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Reinterpreting Arthurian characters: A comparative characterization analysis of *Le Morte d'Arthur* (1485) and *The Kid Who Would Be King* (2019)

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ABSTRACT

*Literary adaptations frequently reinterpret characters to meet the expectations of new audiences while preserving key elements of the source text. This qualitative study examines the characterization of Arthurian characters in Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur* (1485) and Joe Cornish's *The Kid Who Would Be King* (2019), compares their portrayals, and explains their reinterpretation using Linda Hutcheon's adaptation theory. A qualitative comparative approach was employed to analyze three corresponding character pairs King Arthur/Alex, Merlin/Merlin, and Morgan le Fay/Morgana through Roberts' characterization framework, which considers characters' speech and thoughts, actions, others' perspectives, and authorial presentation. The findings reveal that the film largely preserves the characters' fundamental narrative functions while adapting their characterization to suit contemporary audiences. King Arthur and Alex are consistently portrayed as brave and responsible leaders, Merlin remains a wise mentor figure despite a more approachable personality, and Morgan le Fay and Morgana continue to function as central antagonists with different modes of villainy. These findings demonstrate that the adaptation maintains the core identities of Arthurian characters while reinterpreting their characterization within a modern cinematic context, contributing to broader discussions of literary adaptation and character transformation.*

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INTRODUCTION

Literary works continue to evolve through reinterpretation across different historical periods, cultures, and media. Among the various forms of literary transformation, adaptation has become an important area of literary studies because it demonstrates how narratives are reconstructed rather than merely reproduced when transferred from one medium to another (Fan, 2024). Among the various narrative elements, characterization is particularly significant because it shapes readers' and viewers' understanding of characters' identities, motivations, and relationships. Examining characterization therefore provides valuable insights into how literary identities are preserved, modified, or reinterpreted in the adaptation process (Alhamda & Nuristama, 2024; Farhat & Juanda, 2025).

One of the most influential literary works in the Arthurian tradition is Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur* (1485), which has served as a major source for numerous literary and cinematic adaptations. The work presents iconic characters such as King Arthur, Merlin, and Morgan le Fay, whose interactions explore enduring themes of leadership, loyalty, destiny, power, and conflict. Because of its cultural significance and narrative richness, *Le Morte d'Arthur* continues to inspire reinterpretations across different historical periods and media, making it an appropriate text for examining how characterization evolves through adaptation.

One contemporary adaptation of Arthurian legend is Joe Cornish's *The Kid Who Would Be King* (2019). Instead of retelling the medieval narrative directly, the film reimagines the Arthurian legend in a contemporary setting by replacing King Arthur with a modern adolescent protagonist, Alex, while retaining other central figures such as Merlin and Morgana. This reinterpretation provides an opportunity to investigate how the core identities and narrative functions of Arthurian characters are maintained while their characterization is reconstructed to suit contemporary audiences. Consequently, the film offers an appropriate case for examining the relationship between literary characterization and cinematic adaptation.

Recent studies have examined characterization and literary adaptation from different perspectives. Martins and Marques (2024) demonstrate that contemporary films continue to reconstruct Arthurian narratives while preserving fundamental values such as courage, honor, and leadership. Similarly, Purba et al. (2024) investigate characterization in film adaptation and reveal that characters may undergo substantial personality development in response to narrative conflict. Meanwhile, Nuswantoro et al. (2025), employing Linda Hutcheon's adaptation theory, argue that adaptation

should be understood as reinterpretation rather than direct reproduction of the source text. Collectively, these studies confirm that adaptation involves both continuity and transformation. However, they primarily emphasize narrative reconstruction or general characterization changes rather than explaining how the characterization of central Arthurian figures is selectively preserved and reinterpreted when transferred from a medieval literary text to a contemporary film.

Taken together, these studies establish that literary adaptation involves both continuity and transformation in narrative representation. They demonstrate that Arthurian narratives remain adaptable and that characterization may change during the adaptation process. However, they leave unanswered how these processes operate specifically at the level of characterization when medieval literary figures are reinterpreted for contemporary cinema. In particular, existing studies have paid limited attention to the mechanisms through which characterization is selectively preserved while simultaneously reconstructed across literary and cinematic media. Consequently, how adaptation negotiates continuity and transformation in the characterization of core Arthurian figures remains insufficiently understood. This unresolved issue represents a theoretical gap in understanding the relationship between characterization and adaptation across different media.

Therefore, this study aims to (1) analyze the characterization of King Arthur, Merlin, and Morgan le Fay in Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur* (1485) and the corresponding characters of Alex, Merlin, and Morgana in *The Kid Who Would Be King* (2019); (2) compare the characterization of these characters across the literary work and its film adaptation; and (3) explain how their characterization is maintained, modified, or reinterpreted through the adaptation process using Linda Hutcheon's adaptation theory. By focusing on characterization as the primary analytical lens, this study contributes to adaptation studies by demonstrating how contemporary cinematic adaptations preserve the core narrative functions of Arthurian characters while reconstructing their characterization to reflect modern cultural values and audience expectations.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative comparative design to examine the characterization of three corresponding character pairs in Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur* (1485) and Joe Cornish's *The Kid Who Would Be King* (2019). A qualitative approach was considered appropriate because the study sought to interpret

how characterization is preserved, modified, and reinterpreted across literary and cinematic media rather than to quantify textual features.

