

**Twenty-First Century Arthur: Gender-Bent, Inclusive,
Feminist Retellings of the Arthurian Myth**

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Abstract

From Arthurian poetry in the Black Book of Carmarthen to the Latin medieval prose of Geoffrey of Monmouth and popular modern fiction, tales associated with King Arthur and Arthurian characters have been repeatedly recast and retold in various genres and different periods. Each retelling provides not only a new perspective, but also a snapshot of a specific moment in time and of a particular society's collective value system.

This thesis examines a number of twenty-first-century retellings in the genre of young adult fiction that were published between 2019 and 2022 and which turn the archetypes of the Arthurian myth on their heads. What precipitated the publication of several novels for teens of related subject matter in such a short time span?

Whether set in medieval times, the Deep South, or outer space, these new tales, featuring a wide range of diverse main characters in unexpected scenarios, tackle complicated and often divisive themes and subject matters such as authoritarian regimes, feminism, gender-identity, racism, and bodily autonomy. A breakdown of these themes and the nuances of their depictions in each of the texts will be studied and possible connections to and mirroring of recent political upheavals and current events will also be explored.

Introduction

Across the centuries, an enigmatic leader, a quest, a group of loyal followers, a significant if not worthy adversary, and a sprinkling of magic were often the key components needed for a gripping Arthurian tale. From the earliest surviving depictions in Welsh poetry and prose tales such as *Preiddeu Annwfn* (The Spoils of Annwfn) and *Culhwch ac Olwen* (Culhwch and Olwen), to Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae* (The History of the Kings of Britain), to the romances written by late twelfth-century French poet Chrétien de Troyes, to Sir Thomas Malory's 15th-century collection of tales of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table, *Le Morte d'Arthur*, to the numerous film and TV adaptations of the modern age, including the 2021 epic fantasy film *The Green Knight*, the permutations and possibilities for portrayals of the Arthurian legends seem endless.

The promise of a king who will one day rise again when his people need him most has become so ingrained into Western culture that everywhere you look, there is a new adaptation coming out, in book, television or film format. However, between 2019 and 2022 there was an even more concentrated confluence of retellings, specifically in the subcategories of sci-fi (science fiction) and fantasy within the young adult (hereafter YA) fiction genre. In their Introduction to *Sword Stone Table*, an anthology of short stories published in 2021, the editors talk about how the collection came into being. 'Where are all the gender-bent Arthur stories?' they asked. '... The race-bent retellings, the queer ones?' What they discovered as they reached out to a diverse group of writers to invite them to contribute was that they were not alone in their questioning. They were at the beginning of what they call 'a renaissance of "bent" Arthur retellings.'¹

This thesis will analyse a selection of these YA works and examine how the depictions reflect 21st-century society and its rapidly changing attitudes, whether it be through featuring queer, trans, and nonbinary main characters, challenging societal norms, or creating the space for historically marginalized voices to be heard.

¹ S. Krishna and J. Northington, eds., *Sword Stone Table: Old Legends, New Voices* (New York: Vintage Books, 2021) p. xi.

Since not all readers will be familiar with the relatively recently published books being referenced, before beginning a deeper analysis of the various retellings, here is a brief overview of each of the main texts being examined in this thesis.

***Aetherbound* by E.K. Johnston²**

In this subtle retelling of the myth of the Fisher King, the Stavenger Empire, in an effort to colonize the entire galaxy, has depleted nearly all available resources. Generations ago, the Empire encountered a creature called *oglasa*. Originally the *oglasa* were just slaughtered to make way for the massive space lanes needed for transport but then scientists discovered that the creatures were composed of nearly pure protein, contained all the vitamins and minerals a body required for long-haul space travel, and never spoiled. In short, the perfect food. The *oglasa* were massacred to extinction and, now fully fuelled for the foreseeable future, the Empire resumed its plans for complete galactic domination. But then a cataclysmic event stopped them in their tracks.

A burst of unknown radiation erupted out of the Stavenger sun, and swept through space at an almost scientifically impossible rate. It left organic matter unharmed and electronics unburned. It didn't interrupt sound waves or fritz out the invisible pathways by which information was transmitted. But the aether [the main magical power source for the galaxy] was fried. Even the greatest living masters of magic struggled to muster enough power to boil an egg, and since there were easier ways to heat water, they didn't try. Only magic that had already been done remained.³

The Empire was dismantled but a new, complicated hegemony was created in its stead. Now, one's destiny was determined by family DNA. Pendt Harland lives on a generational merchant ship that travels through the galaxy delivering supplies to the various space stations. Members of the Harland family were the only ones who are able to pilot the ship, provided they also had the appropriate genetic abilities.

² E.K. Johnston is a Canadian young adult novelist and forensic archaeologist. She is the author of several other YA novels, including *Exit, Pursued by a Bear* and *The Story of Owen*, as well as several *New York Times* bestsellers in the Star Wars Saga series.

³ E.K. Johnston, *Aetherbound* (Dutton Books, 2021), p. 4.

Pendt's unique gene mutation means her abilities do not align with the customary family duties and expectations. Consequently, her upbringing has been very restricted—her family does not believe she is even worth the oxygen and food she consumes. But when she turns eighteen, she will be marketable for her reproductive abilities. The ship is scheduled to dock at Brannick Station just before her eighteenth birthday and Pendt decides to thwart her so-called destiny. She carefully plans her escape. She successfully manages to get off the ship and hide until the *Harland* has set sail again. It will not be able to return for at least a month, and only if Captain Arkady, Pendt's aunt, is willing to waste the fuel to reclaim her. Ned and Fisher Brannick, the twin brothers who run the station, become fast friends with Pendt, and she soon learns the power she didn't know she possessed is fueled by food, specifically caloric consumption. The trio plans a risky scheme to help them all escape the destinies they never asked for.

