

AN INTERTEXTUAL ENCOUNTER OF BERNARD CORNWELL'S THE WINTER KING

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Abstract

Arthurian Literature is an emerging field in English Literature that discusses the various works on King Arthur. Arthur is considered to be the legendary hero of Britain and the works that come under Arthurian Literature discuss the life and adventures of him. Arthurian works are approached from various perspectives that added new depth to their popularity. Mostly they were looked at from a historical point of view and many still discuss the existence of King Arthur. The other approach is a mythical study where the supernatural and mystery are put under scrutiny. These works have also been studied with reference to social and cultural aspects. Intertextuality is the shaping of a text's meaning by other texts and it is the interconnection between similar or related works of literature that reflected and influenced an interrelationship between texts and generated a general understanding in separate works. These references were made to influence the reader and to add layers of depth to a text, based on the reader's prior knowledge and understanding. Intertextuality would develop a better understanding of the Arthurian novels and would allow the readers to make as many connections as possible with other texts. This paper aims to bring out the intertextuality elements in *The Winter King* by Bernard Cornwall.

Key Terms: King Arthur, Intertextuality,

Introduction:

Arthurian Literature refers to works based on Arthur and Arthurian legends almost in all languages, especially in English and French. King Arthur was a legendary British leader who according to mediaeval histories led the British army against the Saxons in the late 5th and 6th

centuries. The writings under Arthurian literature include poetry, prose, drama and novels. The works that come under this category usually had similar themes such as the legendary history of Britain, love, intrigue, chivalry, might and courage of Arthur as well as the other knights.

Barron in “Arthurian Romance” stated that “Of all the evocative names of romance, none is more charismatic than Arthur – king, conqueror, liege, lord, lover, knight, fountain of nobility, Hope of Britons, England’s Messiah, icon of evolving nationhood over many centuries” (4). From the mediaeval period until the present era there are many works written about Arthurian legends and he has become a source of inspiration to many writers across countries. This fascination and adoration for King Arthur led to the culmination of Arthurian Literature.

Arthurian works are approached from various perspectives that added new depth to their popularity. Mostly they were looked at from a historical point of view and many still discuss the existence of King Arthur. The other approach is the mythical study where the supernatural and mystery are put under scrutiny. These works have also been studied with reference to social and cultural aspects. There are still many experiments in the process that view Arthurian works from a new perspective. This paper aims to analyse intertextual elements in one such Arthurian novel, *The Winter King* by Bernard Cornwell. Intertextuality would develop a better understanding of the Arthurian novels and would allow the readers to make as many connections as possible with other texts.

Intertextuality is a term that described the connection between two texts or textual conventions in their composition. It was actually coined by Julia Kristeva that “refers to a literary theory or a reading method for analysing how individual texts are connected to other texts, a phenomenon which is as old as literature itself” (Tether &McFadyen 185). The term intertextuality was initially employed by poststructuralist theorists and critics in their attempt to disrupt notions of stable meaning and objective interpretation. While structuralist critics employed the same term to locate and even fix literary meaning and this acts as proof to depict its flexibility as a concept.

The Winter King is a magnificent tale of the Dark Ages and the reality of war and political strife in a land where Christianity and paganism were at battle. Cornwell showed the

political conflicts in Britain and defined Arthur's role in those conflicts. It portrayed Arthur the man rather than the legend, a military genius who with a small band of warriors bound to him by loyalty and love, struggled to keep alive a flicker of civilization in a barbarically brutal world. It examined closely the society of fifth century Britain and the spread of Christianity in a pagan country in a realistic sense. The novel vividly described the cruelty of war and struggle not only between Britain and Saxons but also within the kingdoms of Britain.

Intertextual Elements

The Winter King is one such novel that had an intertextual relationship with the Arthurian legends. In order to understand the novel, a wide range of knowledge about King Arthur and his tales is imperative. The novel actually made use of all the sources regarding Arthur and his adventure that acted as a base upon which it is constructed. As intertextuality is shaping of a text's meaning by another, *The Winter King* had a close association with Bulfinch's *Mythology*. The book is a prose recounting of myths and stories from Greek and Roman mythology and King Arthur legends and mediaeval romances. Cornwell had refashioned and reworked most parts of the legends according to his need.

Every Arthurian work is considered to be obligatory intertextuality because they gather sources from early historical and fictional works. Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia* and Thomas Malory's *Morte d'Arthur* were the base of almost all of the Arthurian works. Many writers have evoked an association deliberately between these two texts in their works but *The Winter King* has an accidental intertextual relationship with Bulfinch's *Mythology*. Cornwell did not strike any intentional association with Bulfinch's work and it is up to the reader to find a such relationship between both texts. Cornwell did not deliberately make intertextual references and it is completely upon the reader's own prior knowledge that these connections were made.

The Winter King, unlike other Arthurian novels, did not begin with descriptions of King Arthur and his adventure but rather about the birth of a child who would be the rival of Arthur in ascending the throne of Britain. Cornwell twisted the story in such a way that Mordred became the son and true heir of Uther Pendragon, the High King of Britain while Arthur the bastard who was denied of Kingship. "Mordred, the most beloved of his sons and the only one of those born

to his bride still living” (7) is killed by the Saxons and “left the kingdom without an heir, and a kingdom without an heir is a cursed kingdom” (7). The story actually began with an accusation against Arthur for the death of Mordred who was later banished to Armorica.