The primary data consisted of textual passages from *Le Morte d'Arthur* and dialogue, actions, and scenes featuring the selected characters in *The Kid Who Would Be King*. The character pairs analyzed were King Arthur/Alex, Merlin/Merlin, and Morgan le Fay/Morgana. These characters were selected through purposive sampling because they represent equivalent narrative functions across the source text and the adaptation, namely the hero, the mentor, and the antagonist. Secondary data, including scholarly books and journal articles on characterization and literary adaptation, were used to support the interpretation and contextualize the findings.

The analysis employed two complementary theoretical frameworks. Roberts' (1983) characterization theory was used to identify character traits through four dimensions: (1) what the character says and thinks, (2) what the character does, (3) what other characters say about the character, and (4) what the author says about the character. Linda Hutcheon's adaptation theory was subsequently used to interpret how these characterizations were preserved, modified, or reinterpreted during the adaptation process by considering adaptation as a product, a creative process, and a process of reception.

The data analysis was conducted in four stages. First, textual passages and film scenes involving the selected characters were identified and compiled. Second, each character was analyzed using Roberts' characterization framework to identify dominant traits and modes of characterization. Third, the characterization of each corresponding character pair was compared to identify similarities and differences between the literary work and its film adaptation. Finally, these similarities and differences were interpreted through Hutcheon's adaptation theory to explain how characterization was maintained, modified, or reinterpreted in the transition from literature to film.

RESULTS

This section presents the findings of the characterization analysis based on Roberts' (1983) characterization theory. The analysis focuses on three corresponding character pairs: King Arthur and Alex, Merlin and Merlin, and Morgan le Fay and Morgana. The findings are organized into three parts. First, the characterization of the principal characters in *Le Morte d'Arthur* is presented. Second, the characterization of their counterparts in *The Kid Who Would Be King* is examined. Finally, the characterization of each corresponding character pair is compared to identify similarities and differences between the literary work and its film adaptation.

Characterization of *Le Morte d'Arthur* (1485)

This section presents the characterization analysis of the three principal characters in *Le Morte d'Arthur* (1485), namely King Arthur, Merlin, and Morgan le Fay. Using Roberts' (1983) characterization framework, each character was examined through four analytical dimensions: (1) speech and thoughts, (2) actions, (3) other characters' perspectives, and (4) authorial description. Representative evidence from these dimensions was analyzed to identify the dominant character traits and narrative functions of each character within the novel. The findings presented in this section provide the analytical basis for the subsequent comparison with their corresponding characters in *The Kid Who Would Be King* (2019).

1Characterization of King Arthur

King Arthur is the central protagonist in *Le Morte d'Arthur* (1485) and plays a pivotal role in the development of the narrative. His characterization was analyzed using Roberts' (1983) characterization framework, which examines four dimensions: (1) the character's speech and thoughts, (2) actions, (3) other characters' perspectives, and (4) authorial description. The analysis identified ten instances of characterization across these four dimensions. Table 2 presents representative examples illustrating how King Arthur's character is constructed throughout the narrative.

Table 2: Characterization Analysis of King Arthur in *Le Morte d'Arthur* (1485)

Aspect	Representative Evidence
Speech	Arthur accepts responsibility for defending Britain against rival kings. (Book I, Chs. VIII–IX)
Actions	Arthur draws the sword from the stone. (Book I, Chs. V–VI)
Other Characters' Perspectives	Other kings praise Arthur's "deeds and hardiness." (Book I, Ch. IX)
Authorial Description	Arthur is introduced as the son of Uther Pendragon and rightful heir. (Book I, Chs. II–VI)

The evidence presented in Table 2 demonstrates a consistent pattern of characterization across the four analytical dimensions. Arthur's speech reflects his willingness to accept responsibility and confront opposition, indicating confidence and commitment to his role as king. His actions, particularly drawing the sword from the stone and defending his kingdom, establish his legitimacy and courage through decisive leadership rather than mere claims of authority. These characteristics are reinforced through other characters' perspectives, which repeatedly recognize Arthur

as the rightful ruler chosen to unite Britain. Likewise, authorial descriptions consistently portray Arthur as the legitimate heir to Uther Pendragon and emphasize his central role in restoring political order. Considered together, these forms of characterization consistently construct Arthur as a leader whose authority is validated both by personal qualities and by narrative recognition.

Overall, the findings indicate that King Arthur's characterization is dominated by the interconnected qualities of legitimacy, courage, and responsibility. These qualities are not conveyed through a single characterization technique but are systematically reinforced through dialogue, actions, external evaluations, and authorial narration. The convergence of these four dimensions produces a coherent representation of Arthur as the archetypal medieval ruler and establishes a clear analytical baseline for comparing how this characterization is preserved or transformed in the film adaptation through the character of Alex.

Characterization of Merlin

Merlin is one of the most influential supporting characters in *Le Morte d'Arthur* (1485), serving as Arthur's advisor, prophet, and magician throughout the narrative. His characterization was analyzed using Roberts' (1983) characterization framework, which examines four dimensions: (1) the character's speech and thoughts, (2) actions, (3) other characters' perspectives, and (4) authorial description. The analysis identified ten instances of characterization across these dimensions. Table 3 presents representative examples illustrating how Merlin's characterization is developed throughout the narrative, while the complete coding is provided in Appendix 1.