***The Guinevere Deception* by Kiersten White⁴**

The real Guinevere is dead and Arthur's soon-to-be-bride is actually a changeling sent to Camelot by her father, the late great wizard Merlin. Magic has been banned in the kingdom but the new Guinevere secretly practices knot magic to protect the king from those who might wish to destroy him. She meets Mordred and feels strangely drawn to him. It is clear that he is fiercely protective of his king and suspicious of her. Guinevere can sense a dark magic creeping into the forests surrounding Camelot. One day she is attacked by a wild boar but the 'patchwork knight,' a mysterious masked figure who has been winning all the fights in the tournament, steps in its path and saves Guinevere. In attempting to heal the brave knight, Guinevere learns that the patchwork knight is named Lancelot, and is a woman. Lancelot has been hiding her true identity in hopes of being able to join Arthur's knights of the round table. Guinevere promises to keep her secret. Mordred, who observes Guinevere helping the knight, knows now that Guinevere uses magic but he keeps her secret as well. But there are other secrets in Camelot that soon reveal themselves, leaving Guinevere to face some impossible decisions. She learns that her father

⁴ Kiersten White is an award-winning and *New York Times* bestselling American author of many books for children, teens and adults, including *The Dark Descent of Elizabeth Frankenstein* and *Padawan*.

tampered with her memories, and that he is not dead but in fact trapped in a cave after stealing something of great value from the Lady of the Lake. Guinevere also discovers that Mordred is half-fey and is the grandson of the Dark Queen, who Arthur defeated but who is gathering strength to rise again. Knowing Arthur is preparing to battle his family once again, Mordred implores Guinevere to join him and his people in the battle against their oppressors. Which side will she choose?

***Half Sick of Shadows* by Laura Sebastian⁵**

Elaine of Astolat is at the centre of this story of a group of five friends navigating that exciting, terrifying time of life between childhood and adulthood. Elaine has the gift of foresight and the book opens with the line *I will die drowning; it has always been known*,⁶ but unlike the central figure of Tennyson's poem⁷ from which the book gets its title, in this version, Elaine is not an innocent maiden pining away because of an unrequited love for the knight Lancelot. She does struggle with her mental health but eventually finds her inner strength and agency. Her oldest friend is Morgana, a free spirit with great magical power. She brings Elaine to Avalon, along with Arthur, Lancelot, and Guinevere, and it is there that the five of them bond for life as they reveal who they all truly are. Lancelot is half-fey and doesn't feel like he quite belongs in either world; Guinevere, usually referred to as Gwen, is a fierce warrior with a surprising secret that will soon change how everyone sees her; Arthur is crippled by imposter syndrome and the knowledge that one day he will be king.

When they learn of the death of Uther, Arthur relies heavily on the support of his friends as they all journey back to Camelot. They are surprised to learn that Uther has named Mordred as his heir but Merlin stalls to delay the coronation, tasking Arthur with a series of trials to prove his mettle and challenge for the throne. Meanwhile, as Elaine's story jumps from past through the present to the future, we learn more about her relationship with Nimue, the Lady of the Lake,

⁵ Laura Sebastian is an American author of a number of young adult titles including the *New York Times* bestselling Ash Princess series.

⁶ Laura Sebastian. *Half Sick of Shadows* (New York: Ace, 2021), p. 1.

⁷ Alfred, Lord Tennyson. 'The Lady of Shalott,' in *Selected Poems* (London: Penguin Books, 1991).

and the choices Elaine could make to determine her own destiny rather than the one that has been foretold.

***Legendborn* by Tracy Deonn⁸**

Three months ago, sixteen-year-old Bree Matthews's mother was killed in a car accident. Unable to process her grief, Bree leaves home to attend an early college program at the University of North Carolina. On the night before classes begin, Bree is invited out to a party at the local quarry. There she witnesses something she can't quite make sense of—a partially corporeal monster floating above two fighting footballers and seemingly feeding off their negative energies. A charismatic but unnerving student by the name of Selwyn Kane is shocked to realize that Bree can see the demon and attempts to erase the scene from her mind. Bree somehow knows that this is not the first time someone has tampered with her memories.

Nick Davis is there too, and when he realizes that Bree is able to resist Selwyn's mind control, he knows there is something special about her. He tells her that Selwyn is part of a secret society made up of the descendants of King Arthur and his knights, tasked with defeating the demons and preventing the next Battle of Camlann, a recurring epic battle. He is what's known as a "Merlin" or a Kingsmage. Nick was part of this society too, but has rejected his Legendborn status (which means he is descended from one of thirteen original medieval bloodlines) in defiance of his father. But he rejoins the Order to help Bree infiltrate it in her quest to find the connection between this society and her mother's death.

⁸ American author Tracy Deonn's debut novel *Legendborn* is the first of a YA trilogy and was a *New York Times* bestseller and garnered the author a Coretta Scott King/John Steptoe Award for New Talent. *Bloodmarked*, the second in the series, will be published in November 2022.

***Once & Future* by A.R. Capetta and Cory McCarthy⁹**

Seventeen-year-old Ari Helix is a fugitive on the run. She and her brother Kay steal a spaceship belonging to the evil and tyrannical Mercer Company and then crash-land on Old Earth, now a protected nature reserve. Then Ari pulls a fancy-looking sword from an ancient gnarled tree. She will soon learn that she is the forty-second incarnation of the medieval King Arthur.

Merlin wakes in his crystal cave. He knows it's time to start the cycle again, all thanks to an elaborate curse put on the two of them by the evil Morgana. He is not impressed.

The chivalrous fool must have pulled the sword out of something. It wasn't always a stone. Once it had been a sewer grate, another time, a beanbag chair. Let no one say that Morgana lacked a sense of the absurd.¹⁰

Merlin has to find and train the new Arthur and hopes that together they can break the curse that has him aging backwards, among other things. He's now a teenager and really hopes that *this* time Arthur won't die, which will start the cycle yet again.

He was really not expecting the new Arthur to be a girl. Ari thinks these new powers are cool but what she really wants to do is save her adoptive mothers from the clutches of Mercer and find a way back to her home planet. First, though, she and Merlin will have to get the old gang back together so they can defeat Morgana and save the galaxy from being destroyed by corporate greed.

