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Once and Future Sovereign: Teaching the Gender Spectrum through Postmedieval Arthurian Narratives

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Introduction

When people see themselves reflected in the world around them, be it young children of color viewing the technological wonder of *Black Panther* or the acknowledgement of a queer romantic relationship between Korra and Asami in *Avatar: The Legend of Korra*, those often-marginalized audiences see their own stories validated. In the last decade, large multimedia franchises, including Disney films and Disney-owned story worlds like *Star Wars* and the Marvel Cinematic Universe, have come under fire for their pervasive lack of inclusivity and preference for so-called “traditional” storytelling tropes that remove or preclude representation. Both *Star Wars* and Disney more broadly have teased inclusivity but have never fully committed to showing an out-and-proud character that breaks heteronormative expectations. Audiences can speculate about Elsa, or Raya, or Luke Skywalker, but major media companies will not commit to overt representation of queer or nontraditional sexualities in main characters.¹ The few nonbinary or queer characters who do appear are frequently relegated to an off-screen romance while heterosexual romances are main plots.²

Inclusive stories are growing in numbers, but scholars and educators display a lack of recognition of the many healthy, loving queer relationships extant in fiction. The mythological world of King Arthur presents a wonderful playground for contemporary authors, illustrators, movie directors and show runners to explore and normalize LGBTQIA³ themes, and the Arthurian canon, medieval and postmodern, has been used

¹ Instead, matters are left to actors or other stakeholders, who have high investment in the characters but little control over the directions of the massive franchises. Mark Hamill, the actor who plays Luke Skywalker in the *Star Wars* franchise, addressed the need for representation, as well as the deep relief that a canonical interpretation (whether overtly in the text or from an “authorized” speaker) of representation can offer when he observed that “fans are writing and ask all these questions, ‘I’m bullied in school...I’m afraid to come out’. They say to me, ‘Could Luke be gay?’ I’d say it is meant to be interpreted by the viewer...If you think Luke is gay, of course he is. You should not be ashamed of it. Judge Luke by his character, not by who he loves.” (Charles Bramesco, “‘Of Course’ Luke Skywalker is Gay, Confirms Mark Hamill, Echoing Thousands of Fan-Fiction Prayers,” *Vanity Fair*, March 5, 2016, <https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2016/03/mark-hamill-luke-skywalker-gay>.)

² An example of this phenomenon is Specter, the lesbian police officer in *Onward* (Disney-PIXAR, 2020).

³ OurRight Action International defines the acronym of LGBTQIA as “Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer and/or Questioning, Intersex, and Asexual and/or Ally.” (Bex Montz, “Acronyms Explained,” February 18, 2020, <https://outrightinternational.org/content/acronyms-explained>.)

as a site for exploration of queer theory and readings for decades.⁴ The flexibility of the source material allows creators, scholars, and fans to produce incredibly diverse readings of each text. Two examples that challenge the heteronormative narrative are the Arthurian young adult (YA) novel duology, *Once & Future* and *Sword in the Stars*, by Amy Rose Capetta and Cori McCarthy,⁵ and the short-lived comic book series, *The Once and Future Queen*, by Adam P. Knave and D.J. Kirkbride. A great place to introduce pre-teens and teens to these narratives would be in a classroom. Not only would this encourage literacy and a love of books, but this act would also legitimate narratives that buck the heteronormative trend by legitimating them in a scholarly setting. By discussing and teaching books like these, scholars and educators can help mainstream queer relationships and the idea of the gender spectrum for vulnerable pre-teens and teens who may be questioning their own sexuality and gender identity.⁶

LGBTQIA Youth and Access to Representative Stories

Gender as a concept has evolved considerably: defined best as a sense of self and perceived identity,⁷ it is a psychological and sociocultural phenomenon that is not represented by genitalia one may or may not possess. Gender, especially the concept of “genderqueer” as someone who “falls outside the gender binary,”⁸ is not a new concept globally, but modern multimedia has struggled to accurately depict and usefully represent LGBTQIA stories. Indeed, the continual evolution of the acronym “LGBTQIA” itself expands representation and inclusion: often our recognition of what and who we are comes from narrative media, especially stories we consume growing up.

