

**Autor:**

Vicente Javier López Mate

[vicente.lopez@uah.es](mailto:vicente.lopez@uah.es)

**Título:**

THE LEGACY OF EXCALIBUR: NEOMEDIEVALISM AND THE RESEMIOTIZATION OF THE LEGEND IN FILM AND TELEVISION

**Abstract:**

First mentioned in Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History of the Kings of Britain*, the legend of the sword Excalibur has been in continuous use by writers, including Robert de Boron and Sir Thomas Malory. Its fabled power of slicing through steel has been reimagined in various contemporary works, particularly in film and television, aiming to evoke in modern audiences the same awe that medieval readers once felt. Excalibur, the famous sword forged on the mythical island of Avalon, with supernatural qualities vested in it, has been given new meanings in various retellings such as the TV series *Once Upon a Time* (2011) and films like *Transformers: The Last Knight* (2017) and *Hellboy* (2019), where its magical qualities have grown. This reflects the changes that its mythological roots and nature have undergone with time. These new sets of retellings interact with the source myth by adding fresh ingredients to secure its continued relevance in contemporary popular culture and by mirroring influences of neomedievalism.

**Keywords:** neomedievalism, cinema, Excalibur, resemiotization, Arthurian cinema

**Resumo:**

Mencionada pela primeira vez na *História dos Reis da Grã-Bretanha*, de Geoffrey of Monmouth, a lenda da espada Excalibur tem sido continuamente recriada por escritores, incluindo Robert de Boron e Sir Thomas Malory. O seu lendário poder de cortar o aço tem sido reimaginado em várias obras contemporâneas, nomeadamente no cinema e na televisão, com o objetivo de evocar no público moderno o mesmo fascínio que os leitores medievais sentiram em tempos. Excalibur, a famosa espada forjada na mítica ilha de Avalon, com qualidades sobrenaturais, ganhou novos significados em vários recontos, como a série de TV *Once Upon a Time* (2011) e filmes como *Transformers: O Último Cavaleiro* (2017) e *Hellboy* (2019), onde as suas qualidades mágicas foram amplificadas. Estes novos conjuntos de recontos interagem com o mito de origem, acrescentando novos ingredientes para garantir a relevância contínua do mito original na cultura popular contemporânea e reflectindo as influências do neomedievalismo.

**Palavras-chave:** neomedievalismo, cinema, Excalibur, resemiotização, cinema arturiano

**Plano:**

1. Introduction
2. Once Upon a time
3. Transformers: The Last Knight
4. Hellboy
5. Conclusions

**Como citar este artigo:**

Vicente Javier López Mate, «The legacy of Excalibur: neomedievalism and the resemiotization of the legend in film and television», *Guarecer. Revista Electrónica de Estudios Medievais*, n.º 8, 2023, pp. 53-64.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21747/21839301/gua8a4>

## THE LEGACY OF EXCALIBUR: NEOMEDIEVALISM AND THE RESEMIOTIZATION OF THE LEGEND IN FILM AND TELEVISION

Vicente Javier López Mate  
Universidad de Alcalá

### 1. Introduction

The figure of King Arthur and the mighty Excalibur has always been surrounded by an aura of mystery that has enabled his survival to the present day. Even in the 21st century, experts still disagree on the historicity of the mythical monarch and his court due to the lack of archaeological sources. This paper does not aim to discern whether, behind the legend, there was truly a British military leader who fought against the Saxons, or whether he might have carried the cross of Christ for three nights during the Battle of Mount Badon, as recorded in the *Annals of Wales*<sup>94</sup>. Once this point is clarified, it is known that one of the earliest references in which this myth appears is probably the Celtic poem *Y Gododdin*, from the 7th to the 11th centuries. In this poem, Arthur is briefly mentioned as an ancient hero. However, it is not until the 9th century that Geoffrey of Monmouth, in his book *History of the Kings of Britain (Historia Regum Britanniae)*<sup>95</sup>, narrates the life of this character and presents Arthur as a British king who, after defeating the Saxons, conquered and created his own kingdom. In the aforementioned work, the author already introduced characters from the Arthurian cycle as important as his father Uther Pendragon, the wizard Merlin, the sword Excalibur, and the kingdoms of Tintagel, Camelot, and Avalon.