Table 3: *Characterization Analysis of Merlin in Le Morte d'Arthur (1485)*

Aspect	Representative Evidence
Speech	Merlin prophesies that Arthur will become king and overcome his enemies, revealing his foresight and confidence in Arthur's destiny. (Book I, Ch. VIII, p. 41)
Actions	Merlin uses his magical knowledge and strategic planning to assist Arthur, including distracting King Lot to secure Arthur's military advantage. (Book I, Ch. X, p. 78)
Other Characters' Perspectives	Other characters recognize Merlin as a man possessing extraordinary supernatural abilities, although some regard him with suspicion because of his magical powers. (Book I, Ch. VIII, p. 41)
Authorial Description	The narrator consistently portrays Merlin as Arthur's advisor who guides the king through political and military challenges. (Book I, Chs. II–X)

The representative evidence summarized in Table 3 indicates that Merlin's characterization is constructed through complementary forms of narrative representation. His speech is dominated by prophecies, guidance, and strategic counsel, portraying him as a figure whose authority stems from wisdom and foresight rather than political power. This portrayal is reinforced through his actions, which consistently demonstrate initiative, loyalty, and the effective use of magical knowledge to protect Arthur and strengthen the kingdom. The perspectives of other characters further affirm Merlin's exceptional status by acknowledging his supernatural abilities, although these abilities also make him an enigmatic figure within the narrative. Likewise, the authorial descriptions consistently position Merlin as Arthur's trusted advisor whose presence shapes many of the kingdom's major political and military developments. Viewed collectively, these four dimensions present a coherent characterization of Merlin as a knowledgeable and dependable mentor whose influence extends beyond magical intervention to the guidance and formation of Arthur's leadership.

The findings suggest that Merlin's characterization is primarily defined by wisdom, strategic thinking, and unwavering loyalty. These qualities are developed consistently through multiple modes of characterization, creating a multifaceted portrayal of Merlin as both a supernatural figure and a trusted counsellor. This characterization establishes an important basis for the subsequent comparison with Merlin's representation in *The Kid Who Would Be King* (2019), allowing the study to examine how the mentor figure is preserved while being adapted to a contemporary cinematic context.

Characterization of Morgan le Fay

Morgan le Fay is one of the principal antagonists in *Le Morte d'Arthur* (1485), serving as a recurring source of conflict throughout Arthur's reign. Her characterization was analyzed using Roberts' (1983) characterization framework, which examines four dimensions: (1) the character's speech and thoughts, (2) actions, (3) other characters' perspectives, and (4) authorial description. The analysis identified ten instances of characterization distributed across these dimensions. Table 4 presents representative examples illustrating how Morgan le Fay's character is constructed throughout the narrative, while the complete coding is provided in Appendix 1.

Table 4: Characterization Analysis of Morgan le Fay in *Le Morte d'Arthur* (1485)

Aspect	Representative Evidence
Speech	Morgan instructs her servant to retrieve Arthur's sword, revealing her intention to kill the king when the opportunity arises. (Book I, Ch. XIII, p. 120)
Actions	Morgan secretly steals Arthur's scabbard while he is asleep to weaken his protection. (Book I, Ch. XIV, p. 121)
Other Characters' Perspectives	Sir Uwayne condemns Morgan as a dangerous and malicious figure after discovering her betrayal. (Book I, Ch. XIII, p. 120)
Authorial Description	The narrator consistently depicts Morgan as plotting against Arthur, his allies, and even members of her own family. (Book I, Chs. XIII–XIV; XLI–XLIII)

The representative evidence presented in Table 4 shows that Morgan le Fay's characterization is consistently developed through multiple forms of narrative representation. Her speech openly expresses hostility toward Arthur, revealing intentions that are driven by revenge and personal ambition. This antagonistic disposition is reinforced through her actions, which demonstrate deception, strategic planning, and the deliberate misuse of magical abilities to undermine Arthur's authority. The perspectives of other characters further strengthen this portrayal by presenting Morgan as a feared and untrustworthy figure whose actions threaten the stability of Camelot. Likewise, the authorial descriptions repeatedly position her as a central source of conflict, emphasizing her persistent opposition to Arthur and her willingness to manipulate others in pursuit of power. Considered together, these four dimensions construct Morgan le Fay as a complex antagonist whose influence extends beyond individual acts of hostility to the broader destabilization of Arthur's kingdom.

The result indicates that Morgan le Fay's characterization is primarily defined by manipulation, deception, and antagonism. These qualities are consistently reinforced through dialogue, behavior, external evaluations, and narrative description, producing a coherent representation of Morgan as Arthur's principal adversary. This characterization establishes an important basis for the subsequent comparison with Morgana in *The Kid Who Would Be King* (2019), enabling the study to examine how the role of the antagonist is preserved while being reinterpreted within a contemporary cinematic adaptation.