While access to accurate information about traditionally taboo topics like sexuality and gender has expanded in the past thirty years, as internet resources have made such information more accessible, the idea remains pervasive that this very knowledge itself harms the concept of a heteronormative family lifestyle. This pervasive idea leads, in turn, to unreliable information from bad actors, as well as lack of information—in the form of fictional representation—in narrative media. Consequently, LGBTQIA children and

⁴ See especially Joseph Brennan’s reading of Lancelot from the BBC’s tv series *Merlin* as a queer knight who fails at the heterosexual romance expectations of chivalry, at the cost of his own life in “You Could Shame the Great Arthur Himself: A Queer Reading of Lancelot from BBC’s ‘Merlin’ with Respect to the Character in Malory, White, and Bradley,” *Arthuriana* 25, no. 2 (2015): 20-43. Accessed March 21, 2021. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24643469>.

⁵ I refer to the authors not by the personal names listed on the title pages of their books (A.R. Capetta and Cory McCarthy), but by the names they specify: Amy Rose and Cori.

⁶ For more information on the particular vulnerabilities and dangers faced by queer and LGBTQIA youth, see *The Trevor Project* (<https://www.thetrevorproject.org/>).

⁷ Marilyn Roxie, “What Is ‘Genderqueer’?,” *Genderqueer and Non-binary Identities*. Accessed August 31, 2020, <https://genderqueerid.com/what-is-gq>.

⁸ “Bisexuality,” in *Encyclopedia of Women in Today’s World*, vol. 1 (Los Angeles, CA: Sage, 2011), 156-162, 159.

teenagers struggling to define their identity are not always aware of their potential identity categories or labels because they cannot find reliable factual information or fictional stories that help them see these categories exist; or they cannot explore how these possibilities are acceptable choices for them to make. Scholars and educators value peer-review and source checking, but we must also remember representation and ensure LGBTQIA voices are heard. Carefully researched and vetted data may have gaps and biases, and so too the policies which are based on this data. As educators, we must recall that the knowledge youth have access to, specifically knowledge about the gender spectrum and sexuality, is often highly mediated through policies and cultural frameworks that do not inherently provide accurate information.

Studies have shown that self-identification is happening at earlier ages as children become more aware of the options.⁹ These children learn the terminology, and thus are better able to explain why they may feel or identify in a certain way. Jason Cianciotto and Sean Cahill point out that this early awareness often brings with it greater danger to the child because they are often not supported in their environment for this incredible self-awareness.¹⁰ Almost thirty years ago, Hawaii Transgender Outreach created Chrysalis, an after-school program for transgender youth, as a support network that would help trans youth access “technical” information and socialization with peers that they had been denied.¹¹ This socialization in a comfortable space, among peers, has proven to offer the best coping mechanisms so that LGBTQIA youth do not turn to substance abuse. Preteens and teens already face insurmountable odds in other areas: poverty, education, fragile and endangering home lives. It makes sense to provide access to popular stories that would reinforce these varied ideas of a gender and sexuality spectrum, especially because this would allow those same at-risk youths to see that their own identities are recognized by society as natural and valid.

The most powerful evidence of the value of representative narrative comes from LGBTQIA youths themselves, where they speak of wanting literature that reflects them as normal. One youth, Madelaine Imber, asks for “sexuality to be treated as part of the diversity of the school environment, not ignored. The staff was always really supportive of my writing and so on. But in class and in all discussions, love was heterosexual; marriage was the ideal. Sex was not taboo necessarily, but it was specifically straight.”¹² If youth are aware of the many possibilities of gender and sexuality, but do not see those

⁹ Jason Cianciotto and Sean Cahill, *LGBT Youth in America's Schools* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2012), 3.