The relationship between the father and son was not given much importance in the legends but Cornwell gave more prominence to it. The legends of Arthur as discussed by Bulfinch are mostly about how Arthur became King and the series of adventures he encountered. But this novel took a deep journey into each and every Arthurian character and their relationship with Arthur. In *The Winter King* Arthur became the bastard while Modred became the true heir but in the legends Arthur is portrayed as the original son of Uther while Modred is portrayed as a different personality in different works. He is sometimes depicted as the legitimate son of King Lot or as Arthur’s bastard born to him out of incest with his sister. But in this novel there is a greater shift where Mordred became the rightful heir and is given more importance than Arthur. Though everyone in this novel loved Arthur, they respected Mordred more considering him to be the next High King.

According to Kristeva “any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations: any text is the absorption and transformation of another. The notion of intertextuality replaces that of intersubjectivity” (Kristeva 38). Likewise *The Winter King* is actually the absorption of Arthurian legends that was transformed accordingly to suit the present culture to which the readers belonged. Cornwell has altered the tale by giving his own strategies and ideas and used them as base but created his own structure though. Both Bulfinch’s *Mythology* and the novel dealt with Arthur and described his greatness and the uniqueness of him in detail. They have close affinity with each other and the readers can historically understand the tales by reading both simultaneously. The meanings evolved while reading seemed to enrich the reader's understanding about Arthurian tales.

Cornwell shifted the focus from the sword and its mystery to Arthur the man himself. But Bulfinch said that “a miraculous stone was discovered before the church door, and in the stone was firmly fixed a sword ... Bishop Brice ... proposed a law, that whoever should be able to draw out the sword from the stone, should be acknowledged as sovereign of the Britons”

(Bulfinch 300). It was Arthur who removed the sword from the stone, “thus decisively pointed out by Heaven as their king, Arthur was by general consent proclaimed as such, and an early day appointed for his solemn coronation” (Bulfinch 300). But Arthur in *The Winter King* was only a warlord and bastard who lacked identity. The sword in the stone is an inevitable part of Arthurian novels which Cornwell clearly dealt apart by not giving any importance to it.

The literary text, for Kristeva, is no longer viewed as a unique and autonomous entity but as the product of a number of pre-existent codes, previous discourses and texts. In this respect every word in a text is intertextual and therefore, it must be read not only in terms of a meaning presumed to locate in the text, but also in terms of cultural discourses existing outside the text. Thus Cornwell not only detailed Arthur but described the culture that was predominant in that age. The Bulfinch’s *Mythology* also discusses the culture and lifestyle of the people, especially the nobility and reading this would enable a better understanding of *The Winter King*. A close reading of Bulfinch’s *Mythology* evolved different meanings to the novel where the readers can clearly understand Arthur the man more distinctly.

For Kristeva, a text is “a production that cannot be reduced to representation” (Kristeva 86). She implies that “ideas are not presented as finished, consumable products, but are presented in such as to encourage readers themselves to step in the production of meaning” (Allen 34). In Intertextuality, the text is defined as a productive process and this process is subjected to the interpretation made by the reader having an aggregation of many values and shaped by culture. Thus the text’s meaning is therefore not stable but variable. In the same way, while reading *The Winter King* under the light of Bulfinch’s *Mythology*, the readers created their own meaning rather than the intended one by Cornwell. They understood Arthur and his age with historical relevance and the interpretation may vary according to the readers.

Not only Arthur, but also the legendary characters as portrayed in *The Winter King* had a close association with Bulfinch’s *Mythology*. Intertextuality helped the reader to understand the age, the people and the culture that was predominant during that period through such associational study. The readers would relate not only to one text but to many other texts that have similar aspects. As intertextuality would generate related understanding in separate works

and this reading of both texts would bring the best understanding of Arthurian history as a whole. This study also helped to understand Cornwell's ability to recreate the Arthurian legends and depicted them in a better way. He had his own style of recreating and innovating things though there is a more intertextual relationship to the text.

Intertextuality has been the driving force of Literature ever since it began. Though the term was introduced by Kristeva in the 1960s, the idea that a text is not original but a transformation or imitation of another was passed on right from the early periods. Intertextuality was evident in *The Bible* which is the earliest form of a written text. The New Testament in *The Bible* quoted the verses from the Old Testament. There seem to be more than two hundred verses from the Old Testament that were repeated or referred to in the New Testament. This interconnected body later extended to poems and paintings that refer to Biblical narratives and passed on to literature.

Chaucer's works became an inspiration for many writers who culminated in the idea he created their own texts. His *Troilus and Criseyde* influenced Robert Henryson's *The Testament of Cresseid* and Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida*. Not only Chaucer, but also Shakespeare the greatest of all writers borrowed many ideas from sources in many languages. His *As You Like It* was influenced by the University Wit Thomas Lodge's *Rosalynde: Euphues Golden Legacie* published in 1590. Many of his famous works like *Macbeth*, and *Hamlet* were not original creations but a transformation of other texts.

This tradition later moved on to art, music and movies as well. Even today many can associate a newly released movie with an old one and many songs which were freshly composed seem to be more familiar to the people. All these movies and songs are nothing but the transformation of already existing ones. The musicians, directors, and writers have captured the idea from their predecessors and transformed it based on their creativity. Thus intertextuality is considered to be an inevitable aspect in this world.

Conclusion

Though the historicity of Arthur and his adventures are still an unanswered question the praise and popularity of Arthur will never change. “Real or not Arthur has inspired a vast cultural tradition, which is manifested in poetry, fiction, drama, music... and has been adapted to the concerns of each succeeding age that reinterprets the tradition” (Lupack 5). King Arthur can never be replaced and people loved him, still love and will continue to love him in the future as well. As Barry Commoner said ‘Everything is connected with everything else’, intertextuality not only connected Arthurian texts with the existing Arthurian works but to the entire web of literature. Thus without intertextuality, there is no Arthurian literature.

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