Characterization of The Kid Who Would Be King (2019)

This section presents the characterization of the three principal characters in *The Kid Who Would Be King* (2019) based on Roberts' (1983) characterization framework. Similar to the analysis of *Le Morte d'Arthur* (1485), the characterization of Alex, Merlin, and Morgana was examined through four analytical dimensions: (1) the

character's speech and thoughts, (2) actions, (3) other characters' perspectives, and (4) narrative presentation. Representative evidence from each dimension was identified to examine how the film constructs the personalities, roles, and narrative functions of the selected characters. These findings provide the empirical basis for the subsequent comparison between the literary work and its cinematic adaptation.

Characterization of Alex

Alex serves as the central protagonist in *The Kid Who Would Be King* (2019) and functions as the modern counterpart of King Arthur in the film adaptation. His characterization was analyzed using Roberts' (1983) characterization framework, which examines four dimensions: (1) the character's speech and thoughts, (2) actions, (3) other characters' perspectives, and (4) narrative presentation. The analysis identified ten instances of characterization distributed across these four dimensions. Table 5 presents representative examples illustrating how Alex's character is constructed throughout the film, while the complete coding is provided in Appendix 2.

Aspect	Representative Evidence
Speech	Alex defends his friend against bullies, declaring, "Because there's two of you, he's half your size, and he's my friend." (00:05:45–00:05:47)
Actions	Alex draws Excalibur from the stone, confirming his role as Arthur's successor. (00:12:39–00:13:20)
Other Characters' Perspectives	Merlin identifies Alex as the chosen individual destined to wield Excalibur and lead the fight against Morgana. (00:20:53–00:20:56)
Narrative Presentation	The film presents Alex as an ordinary schoolboy whose journey gradually transforms him into a courageous leader. (00:13:32–00:16:16)

The representative evidence presented in Table 5 illustrates that Alex's characterization develops progressively throughout the film rather than being established from the outset. His speech demonstrates empathy and moral courage by defending others despite his own vulnerability, suggesting that leadership is grounded in ethical choices rather than authority. This characterization is reinforced through his actions, particularly his ability to draw Excalibur from the stone and his willingness to confront increasingly dangerous challenges. The perspectives of other characters, especially Merlin, further validate Alex's role by recognizing him as the chosen successor who must unite others against Morgana. In addition, the film's narrative presentation portrays Alex's journey as one of personal growth, emphasizing his transformation from an ordinary adolescent into a confident leader capable of accepting responsibility. Viewed together, these four dimensions construct Alex as a

hero whose leadership is achieved through character development and experience rather than inherited status.

The analysis reveals that Alex's characterization centers on courage, responsibility, and the gradual development of leadership through personal growth. Unlike traditional heroic figures whose authority is established before the narrative begins, Alex gradually develops the qualities expected of a leader through his decisions, relationships, and experiences. This characterization reflects the film's emphasis on leadership as an acquired rather than inherited quality and provides an important basis for examining how King Arthur's characterization is preserved while being reinterpreted within a contemporary coming-of-age narrative in the subsequent comparative analysis.

Characterization of Merlin

Unlike Alex, whose leadership develops progressively throughout the film, Merlin assumes the role of an experienced mentor responsible for guiding the young protagonist in fulfilling his destiny. To examine how this role is constructed in *The Kid Who Would Be King* (2019), Merlin's characterization was analyzed using Roberts' (1983) characterization framework, encompassing four dimensions: (1) speech and thoughts, (2) actions, (3) other characters' perspectives, and (4) narrative presentation. The analysis identified ten instances of characterization across these dimensions. Table 6 presents representative evidence illustrating how Merlin's personality and narrative function are established throughout the film, while the complete coding is provided in Appendix 2.

Table 6: Characterization Analysis of Merlin in *The Kid Who Would Be King* (2019)

Aspect	Representative Evidence
Speech	Merlin explains the legend of Excalibur and encourages Alex to embrace his responsibility as the future leader despite his doubts. (00:20:53–00:22:35)
Actions	Merlin repeatedly uses his magical abilities to protect Alex and his companions, including transforming between his youthful and elderly forms to guide them throughout their journey. (00:17:35–00:18:40; 00:58:30–01:00:10)
Other Characters' Perspectives	Alex and his friends gradually place their trust in Merlin's guidance and follow his instructions during their preparation for the battle against Morgana. (Throughout the film)
Narrative Presentation	The film presents Merlin as an eccentric yet knowledgeable wizard whose humour is balanced by moments that emphasize his experience, magical power, and commitment to protecting Britain. (Throughout the film)

Rather than relying on a single mode of characterization, the film develops Merlin through the interaction of dialogue, behaviour, external evaluation, and cinematic presentation. His speech reflects wisdom and encouragement as he explains the legend of Excalibur and motivates Alex to accept the responsibilities associated with leadership. This portrayal is reinforced through his actions, which consistently display magical competence and a strong commitment to protecting Alex and his companions throughout their journey. The perspectives of other characters further strengthen Merlin's characterization by showing the growing trust that Alex and his friends place in his guidance, acknowledging him as the mentor who prepares them to confront Morgana. Likewise, the film's narrative presentation depicts Merlin as an eccentric yet knowledgeable wizard whose humorous personality is balanced by moments that highlight his experience, supernatural abilities, and unwavering dedication to safeguarding Britain. Considered collectively, these four dimensions construct Merlin as a wise and dependable mentor whose magical expertise is complemented by his ability to inspire, guide, and protect the next generation of heroes.

