale *The Once and Future... King?* by Shadow Crystal Mage Arthur is woken up by Morgana to protect England from flying dragons. *King Arthur is back and alive. And King Arthur was a girl*. Getting the Excalibur, which dragons are afraid of, in this case, was *the easiest part*, as becoming the true leader and investing her life in her kingdom – protecting and understanding what it needs was a much more complex task. Morgana, in this story, is Arthur's counsellor, and she gradually becomes *a king with charisma* relying on strong intuition.

This type of transformation is in accord with the ecofeminist movement – a way of looking at women's position as equal to nature or as an embodiment of nature that is insulted in the male-dominated industrial world. This cultural trend was discussed in Hernawati (2021) based on Disney's treatment of Moana.

In these interpretations, there is no conflict between fake and real identity, but a conflict between the brutal warrior approach of the stereotypical Arthurian universe and Lady Arthur's ability to resolve conflicts peacefully, promoting cooperation and ensuring that the needs of both her subjects and nature are met. Only in this type of story Arthur comes from Avalon emerging from the dream. This might implicate the cyclical nature of life, death, and rebirth keeping well with Arthuriana.



FIGURE 4. Some illustrations of King Arthur as a nature goddess figure akin to the lady of the Lake

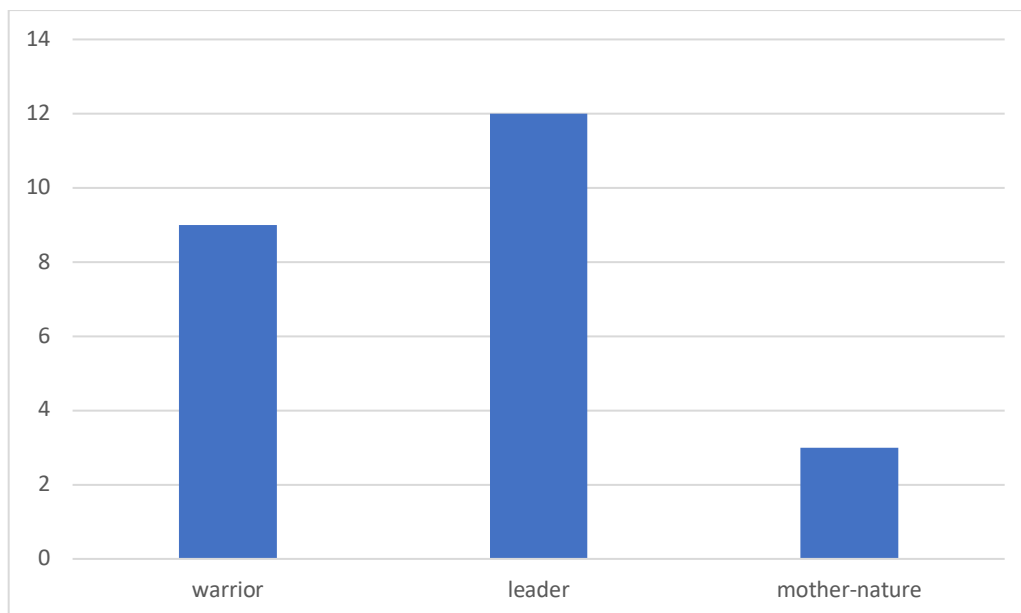


FIGURE 5. Major characteristics of female Arthur in fanfiction.

Fanfiction stories can be bizarre or unfinished, and their interpretation of the character can make him/her meaningless. Yet, some tendencies and probated tensions could still be outlined in these narrative experiments. The outlined characteristics can be combined within a single story, but the challenges of a woman becoming the leader are at the heart of most stories (FIGURE 5). Three types of reinterpreting Arthur as a woman rely on different sources of power: war, intelligence, and magic. In other words, to ensure the role of a woman in leadership positions, she becomes i) the male warrior but better, ii) the empathic, intelligent ruler, ii) the magic of nature.