Despite it has been almost ten centuries since the first appearance of the mythical King Arthur in a written text, it is fascinating to see how the survival of the Arthurian myth has endured to this day. One only needs to take a quick look at movie billboards or any streaming platform to see that medieval-themed movies and series continue to be a regular occurrence

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<sup>94</sup> The first appearance of the *Annals of Wales* is found in a manuscript from 970 AD. It is a chronicle written in Latin that records the most important events that took place between 447 and 970 AD. The entry for the year 516 AD reads, "*Bellum Badonis, in quo Arthur portavit/ crucem Domini nostri Jhesu Christi tribus/ diebus et tribus noctibus in humeros suos et/ Brittones victores fuerunt,*" which means, "The Battle of Mount Badon, in which Arthur carried the Cross of Our Lord Jesus Christ for three days and three nights on his shoulder, and the Britons were victorious."

<sup>95</sup> *Historia Regum Britanniae* is a pseudohistorical chronicle compiled by Geoffrey of Monmouth as a fundamental part of the Matter of Britain. In narrating the history of the founding of Britain, it was very popular in its time and, as a result, was translated into numerous languages. However, it wasn't until the 16th century that its value as a historical source was dismissed due to the lack of accuracy and truthfulness of the events recorded in the chronicle.

each year. A highly profitable business that generates millions of dollars and, far from going out of style, satisfies the tastes of an audience eager for content with a medieval setting.

However, interest in the Middle Ages is not a phenomenon that emerged recently; it survived the Renaissance and was solidified during the 18th and 19th centuries. At that time, the medieval vision was fully romanticized to the delight of readers of the era, eager to read stories of knights and their dangerous and fantastical adventures, with the tales of King Arthur and his noble knights being the audience's favorites. According to Umberto Eco,

we are at present witnessing, both in Europe and America, a period of renewed interest in the Middle Ages, with a curious oscillation between fantastic neomedievalism and responsible philological examination<sup>96</sup>.

Paradoxically, this recreation of the past is not always faithful to the truth, and the memory of the Middle Ages is altered for various purposes, consequently resemiotizing the myth. The survival of Arthur and Excalibur for more than a thousand years exemplifies the myth's ability to adapt, in such a way that its evolution is nothing more than a succession of reinterpretations and reinventions based on a fundamental discursive material<sup>97</sup>. From the perspective at hand, the transformation of the constituent elements of the Middle Ages into myth —if not the Middle Ages itself as a concept— leads to a process of resemiotization that entails various consequences. On one hand, its popularization, is facilitated by the diversification of media, but also the adoption of values that engage in dialogue with the society that produces them. In this sense, it is worth considering the possible questions and responses raised by postmodernism, in light of the breakdown of values assumed by modernity, which has led to the consideration of the emergence of a new Middle Ages (Gutiérrez, 2008).

Through the aforementioned process of resemiotization, Excalibur takes on a new dynamic quality in mediating between medieval wonder and modern-day captivity. While the original magical quality of the sword, the ability to slice through steel, provided by the etymology of its name was already impressive enough, film and television have repositioned and amplified this myth of Excalibur.

The aim of this analysis is to trace the reimagining of the magical properties of Excalibur in three key works within the last decade: the television series *Once Upon a Time* (2011) and films like *Transformers: The Last Knight* (2017) and *Hellboy* (2019) and analyse how each of these contemporary adaptations adds something new in order to enhance the mythical aura of the sword, while reenvisioning its attributes for the modern audience.

To put things into context, it is important to first recall the essential magical properties granted to Excalibur in medieval texts. Uniformly, the accounts of Geoffrey of Monmouth, Wace, and Layamon-ascribed origin to Arthur's sword, originally Caliburnus in name, to its forging upon the Island of Avalon. Looking to French Arthurian traditions for influence, Sir

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<sup>96</sup> Eco (1986, p. 63).

<sup>97</sup> Lacy (1991).

Thomas Malory explains that Excalibur's name roughly interpreted means "to cut steel," which is indicative of its very defining magical function.