Viewed as a whole, Merlin emerges as a character distinguished by wisdom, loyalty, and adaptability. Although his magical abilities remain central to his identity, the film also emphasizes his interpersonal skills and his capacity to inspire confidence in others. Consequently, Merlin's characterization extends beyond that of a conventional wizard, presenting him as a mentor whose guidance is essential to the protagonists' development and the success of their mission. This portrayal provides a foundation for the subsequent comparison with Merlin's representation in *Le Morte d'Arthur* (1485), particularly in relation to the continuity and transformation of the mentor archetype within the adaptation.

Characterization of Morgana

As the principal antagonist in *The Kid Who Would Be King* (2019), Morgana serves as the primary force driving the central conflict of the narrative. Her characterization was examined using Roberts' (1983) framework, which analyzes characterization through four dimensions: (1) speech and thoughts, (2) actions, (3) other characters' perspectives, and (4) narrative presentation. Across the analysis, ten instances of characterization were identified and coded. Representative examples are presented in Table 7, while the complete dataset is provided in Appendix 2.

Table 7: Characterization Analysis of Morgana in *The Kid Who Would Be King* (2019)

Aspect	Representative Evidence
Speech	Morgana declares her intention to reclaim power and destroy those who stand in her way, asserting her dominance over Britain. (01:14:20–01:15:05)
Actions	Morgana summons the skeletal army and launches an assault on Britain using her supernatural powers. (01:16:45–01:20:30)
Other Characters' Perspectives	Merlin and the young knights consistently describe Morgana as an ancient and dangerous enemy whose return threatens the survival of Britain. (Throughout the film)
Narrative Presentation	The film introduces Morgana through dark visual imagery, supernatural effects, and destructive scenes that emphasize her immense magical power and villainous presence. (Throughout the film)

Unlike the protagonists, whose personalities are gradually developed through growth and interaction, Morgana's characterization is established primarily through her role as an immediate source of danger. Her speech communicates an uncompromising desire for domination, revealing motivations rooted in revenge and the pursuit of absolute power. This antagonistic disposition is reinforced through her actions, as her repeated use of destructive magic demonstrates both extraordinary supernatural ability and a willingness to endanger Britain to achieve her objectives. The perspectives of other characters further reinforce this image by consistently portraying Morgana as a feared adversary whose return signals an existential threat to the kingdom. Complementing these dimensions, the film's narrative presentation employs dark visual aesthetics, dramatic lighting, and large-scale magical destruction to strengthen her presence as the embodiment of evil within the story. Collectively, these forms of characterization establish Morgana as a formidable antagonist whose power, intimidation, and relentless ambition shape the central conflict of the film.

Taken together, the analysis portrays Morgana as a character principally defined by power, vengeance, and destructive ambition. Although her supernatural abilities distinguish her from the human protagonists, the film also emphasizes her symbolic role as the greatest obstacle to Alex's emergence as a leader. Consequently, Morgana's characterization functions not only to generate narrative tension but also to challenge the protagonists' courage, unity, and leadership throughout the film. This characterization provides the final analytical foundation for the comparative discussion in the following section, where Morgana's representation is examined alongside Morgan le Fay's portrayal in *Le Morte d'Arthur* (1485).

Comparative characterization

Having examined the characterization of the principal characters in *Le Morte d'Arthur* (1485) and *The Kid Who Would Be King* (2019) separately, this section compares the corresponding character pairs to identify how their characterization is preserved and transformed in the film adaptation. The comparison focuses on King Arthur and Alex, Merlin and Merlin, and Morgan le Fay and Morgana. Roberts' (1983) characterization framework serves as the basis for identifying similarities and differences across the four dimensions of characterization, while the findings provide the empirical foundation for interpreting the adaptation through [Hutcheon's \(2013\)](#) theory in the subsequent Discussion section. Rather than evaluating the adaptation itself, this section highlights the patterns of continuity and change evident in the characterization of each corresponding character across the two works.

Comparative characterization of King Arthur and Alex

King Arthur in *Le Morte d'Arthur* (1485) and Alex in *The Kid Who Would Be King* (2019) occupy parallel narrative roles as protagonists entrusted with Excalibur and the responsibility of protecting Britain. The comparison draws upon the findings presented in Sections 3.1.1 and 3.2.1 to examine how their characterization is constructed across Roberts' (1983) four dimensions of characterization.

Although both protagonists are portrayed as legitimate leaders, the analysis demonstrates notable differences in the way their leadership is constructed. In terms of speech, King Arthur's dialogue reflects confidence, authority, and a strong sense of royal responsibility, consistent with his established position as king. In contrast, Alex's speech is characterised by empathy and moral conviction, particularly in his interactions with friends and classmates, illustrating leadership that emerges through compassion and ethical decision-making rather than formal authority. Despite these differences, both characters consistently express a commitment to protecting others and fulfilling responsibilities greater than themselves.