⁹ A.R. Capetta (they/them) and is an American author of a number of books for young people, including the Lambda Award-winner *The Heartbreak Bakery*. The bestselling *Once & Future* series was co-written with their spouse, Cory McCarthy (he/they), author of the recent YA novel *Man o' War* and numerous other titles. Note that these are the authors' correct forenames and pronouns, although they may appear differently in earlier editions.

¹⁰ A. R. Capetta and Cory McCarthy, *Once & Future* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2019), p.19.

***The Other Merlin* by Robyn Schneider¹¹**

Emry Merlin, daughter of the late and notorious court wizard Merlin, finds herself in Camelot, disguised as her twin brother, Emmett.

King Uther's nineteen-year-old son Arthur, after a night of drinking at the Crooked Spire with his best mate, Lance, absentmindedly pulls the sword out of the stone located in the courtyard between the tavern and the majestic St. Paul's Cathedral. For hundreds of years, the people have been waiting for the person who would remove the sword and become the hero who would unite all of Britain. No one, least of all Arthur, was expecting that hero to be a scrawny and bookish teenager who much prefers the library to the battlefield. The king, shocked at this turn of events, summons the son of Merlin to Camelot, ordering him to serve the future king as his father had done for Uther. But debt collectors and a spell gone wrong leave Emmett unable to go. His sister, Emry, must go in his place. Despite the danger, Emry is excited about the opportunity to hone her already impressive skills and learn more magic at the castle.

What was meant to be only a temporary deception soon gets very complicated, as Arthur and Emry get close. Arthur, unaware that Emry is disguised as a boy, is a bit confused his feelings, as up until now he has assumed that he was only attracted to women. He then learns that, as a political maneuver, his father has arranged for him to marry the princess Guinevere. Arthur pretends to agree but asks for permission to go on a quest to Avalon first to seek counsel from the Lady of the Lake. He takes Emry with him, and the power of the island changes both their lives in significant ways. But if Emry's true identity is revealed, it could spell disaster for everyone.

¹¹ Robyn Schneider is an American award-winning author of several young adult novels, including the bestselling *The Beginning of Everything*. A number of her books have been optioned for TV and film.

‘Heartbeat’¹² by Waubgeshig Rice¹³

One day twelve-year old Art is riding his bike around the First Nations reserve he lives on in Ontario, Canada, when he spots some kids playing baseball. He doesn’t join in when he sees that the local bully, Chuck, is part of the group. But a ball bounces past him and Art decides to retrieve it. It’s stuck under a massive grey stone that looks a lot like the one his Uncle Merle had described in one of his many stories. Art can’t get the ball loose. Chuck shoves him aside and attempts to free it himself. No luck. Several others try as well. It makes no sense to Art—how could it even get that stuck? He examines the rock more carefully and sees that there is an edge that he could try to use as leverage. To his and everyone else’s surprise, he is easily able to lift the huge rock. He yells at someone to grab the ball and after putting the rock down turns to see all the kids staring at him in awe. They implore him to try to move it again. He does so, not sure of the source of his newfound confidence. He lifts the rock even higher, so high in fact that he is able to topple it over, revealing the treasure it had been hiding beneath—a small wooden hoop, and a number of bags made of deer hide. Inside the bags are a number of drums of different sizes. The kids stand there in shock. But Art picks up one of the drums and begins to beat it with a steady rhythm as Merle had shown him. Then he begins to sing. The others join in and soon people from across the reserve, including Art’s parents, are coming out of their houses and making their way to the field, tears streaming down their faces.

Many of these authors cite T.H. White’s *Once and Future King* series and Susan Cooper’s *The Dark is Rising* sequence as their first exposure to the Arthurian canon. Both series, on the surface, are entertaining children’s stories, and meant to be read as such, but they also contain layers of sophisticated commentary on subjects such as the paradoxes of war or fate versus free will. Both authors lived in times of tremendous change—White began writing *The Sword in the*

¹² From the anthology *Sword Stone Table: Old Legends, New Voices*, Swapna Krishna and Jenn Northington, eds. (New York: Vintage Books, 2021), pp. 210-231.

¹³ Waubgeshig Rice is originally from Wasauksing First Nation in northern Ontario, Canada. He is the author of a number of works, including the bestselling novel *Moon of the Crusted Snow*.

Stone when World War II was breaking out. Cooper's books were published between 1965 and 1977, another period of worldwide political and social upheaval.

These young readers who would grow up to become the latest Arthurian storytellers would have initially been drawn to those tales because they were exciting, sometimes dangerous adventures, where the young protagonists faced seemingly unsurmountable obstacles but ultimately triumphed. However, something about the core legends those adventures were based on stayed with them, and compelled these writers to not only revisit those texts as adults, but create new versions that reflected their own experiences and those around them.

Although these new texts vary widely in their premises and general narratives, they overlap significantly in the themes and subject matter they explore, including patriarchal and authoritarian regimes, feminism, gender and sexual identity, racism and bodily autonomy. In this thesis, connections between recent world events and these topics will be made, as well as an exploration of the possible motives of the authors in creating entertaining and creative storylines that, in addition to drawing attention to and offering new perspectives on important global issues, deliberately appeal to the target readership of the genre, namely teenagers and young adults about to venture out into the world.

Feminism and the Patriarchy

By nature of its definition, a patriarchy thrives on giving preferential treatment to men, so it is impossible to ignore how a society's structure is intrinsically linked to feminism, which in its most simple form strives to establish equal rights for men and women. Most of these retellings have a decidedly feminist slant, whether it be in their depictions of the main characters (all except one have a female protagonist) and the way they are treated and react, or their relationships with the men or non-binary persons in their worlds. But the deliberate choices made by the various creators, whether it be in world-building and choosing where a story takes place, dialogue between characters of different genders, or surprising plot twists, result in a diverse collection of narratives that dig deeper into the feminism-adjacent themes of sexism, misogyny, and assumed gender roles, while modelling behaviour that the target readership may not be exposed to in real life.