In *Le Morte d'Arthur*, Malory suggests that Excalibur and its 'marvellous scabbard' were handed to Arthur by the Lady of the Lake 'upon a condition'-at some point in the future, he would return payment for the weapon. Since it came from otherworldly origin, the sword possessed magical attributes making it capable of slicing through iron. Arthur himself testifies to this peculiar quality in the course of his fateful combat with Accolon of Gaul; the moment that underlined the sword's incomparable prowess in battle:

And so they went eagerly to the battle, and gave many great strokes, but always Arthur's sword bit not like Accolon's sword; but for the most part, every stroke that Accolon gave he wounded sore Arthur, that it was marvel he stood, and always his blood fell from him fast. When Arthur beheld the ground so sore be-bled he was dismayed, and then he deemed treason that his sword was changed; for his sword bit not steel as it was wont to do, therefore he dreaded him sore to be dead, for ever him seemed that the sword in Accolon's hand was Excalibur, for at every stroke that Accolon struck he drew blood on Arthur<sup>98</sup>. (Malory, 1485: 116)

From Malory's prose onwards, many works rewrote the deeds of Arthur and his noble knights, extending far beyond the Anglo-American art. Excalibur has, however, become a powerful symbol of power and legitimacy for whoever pulls it as a worthy heir of King Arthur's legend. Recently, it is often present in films and series; in most instances, the properties of the sword have been modified with the intention of magnifying its legacy even more.

## **2. *Once Upon a time***

*Once Upon a Time* is an American fantasy drama television series that aired on ABC from 2011 to 2018. This series was created by Edward Kitsis and Adam Horowitz, very popular writers for their work in the series *Lost* (2004). Its primary themes were hope and optimism, and it could successfully attract a large audience.

The story takes place in two main worlds: a fantasy world where the fairy tales occur and an imaginary coastal town in Maine called Storybrooke. The "real world" storyline centres around the characters Emma Swan, played by Jennifer Morrison, and her ten-year-old son, Henry Mills, played by Jared S. Gilmore. Emma Swan is a 28-year-old bail bondswoman who was abandoned as a baby. She is the mother of Henry who is an enthusiast of fairy tales. At the age of ten, Henry discovers from an old book that his mother is from another dimension and that she happens to be the lost daughter of Snow White and Prince Charming. With the help of the storybook he is constantly carrying, Henry insists that his mother was banished to the outside world to prevent the Evil Queen's malignant influence on him. The situation created by that curse was one where the fairy tale world was stuck in time and the fairy tale characters were brought into the present time, to Storybrooke, Maine, USA. Initial skepticism

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<sup>98</sup> Brian (ed., 1999, p. 116).

gives way to a growing suspicion that the seemingly banal town is, in fact much more complex – a place where magic has been forgotten yet still potent.

The fairy tale characters continue with their lives but without any memories of who they once were. Accordingly, Snow White is transformed into Mary Margaret Blanchard, Henry's schoolteacher; the Evil Queen is transformed into Regina, the mayor of the town; and the Magic Mirror is transformed into a decidedly gossipy reporter. Most of the characters in the series come from the classic fairy tales of the Brothers Grimm and Hans Christian Andersen, with some others coming from Western popular literature, folklore, Arthurian legend, and Greek mythology, besides original characters from The Walt Disney Company. The television series shows Merlin wanting to wed and get old with his lover, Nimue, played by Caroline Ford. He concocts a scheme to make a Holy Grail into a sword to draw out all of his immortality by using the original flame of humanity, called the Fire of Prometheus, to transform the Holy Grail into the well-known sword Excalibur.

Soon enough, along comes Vortigan, who strikes a deadly wound upon Nimue; of course, neither of them yet fathom she is immortal. He snatches Excalibur for himself and tries to use it upon Merlin, to which Nimue intervenes and rips Vortigan heart out of his chest. Despite Merlin's warning that killing him would corrupt her with Darkness, Nimue gives in to her urge for vengeance. Along with her skin and hair, her magic darkens. Afraid of losing her magical powers, she destroys Excalibur by splitting it into two parts: breaking the blade off from its tip. Eventually, Nimue is tagged as the Dark One. In a misguided effort to protect the kingdoms, Merlin binds it to Nimue using the tip of Excalibur, making her subservient to him; this is later referred to as “the Dagger of the Dark One”. The rest of the sword gets stuck in a rock, only to be pulled out by the true ruler of the kingdom.