¹⁰ Cianciotto and Cahill, *LGBT Youth*, 3

¹¹ P. Jayne Bopp, Timothy R. Juday, and Claudia W. Charters, “A School-Based Program to Improve Life Skills and to Prevent HIV Infection in Multicultural Transgendered Youth in Hawai'i,” *Journal of Gay & Lesbian Issues in Education* 1, no. 4 (Oct. 2004): 3-21, 3-4, https://doi.org/10.1300/j367v01n04_02.

¹² Madelaine Imber, “What I Would Have Liked My Teachers to Know” in *Gay, Lesbian, and Transgender Issues in Education: Programs, Policies, and Practices* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 9-13, 9.

possibilities normalized, then that sense of not-belonging still exists. Imber advocates for children to be exposed to this diverse array of possibilities because so much of the information available to her focused solely on clinical sexual education aspects, and not cultural elements including “diverse lifestyles and alternative notions of family and society.”¹³ Likewise, Maayan-Rahel Simon speaks of the ease and comfort she found with herself once she discovered other queer female and transgender role models: “Rather than being envious or resentful of men because I could not have the same privileges, I found that my dedication to myself as a queer woman freed me to appreciate all genders and sexualities for their uniqueness.”¹⁴ Educators at all levels have an obligation to show our students that representations of LGBTQIA identities exist. I contend that one of the best sources of these varied and diverse stories happens to be my specialty: modern adaptations of King Arthur.

Gender and the Medieval King Arthur

As Charlie McNabb observes, the idea of genderqueer and gender fluidity has existed globally and for a long time: “Indigenous cultures around the world have recognized alternative gender roles and identities that do not fit neatly within the Western binary.”¹⁵ Challenging and expanding the Western binary is also feasible for medieval studies, as the research blog *The Public Medievalist* demonstrates through a special series of articles covering how modern audiences can interpret the ideas of sexuality, gender, and gender roles in the Middle Ages in Western Europe.¹⁶ Moreover, gender, as Judith Butler most famously defined the concept, is an act of repetitive performance, “a reenactment and reexperiencing of a set of meanings already socially established, an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylized repetition of acts.”¹⁷ I find that portions of Butler’s definition of gender also explain the appeal of the Arthurian tradition, socially established stories that are reenacted and reexperienced across time and space.

Texts and stories about King Arthur have been subversive and political since their earliest incarnations. Part of King Arthur’s medieval popularity was the ease with which any scribe could adapt his story, whether Arthur was representing British imperialism in Geoffrey of Monmouth’s twelfth-century *Historia Regum Britanniae*, or was used as a counterpoint to the highly codified morals of the church in thirteenth-century French *Vulgate Cycle*. The

¹³ Imber, “What I Would Have Liked My Teachers to Know,” 11.

¹⁴ Maayan-Rahel Simon, “On Being Queer” in *Gay, Lesbian, and Transgender Issues in Education: Programs, Policies, and Practices* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 14-16, 14.

¹⁵ Charlie McNabb, *Nonbinary Gender Identities: History, Culture, Resources* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018), xv.

¹⁶ “Gender, Sexism, and the Middle Ages,” *The Public Medievalist*, September 6, 2020, <https://www.publicmedievalist.com/gsma-toc/>.

¹⁷ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (New York, London: Routledge, 2006), 140.

medieval Arthurian tradition, namely texts that originate in the sixth through sixteenth centuries in Western Europe, has no official set of rules about canonical characters and events, but from the twelfth century (influenced primarily by Geoffrey's text and especially by the works of Chrétien de Troyes) a few consistent features arise: King Arthur is gendered male; Arthur's cisgendered female wife, Guinevere, cheats on him with their cisgendered male friend Lancelot; the affair destroys the kingdom.¹⁸ On the surface, both medieval and modern Arthurian texts seem to highlight this heterosexual binary gender spectrum and its socially-acceptable behavioral expectations. Deeper consideration shows this is not actually the case, as I will show. I propose that if LGBTQIA audiences knew that stories in the Arthurian canon explored gender and societal norms, at-risk audiences might normalize their own questions of identity, since their questions parallel the time-honored Arthurian tradition.