The settings are designed to provide a particular perspective and offer clues to the scope and tone of the story to follow. The futuristic galaxies ruled by the Stavenger Empire in *Aetherbound* and the Mercer Company in *Once & Future* are inherently patriarchal by design and are clearly meant to echo current oppressive and authoritarian regimes. In *Legendborn*, set in America's Deep South, one of the characters is explaining how all the versions of the Arthurian legend have been controlled by the Order: 'They had a hand in most of the stories about Arthur that spread beyond Wales and a pen in every text from Geoffrey of Monmouth to Tennyson.'¹⁴ This is a deliberate commentary on how history, not just legends, are written by the people in power, which of course—as recent scholarship is uncovering—leaves out countless other perspectives.

Told on a smaller geographical scale, the modern Arthurian stories that are set in “traditional” medieval times, with much of the world-building already created by previous narratives, can spend more time highlighting conventions of the time and compare and contrast with modern-day attitudes towards women and their place in society. In *The Other Merlin*, women are treated as commodities. On Avalon, a young female attendant tells Emry about the renowned healing powers of the waters there. But the spring only heals physical wounds and Emry is horrified to learn that men are trading their daughters for a magical soap that temporarily eases emotional pain as well. As the attendant explains:

We ask the travelers to bathe with it, as it eases suffering of the mind... but many become accustomed to having their demons kept at bay. Many come back, desperate for more soap. Desperate enough to trade their daughters for a life's supply.¹⁵

The attendant also reveals that she herself had been brought to Avalon as a baby. She is resigned to her fate, as the longer one stays on the island, the more impossible it becomes to leave. Readers watch as Emry sympathizes with the girl while simultaneously vowing that she will break free of these sexist restraints, somehow. Similarly, in *Half Sick of Shadows*, when Gwen's friends confront her when they discover she is a werewolf, Gwen is unapologetic about

¹⁴ Tracy Deonn, *Legendborn* (Margaret K. McElderry Books, 2020), p. 95.

¹⁵ Robyn Schneider, *The Other Merlin* (New York: Viking, 2021), p. 142.

her newfound power and excitedly shares what it feels like to transform. ‘I am powerful and unstoppable and my fury takes over, drives me, consumes me and everything around me. And it feels *good*. It feels *great*. It feels *right*. I can’t give that up for a life in stiff corsets, spouting pretty words over tea in Camelot. I can’t. I won’t.’¹⁶

In the Author’s Note at the end of *Half Sick of Shadows*, the author reveals how she was fascinated by the portrayal of Elaine in ‘The Lady of Shalott’ and began writing this story as a teenager herself. She was particularly interested in how Elaine was viewed as the ideal woman in Victorian era, in contrast to ‘the evil Morgana and the traitorous Guinevere. She was passive and kind, she did as she was told, she was so wholly dependent on her husband that she *literally* couldn’t live without him.’¹⁷

The final version of the story ended up being ‘unrecognizable from that first draft...in large part because [the author] did eventually realize just how problematic Tennyson’s original poem is, and how inherently sexist the Arthurian myth is as a whole. The women in the canon are seductresses and manipulators, prizes to be won and sacrifices to be made.’¹⁸

While sexism is based around the assumption that women are less capable than men, misogyny goes to the next level, embracing not only the idea that men are superior to women, but actively controlling or punishing women to protect existing male-dominant systems. The characters in these stories strike out against this as well. In *The Other Merlin*, Morgana asks Emry, ‘Why is that men are so threatened by women with power, do you think? Even your father [Merlin] was the same way.’¹⁹ But even Morgana, powerful enough to transfer the substantial magic of Arthur’s scabbard into a ring, is forced to then hand the ring over to her husband, King Yurien. Despite her being the villain of this story, this creates a small bonding moment between two powerful magicians who have been forced since birth to appear smaller than they truly are.

In *Legendborn*, we learn that the “calling” is hereditary—firstborn daughters of members of the Order were often eliminated so that the sons would ascend. But this is not ancient history—that kind of gender discrimination is still happening in the world today, privately but also out in the open. Some fertility clinics proudly advertise gender selection options.

¹⁶ Laura Sebastian, *Half Sick of Shadows* (New York: Ace, 2021), p. 261.

¹⁷ Sebastian, *Half Sick of Shadows*, p. 431

¹⁸ Sebastian, *Half Sick of Shadows*, p. 431

¹⁹ Robyn Schneider, *The Other Merlin* (New York: Viking, 2021) p. 389)

It should be noted that commentary or scenarios built around an exploration of the patriarchy do not necessarily involve villains that are male. In *Aetherbound*, the prime antagonists are Pendt's mother and aunt. Readers may see the female family members' treatment of Pendt as an even greater betrayal because of the assumed nurturing roles of women in general. But that only serves to point out the generational damage of long-term societal structures—these women behave reprehensibly because it is the only way they can ensure their own survival. It's not difficult to make a connection with this storyline to the baffling continued support from women for politicians even after their misogynistic behaviour has been revealed. Speaking up is too risky, or falls on deaf ears, and these men continue to rise through the ranks of power.

The risk to women in demanding equality is explored in numerous ways in the texts being studied. In *The Other Merlin*, when Emry's secret is revealed, the King is furious and demands that she pay the price for treason, which is death. Instantly, she is no longer seen as an accomplished court wizard, for that is a role reserved for men only. Now she is a witch—a terrifying creature of unlimited power. But this is not just a commentary on how things were in medieval times. In an informative (if not wholly academic) 2018 article about the Catholic Church attempting to protect recently appointed Supreme Court Judge Brett Kavanaugh from a coven of witches in Brooklyn, New York, a witch is defined as 'a woman pushed to the edges of society.'²⁰ But perhaps on the edge is where a woman needs to be before she has the perspective to allow her to see that she *can* do whatever she wants, although that choice might not be easy. Readers are introduced to a young Emry frustrated that her father, on the rare occasions he is home, gives her pretty ribbons for her hair but takes her brother into the woods to learn magic. She begs to be included but is denied. She does not give up. She switches places with her brother but is quickly discovered, as she is already far more proficient than Emmett. She already knows 'that, as a girl, she needed to prove herself twice over just to be offered a chance.'²¹ Merlin agrees to continue to tutor her, although he reminds her that it will all be for naught, as she will never be able to use what she learns.

