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When King Arthur is PG 13

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Abstract

In a study of the patterns prevalent in contemporary Arthurian literature by women authors, I examine the depictions of women by women, trace the development of trends over time, and suggest that the representation of positive role models for younger female readers is problematic.

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ROBERTA DAVIDSON

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This study is based upon seventy-two novels written by women authors, their publication spanning the years from 1963 to 2010. All the novels are either historical fiction or fantasies based upon the legends of King Arthur.¹ In a study of such breadth, it was inevitable that I began, while still in the process of reading, to organize the events and themes I found repeatedly in the works into categories. Once I did so, it became clear to me that I was engaged in 'distance reading,' as defined by Franco Moretti 'where distance...*is a condition of knowledge*: it allows you to focus on units that are much smaller or much larger than the text: devices, themes, tropes—genres or systems.'²

What follows attempts to be an objective account of the patterns prevalent in contemporary Arthurian literature by women authors. It is important, however, to recognize two potential weaknesses in this undertaking. The first is that, ideally, such a study is based upon data accumulated by those who are not also in the position of analyzing it. Moretti, describing his own method of analyzing British Novelistic genres using graphs, maps, and trees, explains why this is problematic:

...the gathering of data is obviously crucial, and I decided to reply entirely on: other peoples' work: since we are all eager to find what we are looking for, using the evidence gathered by other scholars, with completely different research programmes, is always a good corrective to one's desires.³

The second ground for subjectivity is my personal interest in the subject. It is arguable that my career as a medievalist was set in motion at the age of eight, when I was first inspired by *King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table*, as 'retold' by Emma Gelders Sterne and Barbara Lindsay. Returning to the book as an adult, I could not help but note that most of the admittedly still-gorgeous illustrations represent the women characters as either languid ladies, apparently on the verge of passing out, or destructive sorceresses dressed in the medieval equivalent of a topless evening gown. As a child, neither the illustrations nor the gendered textual content hindered me from imagining

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