One example of a medieval text that challenges the gender binary is the Old French romance *Roman de Silence*. This text is arguably the best illustration of how medieval authors used Arthurian characters to question the idea of gender.¹⁹ The *Roman de Silence* puts the anthropomorphized concepts of Nature and Nurture into direct opposition and examines their effect on gender identity. The text tells the story of Silence, who is born biologically female but raised in the male gender to circumvent an inheritance issue: women cannot inherit the family land; thus, with no biologically male sons born to the family, the family will lose their land.²⁰ Nature and Nurture fight over Silence's gender (not sex, because both understand that Silence was born with female genitalia), and even quarrel over which pronoun to use with Silence, calling them²¹ both "him" and "her," depending on the speaker.²² Much to Silence's enjoyment and dismay, they excel at the masculine gender and are an exceptional knight, to the point of making cisgendered males in the kingdom jealous and hateful.²³ Silence is "deeply disturbed"²⁴ when their father explains the whole convoluted plot to them and then rages against Nature when

¹⁸ In Geoffrey's text, Mordred is the third member of the love triangle plot, but Chrétien's *Le Chevalier de la Charrette* (*The Knight of the Cart*) establishes Lancelot as the love interest, and this relationship becomes the dominant and perduring one. See Geoffrey of Monmouth, *The History of the Kings of Britain: An Edition and Translation of De gestis Britonum (Historia Regum Britanniae)*, edited by Michael D. Reeve and translated by Neil Wright (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell, 2009); and Chrétien de Troyes. *Le Chevalier de la Charrette (Lancelot)*, edited by A. Foulet and K. D. Uitti (Paris: Bordas, 1989). www.lib.uchicago.edu/efts/ARTFL/projects/charrette/mirror/lancelo2.html.

¹⁹ *Essays on "The Roman de Silence."* *Special issue of Arthuriana. Arthuriana* 12, no. 1 (2002). Accessed March 21, 2021, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27870408>.

²⁰ Heldris de Cornuaille, *Silence a Thirteenth-Century French Romance*, ed. and trans. Sarah Roche-Mahdi (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2007), lines 280-326, 1745-1760.

²¹ For simplicity, since Silence is not allowed to express a pronoun preference, I will refer to Silence as "they."

²² *Silence*, lines 1864-1957, 2054, 2082, 2257-2357, 2500-2624.

²³ *Silence*, lines 3163-3368.

²⁴ *Silence*, lines 2496-2500.

Nature tries to remind Silence that they are biologically female.²⁵ Silence gradually comes to the conclusion that they “don’t want to lose my high position; I don’t want to exchange it for a lesser, and I don’t want to prove my father a liar. I would rather have God strike me dead!”²⁶ Silence has their adventures and survives kidnapping and other typical romance plots, and, again, excels at performing the male gender.

My students cheered as we read *Roman de Silence* in an undergraduate medieval literature course on gender and King Arthur. They had never seen a genderqueer character take charge of their own gender identity in a medieval text. (When we reached the romance’s conclusion, my students looked at me with betrayal.) *Silence* is a medieval romance. We are not thirteenth-century readers, but twenty-first century ones, and because of social constructs and culture, we examine gender in a different way. As such, the *Roman de Silence* by itself, without context and explanation, is a tragic example of how the world has treated transgender and genderqueer characters. This is hardly a positive example for LGBTQIA youth: when the romance ends with Silence accused of rape²⁷ and with Merlin outing Silence as biologically female,²⁸ who is then married off to their uncle for inheritance purposes,²⁹ my students all but rioted and wished to rewrite the ending.³⁰ My students’ disquiet demonstrates that not allowing Silence to come to terms with their gender on their own terms creates a problematic text for both medieval and modern readers; the story establishes precedent for Arthurian stories to question how gender is performed in a traditionally male-oriented chivalric world even if its ending falls short of modern desires.