²⁰ Jude Ellison S. Doyle, 'Female Revenge Still Terrifies Men,' 23 October 2018 < <https://gen.medium.com/the-brett-kavanaugh-backlash-will-make-witches-of-us-all-614b5f7d1e82> > [Accessed 20 September 2022].

²¹ Robyn Schneider, *The Other Merlin* (New York: Viking, 2021) p. 93

As a young adult, when Emry is leaving for Camelot, her grandmother is thrilled for her, saying, ‘It’s high time the women in this family did something more than get left behind while the *men* leave their mark on history.’²²

Guinevere, whom Emry soon meets, has been groomed from a young age to believe that her only value is in how well she can marry. Her mother reminds her frequently that ‘daughters are currency, and sons are kings.’²³ But still she dreams of finding love and marrying on her own terms. Much like Rhiannon in the First Branch of *The Mabinogion*,²⁴ Guinevere intends to work within the system to reach her own goals.

These women are no damsels in distress. At the end of *The Other Merlin*, when Morgana tricks Emry into opening a door to Anwen, Arthur comes to save her, willing to sacrifice himself for Emry. But it’s Emry who figures out a way to save herself. Similarly, in *Legendborn*, Bree Matthews exhibits a strong sense of self and the ability to set boundaries. She pushes back when her love interest, Nick Davis, tells her to just do what he asks and stop asking questions:

“I lean in close again until he tips his head toward mine, then whisper, ‘We may have experienced a life-threatening demon attack together and you may have saved my complete and total bacon—again, thank you—but this isn’t over. I don’t know who you think you are, but you can’t tell me what to do.’²⁵

Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

The portrayals of the characters in these modern tales, young people only beginning to discover the world around them and their place in it while exploring their sexual and gender identities, are deliberate and unapologetic. That’s not to say that these stories all take place in utopian universes where everyone is accepted for who they are. In *The Other Merlin*, while it is made clear early on that Emry is bisexual, Lancelot has been demoted to castle guard following a tryst with a

²² Robyn Schneider, *The Other Merlin* (New York: Viking, 2021) p. 27.

²³ Robyn Schneider, *The Other Merlin* (New York: Viking, 2021) p. 200.

²⁴ Sioned Davies, *The Mabinogion*, 2nd edn. (Oxford University Press, 2018).

²⁵ Tracy Deonn, *Legendborn* (Margaret K. McElderry Books, 2020), p. 72.

nobleman's son. Emry exhibits an unshakeable confidence in her sexuality, while Arthur is puzzled by his attraction to her, as he is unaware Emry is in disguise and all his previous interactions have been heterosexual. Having it be the young woman exhibiting such self-awareness instead of the man puts an extra emphasis on the issue, as does turning the whole situation around to make it odd for someone to *not* be polyamorous. 'It was so confusing, having feelings for someone regardless of their gender,' Emry says, 'and realizing not everyone felt the same way. How simple and straightforward it sounded, to like just one gender.'²⁶ The main characters exhibit no shame in who they are, and support each other, even if the world does not.

In *Once & Future*, Val, a descendant of Sir Percival of Holy Grail fame, is openly gay and catches Merlin's eye. The humorous tone of this story sometimes veers into 'romp' territory and can get a little didactic and heavy-handed at times, but the target readership likely revels in having those normally closed doors kicked wide open. Merlin, in conversation with the non-binary character Lam, clearly meant to be a descendant of Sir Lamorak, gives a lesson that is, again, reversing the 'normal' focus:

'I believe the phrase you're looking for is *straight boys*,' Merlin corrected.
'What is *straight*?' Lam asked, furrowing their brow.
'Oh, goodness,' Merlin said. "Well, it's when a person has attractions to people who are on the other binary end of the ... *ummm*...'
'They're messing with you, Merlin,' Ari said, unable to keep the truth back.
...
Merlin felt fairly sure he had just outed himself to everyone on the ship, something he had never done in all the cycles.²⁷

In the second part of this duology, in a love scene between Ari (posing as Lancelot) and Gwen, readers are given some historical context, to hit home the contrast between the new and old versions:

'According to our Old Earth history classes...Lancelot and Gweneviere were the first recorded love story where a woman chose her love. She's horrifically punished for it, of course, but all the stories before that were about men claiming wives. And then after, the stories became about men and women who fight for their love against all odds.' Ari smiled. 'So you're

²⁶ Robyn Schneider, *The Other Merlin* (New York: Viking, 2021) p. 83.

²⁷ A.R. Capetta and Cory McCarthy, *Once & Future* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2019), p. 106.

telling me Old Earth's boring romantic repertoire of "cis²⁸ boy plus cis girl equals love forever" is because two ladies from the future crashed into the past and broke their terrible mold?'²⁹

These stories offer a healthy portrayal of teenage sex, without shame, an important part of a young person's mental and physical development. While the organisations behind federally funded abstinence policies would disagree, 'all young people should have access to comprehensive sexual and reproductive health information that is medically accurate, LGBTQ inclusive, and culturally and age appropriate so that they can make informed decisions about their sexual behavior, relationships and reproductive choices.'³⁰

Current societal attitudes are highlighted within dialogue in a safe and humorous way, offering perspective and education to readers who, again, may not be able to access this information in their day-to-day lives. In *The Other Merlin*, when Arthur and Lancelot finally discover that Emry is a girl and worry about her honour because she has seen them naked, she replies, 'Oh my god, like either of you are virgins.' 'Of course not,' Arthur protested. 'But that's different.'³¹ Scenes like these force readers to pause and consider carefully what is being alluded to and why. They are trusted to come to their own conclusions and dismiss conventions that no longer work for them.