By weaving together such mythical elements as the Holy Grail and the Fire of Prometheus into the origin of forging the sword, a process of resemiotization emerges, planned to envelope Excalibur in that powerful aura previously discussed. The contemporary viewer is able to understand the immense power residing within the blade of this sword through the association of such powerful and culturally significant artefact within the collective imagination. Thus, the change in the origins of Excalibur serves as a meaningful indicator of the shifts in the powers ascribed to the sword. An example of one of these newly granted powers is much later seen in action.

A fair love story between Arthur and Guinevere, since childhood: he has always imagined building the land of Camelot, hoping to be its king himself someday. Guinevere playfully teases him on this dream as very fanciful. However, he tells her that this is not a fantasy at all, for once, a wise old wizard prophesied that Arthur would one day pull a sword from a stone and be accepted by all as king. From that day on, the young man becomes obsessed with finding the sword. One day, with his trusted friends Sir Lancelot and Sir Percival by his side, he finds the fabled sword stuck in a stone-and also Sir Kay, who had always teased Arthur about his dream. Sir Kay proceeds to try to pull out the sword, and in this very moment, another power is given to Excalibur: he is burned to ashes as the power of the sword judged that he who tried to take it out was not a rightful king of England. While Sir Lancelot and Sir

Percival look on, Arthur manages to pull the sword out. However, the tip is not there. When he finds out that either the sword is broken or incomplete, Arthur fears the people will not recognize him as their king. He therefore decides never to draw the sword fully from its scabbard whenever he has to show it.

Another hidden strength of the sword is that it can also cause wounds incapable of healing. In the next scene, one of the characters acquired a scratch from Excalibur and he tried to dress the cut to seal the wound. A few minutes later, he collapsed as he weakened up due to a loss of blood from his injury caused by the mythical sword. In this scene, Merlin explains to the rest that Excalibur was forged in order to sever immortal bonds, and one of its wounds cannot heal since its power is far greater than his magic.

Thus, the creators of the series have given Excalibur an even more mythical origin, so that through the mere association of concepts, the modern audience can share some of the awe that medieval readers felt upon the sword's appearance. With such a profound difference in its origin, there is little wonder that the magical characteristics are extended in this story to include the destruction of any person picking up the sword but not of its chosen owner, or in its ability to cut through more than merely metal and sever the soul of any person touched by its blade.

### 3. Transformers: The Last Knight

*Transformers: The Last Knight* is an American science fiction and action film released in 2017 based on the homonymous toy line. It is the fifth live-action Transformers film, the second directed by Michael Bay. Mark Wahlberg and Nicola Peltz reprise their roles from the previous film while Josh Duhamel and John Turturro reappear from the first three films.

When *Transformers: The Last Knight* was released, the movie found itself at the receiving end of universal panning by film critics and is considered the worst-rated in the Transformers series. The main criticisms were against the movie's runtime, storyline, direction, character development, writing, camera work, and the constant change of style, but its visual effects were somewhat praised. The movie also became the franchise's second major box office bomb and was estimated to cost both Paramount Pictures and Hasbro an over \$100 million loss. It gained ten nominations at the 38th Golden Raspberry Awards for Worst Picture, Worst Director, and Worst Actor for Wahlberg.

This story is set in medieval England, where King Arthur and his knights, charging into a frenzied battle, were joined by an army of barbarians. Arthur's men were outnumbered by a great multitude. The defeated men of Arthur were smitten down by the savagery of their foes. Whereas his knights have lost all hope of ever leaving this battle alive, Arthur himself still clings to the belief that in this solemn moment, Merlin, his principal adviser and magician, would appear and save them. The other knights think of Merlin as nothing more than a drunken jester. Given his refreshment, Merlin stumbles upon some ancient ruins, part of an alien spacecraft. In the ruins, he finds a Cybertronian Knight – a member of an alien race with advanced technology. It would now seem that Merlin had known this creature all along; in

fact, for keeping its existence a secret, it had given him, earlier, technology, which he could show to people as his magic and so be their wizard.

He begs the elusive knight to help them in this battle. He exclaims that he may be a cheat and a deceiver, but if that can help his people and his king not become extinct, just like what happened to Cybertronian knights, he will do it. Moved by his earnest plea, the knight gave Merlin his strong staff that enabled him to summon a dragon named Dragonstorm to help Arthur and his forces defeat their adversaries. Further, when one peers at the unusual designs around the sceptre, they are the same as those in Excalibur, a powerful sword that Arthur is in possession of; therefore, the magical sword has originally come from the other world and technology incomprehensible to humanity.