Post-medieval Arthurian Conversations

The Victorian Age brought about many dynamic changes in British and American society, including a renewed enthusiasm for romanticizing the Middle Ages that has not yet abated.³¹ Since 2016, American society in particular has seen a co-opting of so-called “medieval” values and symbols by the alt-right and white supremacist movements.³² A strong movement within the joined fields of medieval studies and medievalism studies to

²⁵ *Silence*, lines 2531-2538.

²⁶ *Silence*, lines 2651-2654.

²⁷ *Silence*, lines 5755-5766.

²⁸ *Silence*, lines 6525-6552.

²⁹ *Silence*, lines 6670-6680.

³⁰ A recent modern adaptation emphasizes the gender-queer nature of the story: Alex Myers, *The Story of Silence: 2020’s Extraordinary LGBTQ Chivalric Tale* (London: HarperVoyager, 2020).

³¹ Inga Bryden’s *Reinventing King Arthur: The Arthurian Legends in Victorian Culture* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005) is an excellent resource for this, as well as publications such as Joanne Parker and Corinna Wagner’s edited volume, *The Oxford Handbook of Victorian Medievalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

³² Richard Utz’s *Medievalism: A Manifesto* (Kalamazoo: Arc Humanities Press, 2017) situates the fascination that modern and broadly Western people seem to have with a long-past age. Accessed March 21, 2021, doi:10.2307/j.ctvnc0m.

expand public knowledge of the diversity of medieval Western Europe, Britain in particular, has developed in response. King Arthur is no exception to this fascination with the romanticized past, nor to the dangers: Roberta Davidson's research into the portrayal of female characters within Arthurian retellings has shown how problematic these portrayals can be.³³ When stories of King Arthur are retold, they tend to echo perceptions of the medieval tradition as heteronormative and White-centric; those that deviate from these norms encounter resistance. I encountered this resistance myself: in 2019, when I first discovered Capetta and McCarthy's *Once & Future*, I tweeted my enthusiasm for its potential. The only response came from a total stranger: "King Arthur is male."³⁴ While I didn't respond, the journal for Arthurian studies, *Arthuriana*, stepped in with a fantastic reply: "We don't understand the angry face. While many (even overwhelmingly most) versions of King Arthur have been male, they are all just versions and do not preclude reimagining along all sorts of lines."³⁵ *Arthuriana* continued, "The legend has always been malleable, with the King Arthur figure meeting the needs of its various audiences."³⁶ *Arthuriana* articulated an important reminder: the legend of King Arthur is adaptable, and that adaptability opens the legend to many diverse interpretations.

Amy Rose Capetta and Cori McCarthy's novel *Once & Future* and its sequel *Sword in the Stars* establishes a futuristic space dystopia with a diverse population reflecting contemporary reality: people of color and a spectrum of gendered characters. The story features Ari, the only survivor of the decimated planet of Ketch, who fights an evil galactic corporation to release her foster-mothers from prison. While the cast and their representative tropes seem, on the surface, like a laundry-list of token inclusivity (the nonbinary character, the lesbian relationship, the asexual character), the authors weave these social concepts into believable characters. When Ari smartly disdains chivalry as "giv[ing] birth to toxic masculinity, which caused Old Earth a few millennia of bullshit patriarchy,"³⁷ the audience understands that Ari's own tragic past and loss of her family informs this belief. Ari's reluctance to take up the Arthurian mantle except when it helps her achieve her own quest to find her family becomes an understandable desire because many people can identify with losing people they love. While she attempts to thwart tradition by keeping her romantic relationship with her girlfriend Gwenevere casual, readers will understand why Ari makes these choices: to avoid repeating the Arthurian history that the authors clearly delineate within the text. Using the medieval Arthur as a

³³ Roberta Davidson, "When King Arthur Is PG 13," *Arthuriana* 22, no. 3 (2012): 5–20.

³⁴ Kara Maloney, Twitter post, March 25, 2019.

https://twitter.com/DocMed_Knee_val/status/1110233875085701124.