In *The Guinevere Deception* and the subsequent books in the Camelot Rising series, characters have multiple romantic partners, sometimes simultaneously. Polyamory is not seen as something shameful, but perfectly acceptable between consenting adults. In *Half Sick of Shadows*, Gwen, already married to Arthur, flirts with Elaine, saying she wishes she could compete in the tournament in which the victor would win Elaine's hand in marriage. 'Lucky you can't compete,' Elaine replies. 'I think Albion might frown on a polyamorous queen.'³² In *The Other Merlin*, Guinevere hooks up with Emry's brother Emmett. The sex positivity in all these

²⁸ *cis* (adj.): used to describe someone who feels that they are the same gender as the physical body they were born with (Cambridge Dictionary < <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/> >).

²⁹ A.R. Capetta and Cory McCarthy, *Sword in the Stars*, (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2020), p. 198.

³⁰ The Guttmacher Institute, 'Federally Funded Sex Education: Strengthening and Expanding Evidence-Based Programs, June 2021, < <https://www.guttmacher.org/fact-sheet/sex-education> > [Accessed 29 August 2022].

³¹ Robyn Schneider, *The Other Merlin* (New York: Viking, 2021) p. 279.

³² Laura Sebastian, *Half Sick of Shadows* (New York: Ace, 2021), p. 357.

stories makes readers understand that it's not only okay, but *important* to have healthy active sex lives without judgment. Who and how you love is nobody's business but your own.

Although often conflated with sexual orientation, gender identity has nothing to do with who one is attracted to, but rather how an individual views themselves, as a woman, a man, both, neither, or anywhere along the gender spectrum. A person's gender identity may not necessarily reflect their birth-assigned sex. If an individual is forced to deny that identity it can lead to gender dysphoria and have an impact on their mental and physical health.

These texts all touch on the issues of sexuality and gender identity in significant but very different ways. *Once & Future* starts with the dedication:

For all the Aris out there, who have to hide who they are in order to feel
safe.
And for the Merlins, who need a few extra lifetimes to unveil their identity.
Stay strong, have hope, and please don't hurt yourself.
We are the best part of this future.³³ [v]

The story and its sequel, *Sword in the Stars*, feature a diverse cast of asexual, pansexual, gay, genderfluid and trans characters. The creators have deliberately created a universe where all forms of sexual attraction and the expression of multiple, not just binary, genders are normalized. In the Acknowledgements for *The Other Merlin*, the author states, 'I'm also indebted to the many authors who have paved the way for queer fantasy, and for those writers, agents, editors, librarians, booksellers, reviewers, and readers who are working to lift up and bring more stories in the world that reflect our beautifully diverse reality.'³⁴

Aetherbound approaches the issue of gender identity in a more understated but just as effective way. We aren't told outright why Fisher is not capable of managing the gate of Brannick Station like his twin brother Ned, but readers who are paying attention will eventually figure out it is tied to the ancient, and extremely patriarchal, system set up by the Empire's gene-mages. Because Fisher has two X chromosomes—meaning his gender does not match his birth-assigned sex—he is not genetically compatible. The author intentionally does not spell this out

³³ A.R. Capetta and Cory McCarthy, *Once & Future* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2019), p. v.

³⁴ Robyn Schneider, *The Other Merlin* (New York: Viking, 2021) p. 420.

so that the focus is on Fisher being accepted for who he is. There is no backstory, no deadnaming. His tie to the Arthurian myth is made clear when the reason he is unable to fulfil his desired destiny (to run the station) is uncovered. In the end, Pendt is able to “heal” him with her gene-magic. She is able to manipulate his DNA so that he is genetically compatible with the established system and able to take on the familiar duties allotted to those with XY chromosomes. Fisher is not presented as a “trans character” but rather as a fully developed character who happens to be transgender.

The creators of these stories are deliberately showing their readers that sexual and gender identities are not ‘one size fits all’ and that it is okay to be who you are. They are not doing it to be on trend—they are tapping into their own life experiences and assuring readers that even if they are not supported now, one day they will find their chosen families.

Racism and White Supremacy

In 2020, when it was announced that British actor Dev Patel would be playing the role of Sir Gawain in the upcoming medieval fantasy film *The Green Knight*, debates broke out over the “authenticity” of casting. The fact that his skin was brown seemed to cause quite a lot of uproar. Tracy Deonn, still deep in the research and writing of *Legendborn*, took to Twitter to declare, ‘There is no single Arthurian story. No sacred text. Black people existed in the Medieval. KA is 1500 year-old fanfic that began in Wales. Repeat!’³⁵

In an article written the following year, Deonn insisted that it was *because of*, not *in spite of*, the creative liberties taken with each retelling that the legend had endured.

‘Freedom from canon is how Arthur has survived this long in the first place. This is why Arthurian retellings are so powerful, after all—because we are watching characters in the midst of epic, legendary lives, who have the potential to be remembered long after they’re gone.

When Arthurian retellings like *The Green Knight*, or other stories with inclusive representations of race, gender, sexuality, and other identities, are

³⁵ Tracy Deonn, ‘Every King Arthur Retelling Is Fanfic About Who Gets to Be Legendary,’ < <https://www.tor.com/2021/03/23/every-king-arthur-retelling-is-fanfic-about-who-gets-to-be-legendary> > 23 March 2021 [Accessed 9 June 2022].

deemed “inauthentic,” these claims aren’t based on Arthuriana’s reality. They’re based on exclusion.³⁶

Several of the texts being reviewed in this thesis address racism in different forms. For example, while it’s not the main theme of the novel, Ari Helix in *Once & Future* is an immigrant to a new planet and because of her heritage she frequently experiences racial discrimination. This characterization is a deliberate commentary on recent British and American immigration policies. But two of the retellings tackle the issue of racism head on by placing the stories in settings that automatically situate the readers in the midst of the conflict. *Legendborn*, written by a Black author, is set in present-day North Carolina, an area of the southern United States historically overtly oppressive for Black people and still troubled by frequent racially motivated incidents. ‘Heartbeat,’ by an Indigenous writer, takes place on an Anishinaabe reserve in Northern Ontario, which immediately highlights the shameful history of colonisation in Canada and the deliberate displacement of the Indigenous populations and the attempted eradication of their cultures by the Catholic Church.