A similar pattern can be observed through their actions. King Arthur's heroic qualities are demonstrated through military achievements, successful leadership in battle, and decisive actions that reinforce his legitimacy as Britain's ruler. Alex, however, demonstrates leadership through everyday acts of courage before accepting his larger role, such as defending vulnerable classmates and gradually learning to lead his peers. His ability to draw Excalibur marks an important narrative turning point, but his qualification as a leader is further developed through subsequent experiences rather

than being immediately established. Consequently, both protagonists are portrayed as courageous leaders, although their heroism is expressed within different narrative contexts.

The perspectives of other characters further illustrate both continuity and change between the two portrayals. In *Le Morte d'Arthur*, Arthur is recognised by kings, knights, and Merlin as the rightful ruler whose authority derives from prophecy and royal lineage. By contrast, Alex initially receives uncertainty and skepticism from those around him before gradually earning their confidence through his decisions and leadership during the mission. This difference suggests that while external recognition remains an important component of leadership in both works, the process through which that recognition is achieved differs considerably.

The comparison also reveals variation in narrative presentation. The novel introduces Arthur through genealogical background and prophetic fulfilment, emphasising his predetermined role within Britain's political order. Conversely, the film presents Alex as an ordinary adolescent whose transformation into a leader unfolds progressively throughout the narrative. His development is portrayed as a learning process shaped by challenges, teamwork, and personal growth. Despite these contrasting narrative approaches, both protagonists ultimately embody the qualities required to unite others and defend Britain against a common threat.

The comparison indicates that King Arthur and Alex share several core characteristics, including courage, responsibility, and commitment to protecting others, while differing substantially in the way these qualities are established and developed within their respective narratives. Arthur's characterization emphasizes inherited legitimacy and established authority, whereas Alex's characterization highlights personal development and earned leadership. These comparative patterns provide the empirical basis for the subsequent discussion of how the protagonist has been preserved and reinterpreted in the film adaptation through Hutcheon's (2013) adaptation framework.

Comparative Characterization of Merlin

Among the three character pairs examined in this study, Merlin demonstrates the greatest continuity between *Le Morte d'Arthur* (1485) and *The Kid Who Would Be King* (2019). Drawing upon the findings presented in Sections 3.1.2 and 3.2.2, this comparison examines how Merlin's characterization is maintained and modified across the literary and cinematic narratives using Roberts' (1983) four dimensions of

characterization. Table 9 summarizes the principal points of comparison identified from the analysis.

Across both works, Merlin's speech consistently reflects wisdom and guidance, positioning him as the principal source of knowledge for the protagonist. In *Le Morte d'Arthur*, his dialogue is predominantly prophetic, strategic, and authoritative, often revealing future events or advising Arthur on matters of kingship and warfare. By contrast, Merlin's speech in *The Kid Who Would Be King* retains its instructional purpose but adopts a more conversational and humorous tone. His explanations of Arthurian history and encouragement of Alex make ancient knowledge more accessible to a younger audience while preserving his role as the protagonist's mentor.

Merlin's **actions** further demonstrate a strong degree of continuity between the two works. In both narratives, he actively supports the hero by using his extraordinary abilities to overcome obstacles and safeguard Britain. In the novel, his actions focus primarily on political counsel, prophecy, and strategic intervention that strengthen Arthur's rule. The film expands this role by emphasizing Merlin's magical powers and direct involvement in protecting Alex and his companions during their journey. Although the form of assistance differs according to the narrative medium, Merlin consistently functions as the character who enables the protagonist to fulfil his leadership responsibilities.

The perspectives of other characters likewise reinforce Merlin's exceptional position within both narratives. In *Le Morte d'Arthur*, Arthur, the knights, and other rulers acknowledge Merlin as a trusted advisor whose wisdom and supernatural knowledge are indispensable to the kingdom. Similarly, in the film, Alex and his friends gradually develop confidence in Merlin's guidance, relying on his experience to prepare for the confrontation with Morgana. While the relationships become more informal in the contemporary adaptation, Merlin continues to command respect through his knowledge, experience, and commitment to protecting others.

Differences become more apparent in the narrative presentation of the character. The novel introduces Merlin as a mysterious prophet whose authority is closely associated with political affairs and the establishment of Arthur's reign. Conversely, the film portrays him as an eccentric and charismatic mentor whose humour and youthful appearance create a more approachable personality. At the same time, scenes showcasing his magical transformations and supernatural abilities preserve the sense of mystery that defines his literary counterpart. These cinematic choices broaden Merlin's appeal without fundamentally altering his narrative function.

Overall, the comparison demonstrates that Merlin's characterization remains remarkably consistent across both works. In each narrative, he is portrayed as a wise,

loyal, and dependable mentor whose knowledge and guidance are essential to the protagonist's success. The principal differences lie not in his core characteristics but in how those characteristics are expressed, with the film adapting his personality and presentation to suit the expectations of a contemporary audience while maintaining his enduring role within the Arthurian tradition. This comparative pattern provides an important foundation for interpreting the adaptation strategies discussed in the following section through [Hutcheon's \(2013\)](#) adaptation theory.