³⁵ *Arthuriana*, Twitter post, March 27, 2019.

https://twitter.com/Arthuriana_Jrnl/status/1110862973302657024.

³⁶ *Arthuriana*, Twitter post, March 27, 2019.

https://twitter.com/Arthuriana_Jrnl/status/1110863104135651329.

³⁷ Amy Rose Capetta and Cori McCarthy, *Once & Future* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2019), 2.

backdrop allows the authors to play with ideas of gender, sexuality, and what a non-issue this can be in terms of how we determine identity.

Alex Brown, a reviewer for Tor, comments on the lack of diversity in SFF and how that often reflects on the lack of creativity of the creators: “As a reader who is not part of the majority, it’s difficult to constantly be left out of the narrative, to be told that your stories aren’t important, that you have no place in the future. Thankfully there are authors like Capetta and McCarthy to challenge the status quo.”³⁸ Capetta and McCarthy normalize a range of sexual orientations and pronoun uses: when Ari identifies one background character as a nonbinary “fluid,”³⁹ the story casually reinforces the idea that gender identity is flexible; in another instance, Kay chastises Merlin’s act of misgendering by exclaiming, “Dude! Lam is fluid. *They*.”⁴⁰ Capetta and McCarthy create a future that normalizes introductions by way of names and pronouns: Merlin’s social gaffe in denying Lamorack’s “they” pronoun is the exception, rather than the rule. The novels model recovery as well as normalizing pronoun specifications: while Merlin is taken aback by his gaffe at first, he eventually adapts to the social norms, focusing less on the fact that Ari and Gwen are lesbians and seeks instead “a last-ditch effort to avoid the worst of the cycle’s pain.”⁴¹ Merlin’s concerns for Ari are less that she’s pursuing a relationship with another woman, and more that Ari’s former girlfriend Gwen is Gwenevere reincarnated, thus normalizing the idea that nonheteronormative relationships are not only possible, but acceptable.

While representation within stories is important, representing marginalized author voices should also be a priority. Cory McCarthy, one of the authors of *Once & Future*, provides an Identity section on their website, establishing an intersectional web: “Irish-Arab American, nonbinary trans, pan, ace spec (demi). They/them”; in a short biography on the same page, McCarthy identifies co-author Amy Rose Capetta as their spouse.⁴² These identity factors are key to their past experiences with literature, and the authors work to create stories where their identities (and others) *are* represented. Each of their books, jointly or individually, feature LGBTQIA characters, providing their readers with identities and possibilities that those readers might have otherwise missed. Capetta and McCarthy’s openness about gender and sexual identity helps to normalize the idea that more than heteronormative voices can exist within the literary world at large, especially within the young adult genre. By “outing” themselves in this way, Capetta and McCarthy

³⁸ Alex Brown, “An Ancient Curse, A New Cycle: *Once & Future* by Amy Rose Capetta and Cori McCarthy,” Tor.com, April 2, 2019, <https://www.tor.com/2019/04/02/book-reviews-once-future-by-amy-rose-capetta-and-cori-mccarthy/>.

³⁹ Capetta and McCarthy, *Once & Future*, 31.

⁴⁰ Capetta and McCarthy, *Once & Future*, 42.

⁴¹ Capetta and McCarthy, *Once & Future*, 58.

⁴² “CORY MCCARTHY,” Cory McCarthy, accessed August 31, 2020, <https://www.corimccarthy.com/>.

invite a dialogue to provide resources and information—to pass on knowledge so that young people can find their means of identification. In an interview, Capetta and McCarthy stated that such books for teenagers are necessary: “We put them [LGBTQIA youth] through so much in this society that to not give them stories crafted for them would be insult on top of injury....Many people we know grew up without YA [young adult literature] and without real reflections of themselves in the stories they loved, and it’s wonderful to believe that that is changing for the better.”⁴³