The main character of *Legendborn* attends North Carolina University. Though academically she scored well enough to have been accepted into a very elite program, she feels out of place immediately. Her dorm building is an antebellum building, built before the Civil War and the abolition of slavery. As Bree puts it, ‘not built *for* people who looked like me, but definitely built *by* them.’ It’s just the first of many instances of highlighting what people of colour must do to survive in a world that was not designed for them.

Growing up Black in the South, it’s pretty common to find yourself in old places that just...weren’t made for you. Maybe it’s a building, a historic district, or a street. Some space that was originally built for white people and white people only, and you just have to hold that knowledge while going about your business.³⁷

As Bree seeks therapy to deal with her grief and learn more about her mother and the matrilinear systems of her ancestors, the reader is exposed to a deeper understanding of Black

³⁶ Tracy Deonn, ‘Every King Arthur Retelling.’

³⁷ Tracy Deonn, *Legendborn* (Margaret K. McElderry Books, 2020), p. 75

history, culture, and magical systems. They also bear witness to frequent examples of casual racism and microaggressions in Bree's day-to-day life and are exposed to the concept of intergenerational trauma and bloodlines, which, for narrative purposes, is both devastating for Bree, but also turns out to be the secret to unlocking her full powers. At one point, Bree is kidnapped by Nick's father, Lord Davis, who, while acknowledging the existence of knights of colour in medieval times, puts his own biased spin on the information in order to justify preventing Bree from joining the Order or having a relationship of any kind with his son.

Moriaen, grew up to be a formidable fighter—tall, strong, skilled in battle. Moriaen wore a shield and armor and, as grandson to Pellinore and nephew to so many valorous knights, it must have seemed a sure thing that he, too, would join the Table... But Moriaen did not... Do you know why?"

I swallow around the thick, burning rage in my throat. "No."

"Because he was not worthy." He clasps his hands in his lap, eyes unreadable. "Just as you are not worthy. Not for Camlann, and not for my son."³⁸

The next book in the Legendborn Cycle, entitled *Bloodmarked*, is coming out in November of 2022³⁹ and will explore this storyline further, along with its related topics of racial purity and white supremacy.

"Heartbeat," the story of a boy growing up on a reserve with his family but completely disconnected from his culture, also explores the devastating impact of intergenerational trauma. As a child, Art's father was sent to residential school, one of hundreds of government-funded institutions set up across Canada and administered by the Catholic Church. He and Art's mother are devout church-goers now and discourage Art's friendship with the elder Merle. 'I don't trust Merle and all that 'medicine' he talks about,' says his mother. 'It's time for us to move on from all that stuff. Us Indians don't live like that no more.'⁴⁰

But Art finds Merle fascinating and sneaks away to visit him whenever he can. Merle hadn't been to residential school, and therefore had retained far more of his Anishinaabe culture.

When he was a child, Merle's parents always told him to run into the bush whenever they saw the white man coming.... Merle never spoke of why his

³⁸ Tracy Deonn, *Legendborn* p. 423

³⁹ From the author website < <https://www.tracydeonn.com/bloodmarked> >.

⁴⁰ Waubgeshig Rice, "Heartbeat," in *Sword Stone Table*, p. 216.

parents chose him to be the one to escape, and others in the community could only speculate why. Some said it was because his parents believed he was born with strong medicinal knowledge.⁴¹

Merle would share story after story about growing up on the reserve, but it was the unfamiliar cultural elements, the ceremonies and the drumming, that fascinated Art the most. ‘But around the time the white man came to take the kids away to those schools,’ Merle said, ‘they took the drums too. The government made it illegal for us Anishinaabeg to have them. They wrote it into that law⁴² about us. That law said we couldn’t gather in groups to practice our culture.’⁴³

He tells Art that while most of the cultural artefacts were burned or otherwise destroyed, there are rumours that some of the ceremonial drums were hidden away and that one day they will be able to sing their songs again.

These retellings, framing horrific atrocities committed upon entire cultures simply because they differed from those in power, highlight how little has changed over the centuries. The petty discourse over the colour of an actor’s skin is a perfect example of how far we still need to go in dismantling systemic racism.

Bodily Autonomy and Free Will

As with racism, all of these retellings touch on the issue of bodily autonomy and the notion of consent, some in more detail than others, but all are clearly influenced by the marked political shifts happening around the world. Right now, in September 2022, both Iran and India are in the news, as women in both countries protest their right to decide whether to wear a hijab. In Iran, a woman was beaten (and later died) by the ‘morality police’ for being seen in public without a

⁴¹ Waubgeshig Rice, “Heartbeat,” p. 221.

⁴² This is a reference to the *Indian Act*, a Canadian federal law first introduced in 1876. While it has been revised several times over the years, it is still in existence and has had a profound effect on generations of Indigenous peoples.

⁴³ Waubgeshig Rice, “Heartbeat,” p. 222.

headscarf.⁴⁴ This sparked a protest that has captured the world's attention, as images of women chopping off their hair and burning their scarves flood social media. Meanwhile, in India, a group of teenage girls have taken their fight in protest of the laws banning the wearing of hijabs in school to the country's Supreme Court.⁴⁵ Similar protests have been ongoing in the province of Quebec in Canada. In June of this year, the Supreme Court of the United States overturned *Roe v. Wade*, effectively dismantling the constitutional right to an abortion, which has been in place for nearly half a century, and ostensibly taking away a woman's right to choose what happens to her own body. This outcome was one that many had been predicting for years, as the balance of power after the 2016 Presidential election continued to shift toward the religious right. Anti LGBTQ legislation is on the rise, particularly in relation to trans and non-binary youth. Recently, a group of students organized school walkouts across the state of Virginia in protest of Republican Governor Glenn Youngkin's proposed changes to existing district guidelines that would impact the privacy and safety of trans and non-binary students.⁴⁶

