

*Quest for Camelot*. Frederik Du Chau, dir. Based on *The King's Damosel* by Vera Chapman. Screenplay by Kirk De Micco and William Schifrin, and Jacqueline Feather & David Seidler. Songs by David Foster and Carole Bayer Sager. Warner Bros. Feature Animation. 1998. 85 minutes.

*Quest for Camelot* disappoints at every turn. It purports to be based on Vera Chapman's *The King's Damosel*. Yet anyone familiar with Chapman's adult romance of rape, torture, revenge, forgiveness, personal redemption through love, and spiritual regeneration through a Grail quest, will have to wonder why Warner Bros. ever bought the rights to the story in the first place if it wanted to make a children's film. Only a literary critic could find any joy in teasing out the obscure, tangential references to the original text.

A few surface similarities to the novel remain. There's a strong heroine—essentially Malory's Damsel Maldisant, whose tale Chapman rewrites and enlarges in her novel. There's a blind man—an important character for the development of Chapman's heroine, but far less important in the novel than the film. There's a villain—several from Malory and Tennyson via Chapman, all compressed into the film's Ruber. There's a falcon—Chapman's belongs to the heroine, the film's to first Merlin and then Garrett. And finally there's a quest for the Grail that will heal the heroine's psychic scars and potentially restore the blind man's sight, here reduced to an adventurous search for the stolen Excalibur. For the record, there's no toy-spinoff, two-headed, talking dragon anywhere in the book.

That the film but dimly reflects the novel comes as no shock. Yet what does surprise is how little the film deals with any familiar Arthurian themes. Arthur himself is a minor, impotent character, introduced to the audience in a long shot that immediately deemphasizes his importance. Indeed, he remains spatially and narratively distant throughout the film, never receiving the close-up treatments reserved for the principal (and non-Arthurian) characters, Kayley and Garrett. An almost powerless Merlin at the king's side is superfluous, telling Arthur at one point that magic cannot help them, but that instead they will have to rely on the citizenry to solve the national crisis that arises with the theft of Excalibur. Evidently Arthur and Merlin cannot rely on the Round Table knights, a virtually indistinguishable bunch of noble-looking men who spend most of their time within Camelot's walls instead of out seeking the sword. Likewise, although the castle's occupants pledge to uphold the monarchy by pursuing a random mix of democratic ideals—liberty, justice, trust, freedom, peace, honor, goodness, strength, and valor—we rarely see them actually *acting* on these pledges. The king himself, an apparent proto-Marxist, seems to have yet another political agenda as he explains to rogue knight Ruber that 'land will be divided according to each person's needs.' And despite the film's title, the quest is for *Excalibur*, not *Camelot*. In fact everyone *knows* where Camelot lies—there are literally roadsigns in Arthur's well-organized kingdom. In sum, the film's Arthurian dimension is simply incoherent if given more than five minutes' thought.

In the film's defense, it may be argued that *Quest for Camelot* isn't supposed to be Arthurian. But if it is Warner Bros.'s attempt to create a strong heroine movie to rival Disney's *The Little Mermaid*, *Beauty and the Beast*, *Pocahontas*, and the recently released

*Mulan*, it still fails to satisfy for all the same reasons Disney's films are often criticized. Kayley is without doubt the same plucky mainstream heroine we've seen many times before: a young, goo-goo-eyed brunette; strong and confident, but always less so than the males in her life; beautiful and tomboyish at once, though ready to trade her pants for a (wedding?) dress by movie's end; a girl who wants to be a boy, at least until she meets one. Her signature song, the admittedly pretty 'On My Father's Wings,' overtly reveals Kayley's reliance on the patriarchy at the beginning, and the 'Just Knighted' sign on the horse's tail as she and the male lead ride off together at the end suggests the connubial 'just hitched' even if we've witnessed no marriage ceremony. Garrett, the blind young man who accompanies Kayley on her quest, serves a predictable function as her antagonist, then teacher, and finally love-interest. Throughout their adventures it is clear that to succeed she must learn to follow his ways, and in particular must master Garrett's Sun Tzu-(or, more probably, *Karate Kid*-) inspired battle tactic—take position, face fear, and hold ground until the last possible moment—to defeat Ruber and return Excalibur to Arthur. In large measure, Garrett serves merely as a replacement for Kayley's dead father, new wings for her to fly on. And in the process, rather than offer us a truly independent heroine, the film ultimately only shows us hackneyed themes and reaffirms dominant paradigms, because to do anything bolder is too risky for Hollywood.

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