When the fight has ended, Arthur assembles his most noble knights around the Round Table. Among them stand his loyal friends, along with five Cybertronian knights who know that Arthur is the true possessor of Excalibur and vow to serve him as knights. Thus, Arthur's knightly brotherhood commences. Under the banner "no victory without sacrifice," he wields Excalibur and proclaims that his order shall fight for honour, for humanity and all that is good in mankind.

In the modern-day narrative, a race of aliens has arrived in New York City. The leading character, Cade Yeager, who has experience in fighting these monsters, tries to engage them with not much luck. It is at this moment that one of the original Cybertronian knights appears, keeping his agreement to safeguard humanity but soon finds himself outmatched and beaten. Cade tries to attend to his wounds, as the dying knight, knowing he has only moments to live, gives him a medallion that he says will protect him. The medallion bears the same markings as Excalibur. Through the film, medieval knights are revived from their sleep, and through their continued mission of protection for humanity, they cannot manage to differentiate that Cade and his Transformer friends are their side to support. As the storyline unfolds up to the climax, boldly Cade confronts the Knights by putting his life in danger to save his friends. This noble sentiment activates a necklace's truest power, revealed at last to be none other than Excalibur in its alternate form. The sword rendered Cade superhumanly strong, allowing him to ward off his mighty opponent. The Cybertronians immediately stop the attack, recognizing him as the descendant of Excalibur's original wielder, offering their service unto him, just as they once did with his ancestor, King Arthur, centuries ago.

In this particular instance, the director Michael Bay gives an extraterrestrial origin to explain Excalibur's peculiar abilities. It is not a magic sword but a manifestation of highly advanced alien technology. Only through this technological underpinning is Excalibur malleable and ever-changing to the needs of its wielder. It is through this position that the full potential of Excalibur is confined. But if the owner happens to belong to the bloodline of Arthur, he can unleash the sword's latent abilities that, aside from giving him legitimacy before his knights, also grant him superhuman strength, provided he agrees to take the oath to fight for honour and for everything that represents what is good in humanity.

#### **4. Hellboy**

*Hellboy* is a film about the homonymous comic book character released in 2019. The film was directed by Neil Marshall and co-written by Mike Mignola, Andrew Cosby, Christopher Golden, and Aron Coleite. It is a direct adaptation of the comics by Mike Mignola, set in the modern day. It stars David Harbour, Ian McShane, and Milla Jovovich.

Set in the Middle Ages, it begins with the Blood Queen, Vivienne Nimue, releasing a deadly plague over England. King Arthur, through the help of Ganeida, a member of his coven, finally confronts her. Because Nimue is of a magical nature, she tells Arthur that no weapon of mortal origin can hurt her. Arthur then responds by pulling out his sword, saying that it is not of mortal origin. The witch recognizes Arthur's sword as Excalibur; with that very same sword, he dismembers her and instructs his knights to take her parts to the farthest corners of the earth and bury them throughout England.

In modern times – roughly thirteen centuries later – a coven of witches starts searching for Nimue's parts, succeeds in breaking the seals that kept her imprisoned, and brings her back to life after reassembling her body. The nature of the protagonist in the movie, Hellboy, is pretty weird and strange. His name and appearance point to his demonic origin, which makes him what he is. Amazingly, he is working as a paranormal investigator for the United States government. The government sends Hellboy and his companions to investigate the unfolding events brought about by the resurrection of the coven. He follows a clue that brings him back to the scene, before Nimue's resurrection, where she wreaks her vengeance on the coven of witches who had refused to aid her in the past against King Arthur. However, Ganeida, the witch who betrayed her, escapes.

Ganeida then brings Hellboy to the resting place of the wizard Merlin, who feels the stirrings of the witch's power and spires back to life. Merlin tells the protagonist that he is the descendant of King Arthur, his mother having been a woman who sold her soul to the devil; therefore, she had a child with the devil. When he is finally presented with Excalibur, Hellboy declines after having a vision of himself bringing about doomsday when using the sword. Weakened as his magic is drained from him, Merlin turns to dust and disappears. Notably, the sword erupts in flames when held by the protagonist – a key piece in a visual and thematic puzzle.