The main premise of *Aetherbound* is so tied to bodily autonomy that it starts with a Content Warning⁴⁷ about medical violence. The narrative is literally about what it's like to live when your body is not your own, when someone else controls how much food you receive and determines your future based on your genetic makeup. Pendt is a powerful magician but that information has been kept from her so that she can serve her society in the manner the people in power have determined is best. But Pendt rejects her destiny as a baby factory and forges her own path, and in doing so is ultimately able to help others achieve their dreams as well. While overt in *Aetherbound*, the concept of destiny versus free will is a through line in all of these retellings. The Arthurian myth is rooted in the notion that Arthur *will* be king. But these writers have dug deep to explore just what destiny means. Do you sit back and let it happen to you? Or do whatever it takes to create

⁴⁴ National Public Radio, 'Why Iranian women are burning their hijabs after the death of Mahsa Amini,' 21 September 2022, < <https://www.npr.org/2022/09/21/1124237272/mahsa-amini-iran-women-protest-hijab-morality-police> > [Accessed 24 September 2022].

⁴⁵ National Public Radio, 'As India turns 75, Muslim girls are suing to wear the hijab — and protect secularism,' 24 August 2022, < <https://www.npr.org/2022/08/24/1117415037/india-muslim-hijab-ban-schools> > [Accessed 24 September 2022].

⁴⁶ Sarah Rankin, City News, 'Virginia students protest Youngkin transgender policies,' < <https://toronto.citynews.ca/2022/09/27/virginia-students-protest-youngkin-transgender-policies-2/> > [Accessed 28 September 2022]

⁴⁷ . This relatively new development in publishing provides a 'heads-up' to readers that may be triggered by certain subject matter.

your own destiny? In *The Other Merlin*, on Avalon Arthur lies on top of the stone tomb of an ancient king and is transported through a series of visions. When he awakes he is startled to realize that he is holding a sword. No, *the* sword. Excalibur. He begins to protest.

‘It is yours,’ said the Lady. ‘The sword in the stone chose you. And Excalibur recognizes that choice, of its own free will.’ You have proven yourself to the sword. Its glow shows that you are worthy to wield such a blade,’ said the Lady.⁴⁸

Later on, Arthur ruminates on being king, having decided, after resisting for so long, to embrace the destiny that has been laid out for him, saying that leading the kingdom ‘wasn’t about being bowed to and respected. It was about fighting for a future that was more forgiving and open-minded than the past. And that was a future worth sacrificing for.’⁴⁹ Meanwhile, Guinevere is hatching a plan to get out of the arranged marriage, hitting home the message that everyone’s path is different.

Unlike Arthur, who reluctantly accepts what is being handed to him, in *Legendborn*, Bree has to fight tooth and nail to take what, she eventually comes to realize, is rightfully hers, even though she really wants to be left alone and live her life:

I’m not Nick. I’m not some chosen one. I am the product of violence, and I am the Scion of Arthur, and I don’t want to be either. I just want to be my mother’s daughter. And my father’s. I just want to be *me*.
But I know it will never be that simple again. *I* will never be that simple again.⁵⁰ (p.479)

⁴⁸ Robyn Schneider, *The Other Merlin* (New York: Viking, 2021), p. 149.

⁴⁹ Robyn Schneider, *The Other Merlin* (New York: Viking, 2021), p. 346.

⁵⁰ Tracy Deonn, *Legendborn* p. 479

She is the descendant of Arthur and is destined to rule in this timeline, regardless of how many powerful white men try to stop her. The tagline on the cover of the book sums it up: *Some legacies are meant to be broken.*

Conclusion

The messages of these retellings are ultimately ones of support, encouragement and most of all, hope. By creating societies where differences are accepted and even celebrated empowers and inspires readers of all genders to challenge the status quo and demand equality. As Lance says to Emry in *The Other Merlin*, when her disguise is discovered:

It shouldn't matter that you're a girl. Things like that—your gender, or who you love, or where you come from—they shouldn't matter.'

'Yet somehow they matter most to the wrong people,' Emry said. 'And I'm out of time. I can't keep waiting on the world to change.'

'Which is why we are going to change it ourselves.'⁵¹

These stories offer a blueprint on how to break cycles and be a good person, even if you didn't have good role models in your formative years. They outline how important it is to fight for what's right, even if it feels like everything is stacked against you. The youth of today have the power to reject what is being present to them. Bree did not accept the ramblings of a frustrated old white guy:

'Once, ladies were respected and honored at court, but then the Order of the Rose fell to the wayside and now women sit at the Table when Malory tells us that "the very purpose of a knight is to fight on behalf of lady"! And now my son's foolishness in choosing you, who sits at the crux of two faults. Can you not see the sickness here? How the corruption must be rooted out and corrected?'

Two faults. My race and my gender.

But they are not faults. They are strength.'

And I am more than this man can comprehend.⁵²

⁵¹ Robyn Schneider, *The Other Merlin* (New York: Viking, 2021), p. 338.

⁵² Tracy Deonn, *Legendborn*, p. 484

The fact that books are getting banned in schools across North America is proof that those who want to control the thoughts of the next generation are worried.

According to a report by PEN America, nearly 140 school districts in 32 states across the country issued more than 2,500 book bans during the 2021-22 school year alone. Texas, Florida and Pennsylvania led with the most bans.⁵³ This trend is particularly harmful to young people from historically marginalized backgrounds because the books most targeted were ones that featured characters who are LGBTQ+, explored themes of race and racism or dealt with sex education.

They are scrambling to reclaim their power.

It is not by accident that these stories were published in the young adult genre —today's youth are the warriors we need to fight back against oppressive and authoritarian regimes. They are the ones who will bring the magic back to Camelot.

⁵³ From the PEN America report 'Banned in the USA: The Growing Movement to Censor Books in Schools,' 19 September 2022, <<https://pen.org/report/banned-usa-growing-movement-to-censor-books-in-schools>> [Accessed 23 September 2022].

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