Once & Future is far from the first text to present a genderbent Arthur, or shift representation of the problematic love triangle. DC’s *Camelot 3000*, published from 1982-1985, presented audiences with a female incarnation of Tristan, forcing Tristan to re-examine themselves in terms of gender and sexuality. Even the 2010 Disney channel series, *Avalon High*, highlighted the latest reincarnation of Arthur Pendragon as a high school student named Allie Pennington.⁴⁴ Arthurian texts that consider characters of color, however, are rare. The five-issue Dark Horse comic book *The Once and Future Queen*, by Adam P. Knave and D.J. Kirkbride, reimagines King Arthur as a Rani Arturus, a 19-year-old half-Indian, half-British chess champion who begins her hero’s journey at an international chess tournament in Cornwall when she is distracted by a cute girl. Four pages later, Rani pulls a (literal) sword from a stone, and memories of a different life—Guinevere’s betrayal included—overwhelm her. Knave and Kirkbride normalize this change in gender (and race), Merlin’s wise comment on the matter is simply this: “you are the Arthur foretold, the once and future...queen, yes? You will unite the world.”⁴⁵ Queen or king is unimportant: what matters is destiny.

Rani herself is less concerned with her past life’s changed gender, and instead focuses on the fact that she is only 19, with most of her experience via the past life memories. Rani’s approach is also applied to the construction of the Arthurian love triangle: Guinevere is Gwen, the cute girl who turned Rani’s head at the chess tournament; Lancelot is Lance, Rani’s high school friend; and the sexual tension traditionally used to divide the trio is instead turned into an opportunity for healing the damage of the past lives. The triad feels, in Lance’s words, that “the three of us—together” feels right.⁴⁶ Rani does not permit feelings alone to steer their course: she asks important questions regarding individual consent within the context of a compelling destiny, saying “Am I pulling you toward me the same way the sword pulled me into that cave? Is that why you’re here? Why is Lance in my kitchen? Is anything we’re feeling real, or is it part of all

⁴³ Aurora Dominguez, “5 Questions With: Amy Rose Capetta and Cori McCarthy, Authors of ‘Once & Future,’” *Frolic*, August 7, 2019, <https://frolic.media/5-questions-with-amy-rose-capetta-and-cori-mccarthy-authors-of-once-future/>.

⁴⁴ The Disney series is an adaptation of Meg Cabot’s book series of the same name.

⁴⁵ Adam P. Knave et al., *The Once and Future Queen* (Milwaukie, OR: Dark Horse Comics, 2017), 16.

⁴⁶ Knave et al., *The Once and Future Queen*, 44.

this wizard and fae stuff?”⁴⁷ By questioning their traditional roles, closely linked to a rigid heterosexual monogamy that does not apply, the triad attempts to avert the tragic destiny that theoretically awaits.⁴⁸ Within the comic, Rani’s cisgendered womanhood and her bisexual attraction to both Gwen and Lance isn’t forced or focused on as either abnormal or with attention that implies exceptionality: the audience takes for granted that Arthur is reborn as a biracial, bisexual, cisgendered female 19-year-old. The very normalization of sexual and gender identity, especially in a literary tradition that revolves around the idea of heteronormative love triangles that produce tragedy, shows the power of representation.

D.J. Kirkbride wanted to focus less on the “will they won’t they” sexual tension of the traditional love triangle, and more on adventure in the Arthurian genre.⁴⁹ Consequently, when Gwen confronts Rani about Lance and who should “be” with whom, Rani has a simple solution—“But you and me. Maybe you and Lance should give it a go instead?”⁵⁰ Gwen’s response is to suggest polyamory as a simple solution,⁵¹ neatly removing the possibility of an illicit affair; much of the tragedy of the medieval Arthurian material is generated by Lancelot and Guinevere’s sexual tension, leading to distrust and eventual betrayals of monogamous marriage vows. All three engaging in a relationship means there is no illicit affair to hide, and there is no betrayal of monogamy. By normalizing the idea of a healthy sexual and romantic relationship between three adults, the authors of the comic not only offer an alternative to heteronormative sexual pairings, but also provide a way to avoid the traditional tragedy. Sexual jealousy can still arise in a triad or polycule, of course, so the comics show a compelling conversation between Gwen and Rani about how all three partners could explore their desires without harming the others; additionally, Lance and Rani have a sweetly honest conversation about how Lance’s identity as asexual would affect his romantic relationship with Rani.⁵²