Hellboy and his companions follow the witch as she goes through London, finally stopping at St. Paul's Cathedral. In a very intense battle, Nimue knocks the protagonist down through the catacombs of the cathedral, and out to the tomb of King Arthur. Nimue tells him to take the sword if he wants to kill her, knowing that if he did it, the prophecy that Hellboy brings on the Apocalypse would be true.

At first, Hellboy is reluctant to release the sword. However, in the opening scenes of the film the witch kills his adoptive father. Angry over this incident, Hellboy runs into the woods nearby and, in a short burst of anger, releases the sword from the stone in which it is buried. This releases the Apocalypse, where demons begin to manifest on earth. But his father's spirit

appears to convince Hellboy, who finally composes himself and decapitates the witch, hurling her head toward the portal, which shuts down after all the demons are cast back to hell.

For this scene, the director, Neil Marshall gave Excalibur a flaming edge; this gives one a faint association with a passage from *Le Morte d'Arthur*. Within Malory's work, it is Excalibur, the name of the sword given to Arthur by the Lady of the Lake that he hands over to Sir Bedivere to return to the waters after his battle with his son, Mordred. However, there is one reference right in the beginning of the work and that is when the sword taken out from the anvil is considered to be Excalibur. In the battle against the kings who do not recognize him as their superior, Arthur takes out the sword he once had drawn from the anvil only when he is at the brink of defeat, upon advice of Merlin. And then «he drew his sword Excalibur, but all of it shone so bright in his enemies' eyes that it gave off light as if it had been thirty torches<sup>99</sup>», thereby scaring his enemies and increasing their urge to flee. This view of the sword, as depicted through the film, having the eternal ability to burn while in the hands of Arthur's descendant, creates a process of resemiotization, linking the medieval readers to the modern-day audiences that have viewed this film.

The resemiotization of Excalibur in *Hellboy* reveals aspects of how Arthurian symbology undergoes changes through time and medium. Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur* employs the sword Excalibur not only as a symbol of kingship but also as an armament imbued with supernatural light. The film reinforces this imagery by making Excalibur a literal flaming sword, reinforcing its divine and apocalyptic connotations. While Malory's Arthur uses the sword to make his rule, *Hellboy* reimagines it as a burden of destiny, both his heritage and a symbol of his destructive potential. This resemiotization changes Excalibur from being a sovereign legitimizing artifact into a catalyst in existential conflict, which aligns with the much bleaker motives in the film. By drawing on Malory's portrayal, yet reshaping the meaning of the sword, the film connects medieval and modern storytelling in a way that shows legendary symbols are fluid across time.

## 5. Conclusions

Throughout this analysis, what can be demonstrated is that the works being presented have caused drastic alterations in Excalibur. Initially, among the English sources, it was presumed that the only power given to the sword was to cleave through steel. But looking at the features bestowed upon Excalibur in these three modern interpretations, it becomes quite clear that the sword has many more powers: to dissolve into dust a person trying to hold onto it, if this person is unworthy to possess the sword; to inflict wounds impossible to heal since its blade rips both soul and sinew; to slay that which has become immortal; to grant a person superhuman strength; to be fluid and able to change shape; to erupt into flames; and finally, to unleash chaos on earth.

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<sup>99</sup> Brian (ed., 1999, p. 43).

While the powers attributed to each of the selected works markedly differ, certain similarities or convergences are discernible. First and foremost, wielding Excalibur confers legitimacy upon the individual as the king chosen by legend, which implies that an army will follow – be it composed of men, alien robots, or a horde of demons. There also seems to be some relationship between the powers of Excalibur and the qualities of its master, for each of King Arthur's heirs appears to gift the sword with various powers. It is not only the case that Excalibur changes its carrier, shaping him to face his fate, but the fate of the sword is also predetermined in turn by the nature and decisions of its master.

Another similarity between the three works is how the change in the origin of the sword explains the differences in its abilities. Whereas *Hellboy* does not detail this, the other two works are changed significantly to explain the reasons for new powers.

However, no matter how many changes or variations the story of King Arthur and his magic sword underwent throughout the centuries, it would still be recognisable and appealing to its audiences, as long as its leading themes and motifs were in place. Moreover, every author attempting to render their interpretation of the Arthurian myth – whatever his motives – automatically contributes to the perpetuation of the latter for generations of people.

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