3. Comparative Characterization of Morgan le Fay and Morgana

Morgan le Fay in *Le Morte d'Arthur* (1485) and Morgana in *The Kid Who Would Be King* (2019) occupy equivalent narrative positions as principal antagonists whose actions threaten Britain's stability and challenge the protagonists' leadership. Building on the findings presented in Sections 3.1.3 and 3.2.3, this subsection compares their characterization across Roberts' (1983) four dimensions to identify the principal continuities and modifications evident in the film adaptation. Table 10 summarizes the comparative findings.

Although both characters function as central antagonists, the analysis reveals that their characterization is expressed through different forms of conflict. Their speech consistently communicates hostility toward the protagonists and a determination to obtain power. In *Le Morte d'Arthur*, Morgan le Fay's dialogue is often deceptive and calculated, reflecting her preference for manipulation and political intrigue. By comparison, Morgana's speech in the film is more direct and confrontational, openly declaring her intention to dominate Britain and eliminate those who oppose her. While both characters articulate similar ambitions, the adaptation shifts the emphasis from subtle manipulation to explicit intimidation.

A comparable pattern emerges through their actions. Morgan le Fay frequently relies on secretive strategies, betrayal, and magical schemes designed to weaken Arthur and destabilize his kingdom. Her actions are characterised by careful planning and indirect confrontation. Conversely, Morgana exercises her supernatural powers through large-scale attacks and overt displays of magical force, including commanding an army of the dead to wage war against Britain. Despite these differences in execution, both characters use magic as the principal means of challenging the established order and obstructing the protagonists' mission.

The perspectives of other characters also reinforce their shared role as formidable adversaries. In the literary work, Morgan le Fay is regarded with suspicion and fear because of her repeated acts of betrayal and her misuse of magical knowledge.

Similarly, Merlin, Alex, and the young knights consistently describe Morgana as an ancient and powerful enemy whose return places Britain in grave danger. In both narratives, external evaluations strengthen the perception that the antagonist represents a threat extending beyond individual characters to the kingdom as a whole.

Greater variation is evident in the narrative presentation of the two antagonists. The novel constructs Morgan le Fay primarily through recurring episodes of conspiracy, emphasizing her political influence and manipulative nature within Arthur's court. The film, in contrast, employs visual effects, dark imagery, and scenes of large-scale destruction to underscore Morgana's supernatural power and imposing presence. As a result, the literary antagonist derives much of her influence from strategic deception, whereas the cinematic version projects authority through spectacle and overwhelming magical strength.

Viewed collectively, the comparison indicates that Morgan le Fay and Morgana retain the same fundamental narrative function as the principal antagonists of the Arthurian story. Both are characterised by ambition, hostility, and the pursuit of power, yet the manner in which these qualities are conveyed differs substantially between the two works. Morgan le Fay's characterization emphasizes manipulation and political strategy, while Morgana's characterization foregrounds direct confrontation and supernatural dominance. These comparative findings complete the empirical analysis of the three corresponding character pairs and provide the basis for interpreting how their characterization has been preserved and transformed in the adaptation through [Hutcheon's \(2013\)](#) theoretical framework in the Discussion section.

DISCUSSION

The findings reveal that *The Kid Who Would Be King* (2019) preserves the principal narrative functions of King Arthur, Merlin, and Morgan le Fay while substantially reconfiguring how their characterizations are constructed. Although the three corresponding characters continue to fulfil the roles of hero, mentor, and antagonist, their personalities, leadership styles, and modes of representation are reshaped to suit the narrative conventions of contemporary cinema. These findings support Hutcheon's (2013) view that adaptation is both an act of preservation and transformation, in which source texts are reinterpreted rather than replicated. Similar arguments have been advanced by [Sanders \(2006\)](#) and [Leitch \(2007\)](#), who contend that successful adaptations maintain the narrative identity of literary characters while modifying their representation to accommodate changes in medium, historical context, and audience expectations. Accordingly, the adaptation demonstrates continuity

with *Le Morte d'Arthur* (1485) while reconstructing characterization to fit a contemporary coming-of-age fantasy.

Despite noticeable modifications in characterization, the adaptation consistently preserves the narrative functions of the principal characters. King Arthur is reimagined as Alex, yet both fulfil the role of Britain's destined protector. Likewise, Merlin continues to function as the protagonist's mentor, while Morgan le Fay and Morgana remain the primary antagonists responsible for initiating the central conflict. This continuity suggests that the adaptation prioritizes preserving narrative structure over replicating character details. [Hutcheon \(2013\)](#) argues that adaptations maintain recognizable identities because audiences expect continuity between the source text and its reinterpretation. Similarly, [Sanders, et al \(2006\)](#) notes that adaptations often retain core narrative functions while reshaping characterization to accommodate new cultural and narrative contexts. The present findings therefore indicate that the adaptation preserves the essential Arthurian archetypes while modernizing their characterization for a contemporary audience.

While narrative roles remain stable, the characterization of the principal figures undergoes substantial transformation. This pattern is consistent with previous adaptation research showing that film adaptations commonly preserve the narrative functions of literary characters while modifying their characterization to suit contemporary audiences and the affordances of the cinematic medium. For instance, that characterization in adaptation is rarely transferred unchanged; instead, it is reconstructed through visual storytelling, performance, and narrative condensation. Likewise, [Hutcheon \(2013\)](#) emphasizes that adaptation should be understood as creative reinterpretation rather than literal reproduction, allowing familiar characters to acquire new meanings in different historical and cultural contexts. Arthur's inherited kingship is reconstructed as Alex's personal journey toward leadership, reflecting a shift from hereditary authority to earned responsibility. This finding is consistent with [Woller \(2021\)](#), who argues that Arthurian adaptations frequently reinterpret established characters rather than reproduce them literally, allowing familiar figures to acquire new meanings while remaining recognizable within different narrative forms.