CONCLUSION

Myths in general, and the Arthurian myth in particular, can be viewed as a conceptual matrix with multiple thematic slots, like a Lego set allowing one to build almost anything from a set of its core elements: the Warrior King, Excalibur, the Round Table, the Grail, love-story, nobility, friendship, war, and leadership. Yet even the original set requires updating, particularly in making the patriarchal, masculine, brutal myth embrace a female point of view – caring, loving, and non-aggressive. Paraphrasing the Shakespearean saying that places beauty in the eye of the beholder, fanfiction places meaning in the eye of its authors, not where the original myth did. This implies that modern unresolved tensions are channelled into the structures proposed by the myth.

Seventeen analysed stories allow one to draw the following conclusions. Deconstructing one core characteristic leads to reinforcing the others to ensure recognizability. Making Arthur female entails emphasizing her social position, describing the chronotype in detail, and following the plot meticulously, adding all necessary artefacts and recognizable characters. The language used in the stories relies largely on discursive canon while viewing all the descriptions in opposition to females.

Three major deconstruction routes may be tentatively outlined: a woman Warrior, a female Leader, and Mother Nature. There are three ways to solve the problem of what a lady-Arthur could do in this mythological world and what qualities she could rely on. The warrior type takes on the male role and clashes two types of identities, highlighting the difficulty for women to pretend they are like men but better. A female warrior is KA of archaic stories; the goddess of war found in many mythologies, such as the Greek Athene or Scandinavian Freyja. The women leader explores the intellectual part of the original image, reinforcing these qualities. She is a wiser and more thoughtful Arthur, akin to Irish Morrigan, with remarkable strategic thinking. The third type is close to the mythological power of women keeping in touch with nature akin to Morgana, being thus given a leading role in the narrative. The author has not escaped the notice that this picture resembles the female archetypes by their basic underlying pattern: Huntress, Queen, and Sage.

Senses mix and mingle; they are fluid in writers' imagination within the confines of the initial mythological conceptual matrix. It also makes fanfiction a medium where mythological complexities are disentangled through deconstruction to revitalize old myths. Thus, the myth in fanfiction has gone full circle and has not considerably transformed to its mythological core.

Paradoxically, myths uncover modern tendencies to be explored further. Making Arthur a Woman addresses not the archaic ills but the present real-world inequalities, challenging audiences to rethink traditional gender roles and societal expectations of leadership despite all of feminism's achievements. In fanfiction, Lady Arthur is successful as a warrior, a king, and a capable leader. Through regendering, the storytellers, many of whom are women, challenge the entrenched norms

behind certain roles as inherently masculine or feminine and empower other women to envision themselves as leaders.

Meanwhile, the tension between the role of a king and the burden of responsibility is the problem many contemporary women are trying to balance trying on the traditionally male roles and struggling to gain acceptance in a largely male world. The struggles portrayed in Arthurian fanfiction, particularly within the romantic and family lines, may parallel the real-life experiences of women seeking recognition in leadership positions. Many female characters suffer from the need to conform to the rules of the old trade while being successful warriors and kings. Moreover, the readers try to comfort the tragic image of Arthur by depicting a happy, devoted love.

Importantly, the authors doubt that aggression will lead to a sustainable kingdom, just and caring of its citizens, but a hardworking, intelligent, and clever ruler with strategic thinking will. In many stories, brutality is the option consciously chosen by Arthur, while other options do not exist. By exploring these themes through the lens of gender, fan writers draw attention to the ongoing dialogue surrounding women's rights and gender equality.

Arthur's image ironically fulfilled the prophecy of the once and future king. It proves that the myth is both eternally open to novelties and evades rigorous definitions, either as a character or as a cluster of meanings and values. Fanfiction, in its turn, may contribute to a deeper understanding of the cultural shifts and serve as a medium for reinterpreting traditional myths. Fanfiction creates a powerful democratizing undertow, allowing new voices to break through the dated narrative. It helps establish new norms and meanings through we-narratives.

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