Conclusion

Both *Once & Future* and *The Once and Future Queen* present and explore open-minded attitudes toward sexuality and gender identity. The texts’ nonchalance toward the social construct that is the gender binary also helps readers apply definitions to feelings, and names to identities. Representation allows identity to become less stigmatized and more

⁴⁷ Knave et al., *The Once and Future Queen*, 43.

⁴⁸ We unfortunately never know if their self-awareness and polyamory are enough to circumvent the past, because the comic was cancelled after five issues.

⁴⁹ Graeme McMillan, “‘Once and Future Queen’ Writers on Rethinking King Arthur: ‘The Future Isn’t Straight White Men,’” *The Hollywood Reporter*, November 8, 2017, <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/heat-vision/once-future-queen-writers-rethinking-king-arthur-future-isnt-straight-white-men-1055827>.

⁵⁰ Knave et al., *The Once and Future Queen*, 60.

⁵¹ Knave et al., *The Once and Future Queen*, 61.

⁵² Knave et al., *The Once and Future Queen*, 68.

of a non-issue, the same as any other personality or identity trait that a character or person might exhibit.

Fiction, of course, will not solve every social barrier. As human gender sexuality advocate and researcher Nova Bradford notes in a study of transgender sex education, “transgender-inclusive sex education concerns not only what information, but also from whom the information is delivered.”⁵³ The study’s “participants expressed a desire both for diverse content and diverse voices to deliver it,” and fiction can provide this—but young adult novels and graphic novels cannot solely provide the sort of comprehensive sex education needed to fully normalize LGBTQA identities.⁵⁴ Instead, Bradford notes that “the inclusion of transgender people in the delivery of sex education content” is vital,⁵⁵ an observation valid in elementary, secondary, and tertiary educational levels, as well as community support and representation among peers. Fiction is only one component that will normalize the concept of a spectrum of gender and sexuality possibilities.

Educators can use medievalism or medieval studies to contribute to this normalization, and to eliminate the false notions that gender is a modern construction, absent from the historical literary record. The gender-questioning Arthurian texts of the Middle Ages demonstrate that medieval authors and audiences explored these topics in the same ways that modern audiences wrestle with them, even if the audience in the Middle Ages didn’t come to the same conclusion. Educators have an obligation to provide context and show that representation of gender has historically been complicated. Broadly speaking, study of medieval texts allows modern readers to see a complicated progression of thought that has shaped Western, particularly American, cultural norms. Medievalism also has value, and Arthurian texts, particularly popular ones from the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, are especially rich resources to see how the question of gender has continued. I encourage educators to pair the medieval with the postmodern: teach *The Roman de Silence* alongside the *Once & Future* duology and *Once and Future Queen*. Use problematic representations of medieval gender to start a conversation about the present.

Ultimately, as scholars and as students, we are what we read, and we respond to the ideas that exist around us. As educators and researchers, our responsibility is to ensure that our students have access to both information and to representation. Conservative elements continually push for narrower definitions of gender and sexuality, and they try to restrict information to youth. Young adult novels and graphic novels like *Once & Future*

⁵³ Nova J. Bradford et al., “Sex Education and Transgender Youth: ‘Trust Means Material By and For Queer and Trans People,’” *Sex Education* 19, no. 1 (May 2018): 84-98, 97, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14681811.2018.1478808>.

⁵⁴ Bradford, “Sex Education,” 97.

⁵⁵ Bradford, “Sex Education,” 97.

and *The Once and Future Queen* can help bridge the increasing gap between theoretical information and representation. We, as educators, can put the power of defined identity into our students' hands.