On the other hand, Merlin retains his wisdom and advisory role but is portrayed with greater humour and emotional accessibility. Likewise, Morgan le Fay's political manipulation is transformed into Morgana's visually spectacular supernatural aggression. These modifications illustrate [Hutcheon's \(2013\)](#) argument that adaptation involves reinterpretation rather than duplication, allowing familiar characters to acquire new meanings without losing their narrative identity. Such transformations also correspond with Stam's (2005) observation that cinematic adaptations frequently modify literary characterization to exploit the expressive potential of visual storytelling while maintaining thematic continuity.

The observed modifications also reflect differences between literary and cinematic storytelling. Similar observations have been reported in film adaptation studies, which suggest that cinema increasingly relies on visual performance, cinematography, and non-verbal characterization to communicate traits that are conveyed through narration in literary texts ([Cartmell & Whelehan, 2010](#)). Additionally, this observation is consistent with recent studies arguing that the transition from text-based narratives to audiovisual media inevitably changes the way characterization is communicated. Rather than relying primarily on narration, films construct character through visual performance, cinematography, editing, and sound, resulting in new forms of audience engagement ([Sholihah, 2024](#)). This tendency is evident in the present study, where Morgana's menace is communicated primarily through visual spectacle and magical effects, whereas Morgan le Fay's antagonism is developed through narrative description and political manipulation in the source text. In the novel, characterization is primarily constructed through narration, dialogue, and descriptive passages, allowing gradual exploration of motives and personality. By contrast, the film relies heavily on visual performance, cinematography, sound, and special effects to communicate character traits within a limited running time. Consequently, Alex's growth is conveyed through action and interpersonal interaction, Merlin's wisdom is balanced with humour and expressive performance, and Morgana's villainy is reinforced through visual spectacle and magical effects. [Hutcheon \(2013\)](#) argues that such transformations are inherent to adaptation because each medium possesses distinct representational resources. Similar conclusions have been reported by [Cartmell and Whelehan \(2010\)](#), who emphasize that cinematic adaptations reconstruct characterization according to the affordances and limitations of film rather than attempting literal fidelity.

Unlike previous studies that primarily examine additions, omissions, or plot changes in literary adaptations, the present study demonstrates how characterization itself can be simultaneously preserved and transformed while maintaining the characters' narrative functions. Beyond demonstrating how Arthurian characters are reinterpreted in a contemporary fantasy film, the present study contributes to adaptation studies by showing that characterization can be simultaneously preserved and transformed without disrupting the characters' narrative functions. These findings reinforce [Hutcheon's \(2013\)](#) proposition that fidelity should not be regarded as the primary criterion for evaluating adaptations. Instead, successful adaptations negotiate continuity and innovation to maintain the cultural significance of literary characters across media. Future studies may extend this analysis by examining characterization in other Arthurian adaptations or by incorporating multimodal approaches to explore how cinematography, costume, and performance collectively shape audience perceptions of adapted characters.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the characterization of King Arthur, Merlin, and Morgan le Fay in *Le Morte d'Arthur* (1485) and their corresponding characters Alex, Merlin, and Morgana in *The Kid Who Would Be King* (2019) using Roberts' characterization theory and Hutcheon's adaptation theory. The findings demonstrate that the film adaptation preserves the principal narrative functions of the three characters while substantially reinterpreting how their characterizations are constructed. Across both works, King Arthur/Alex continues to represent the heroic leader, Merlin retains his role as the wise mentor, and Morgan le Fay/Morgana remains the principal antagonist. However, their characterization is reshaped to reflect the narrative conventions of contemporary cinema, resulting in a transition from hereditary leadership to personal growth, from a solemn prophetic mentor to a more approachable guide, and from a politically manipulative antagonist to a visually dominant supernatural villain.

These findings support [Hutcheon's \(2013\)](#) conception of adaptation as both preservation and transformation, demonstrating that successful adaptations do not require literal fidelity to the source text. Instead, *The Kid Who Would Be King* (2019) maintains the symbolic identity and narrative significance of the Arthurian characters while reconstructing their characterization to suit a contemporary coming-of-age fantasy and the affordances of the cinematic medium. The study therefore contributes to adaptation studies by illustrating how characterization can evolve across media

without altering the characters' essential narrative functions, highlighting adaptation as a process of creative reinterpretation rather than simple reproduction.

This study is limited to the analysis of three corresponding character pairs using Roberts' characterization framework and Hutcheon's adaptation theory. Future research may broaden the scope by examining additional Arthurian characters, such as Sir Lancelot or Queen Guinevere, investigating other intrinsic literary elements including plot, setting, or theme, or exploring characterization in different literary adaptations. Comparative studies employing multimodal or audience-oriented approaches may also provide deeper insights into how characterization is reconstructed through cinematic techniques and interpreted by contemporary audiences.

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