

# A Journey from Encumbrance to Resilience: A Study on Nancy Mckenzie's *Queen of Camelot*

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## Abstract

The term "Arthurian Literature" describes writings in poetry, prose, dramas, and novels that are based on the mythical King Arthur, who is said to have ruled Britain in the fifth century BC. Experts have been debating and disputing King Arthur's historical foundation for a long time. Despite the never-ending controversy surrounding the history of King Arthur and his knights, numerous authors have continued to express their love and devotion for him in their works. King Arthur emerged as the main character in the Matter of Britain, saving the entire country with his victorious conquest of the Saxons. Authors from all around the world have embellished their love for Arthur by rewriting the well-known legendary tales from various perspectives. Resilience refers to the ability of an individual, community, or system to bounce back, adapt, and recover from adversity, challenges, or setbacks. It involves the capacity to withstand and navigate through difficult circumstances while maintaining a sense of well-being. Resilient individuals can adjust and adapt to changing situations. They are flexible in their thinking and behaviour. They can manage their emotions effectively, staying calm under pressure and bouncing back from emotional distress. This paper aims to analyse the evolution of Guinevere from encumbrance to resilience in Nancy Mckenzie's *Queen of Camelot*. Resilience is a dynamic and evolving quality that can be developed and strengthened over time through various life experiences. The paper tries to show how the protagonist, Guinevere becomes a resilient woman after undergoing lot of difficulties.

**Keywords:** Arthurian Literature, Encumbrance, Resilience, Anxiety, Repression

## Introduction

The term "Arthurian Literature" describes writings in poetry, prose, dramas, and novels that are based on the mythical King Arthur, who is said to have ruled Britain in the fifth century BC. Experts have been debating and disputing King Arthur's historical foundation for a long time. Despite the never-ending controversy surrounding the history of King Arthur and his knights, numerous authors have continued to express their love and devotion for him in their works. King Arthur emerged as the main character in the Matter of Britain, saving the entire country with his victorious conquest of the Saxons. Authors from all around the world have embellished their love for

Arthur by rewriting the well-known legendary tales from various perspectives. While legends have only spoken about the great bravery of men, myths offer women significant roles. Women have always been the only characters, especially in the King Arthur legends. Women have not taken on any active roles in the stories; they have only ever been the men's wives, sisters, and mothers. Even though Arthurian legend dates back to the Middle Ages, numerous authors have updated it for the contemporary era. However, even these cozy contemporary retellings only highlight the fabled qualities of King Arthur and his knights. The modern-day female writer is the only one who has revived the long-forgotten female characters of the Arthurian legends. Nancy McKenzie's *Queen of Camelot* is one such Arthurian novel that recounts the legends from Guinevere's perspective.

### **Tenets of Resilience**

Resilience refers to the ability of an individual, community, or system to bounce back, adapt, and recover from adversity, challenges, or setbacks. It involves the capacity to withstand and navigate through difficult circumstances while maintaining a sense of well-being. Resilient individuals can adjust and adapt to changing situations. They are flexible in their thinking and behaviour. As Bram Stoker says "It is really wonderful how much resilience there is in human nature. Let any obstructing cause, no matter what, be removed in any way, even by death, and we fly back to first principles of hope and enjoyment" (324). They can manage their emotions effectively, staying calm under pressure and bouncing back from emotional distress. Resilience is a dynamic and evolving quality that can be developed and strengthened over time through various life experiences. Believing in one's abilities and having confidence in the capacity to overcome difficulties is crucial for resilience.

### **Journey of Encumbrance**

The concept of the unconscious was central to Freud's account of the mind. It was introduced in connection with the phenomenon of repression. Repression is the act of suppressing a thought or desire in oneself so that it remains in the unconscious. The unconscious mind comprises mental processes that were inaccessible to consciousness but that influence judgements, feelings or behaviour. The feelings, motives and decisions were influenced by past experiences, and stored in the unconscious. His structure of personality, the id was regarded as entirely unconscious while the ego and super-ego had conscious, preconscious aspects.

According to Freud, fears are present in the unconscious level of the Id aspect of personality. "The id, or desire, consists of all of our primitive, innate urges. These include various bodily needs, sexual desire, and aggressive impulses" (Baron 464). Fear is an important aspect of the unconscious which delves deep inside one's mind. This fear leads to a lot of mental as well as physical problems in one's life and can be resolved only when it is made to interact with the conscious mind. Anxiety which Freud conceptualized is also an integral part of the human experience that arises from conflicts within the mind.

Guinevere in this novel is portrayed as a fragile woman who is not able to cope with reality. At the beginning of the novel, she is full of life and vibrancy; she also loves to ride horses when almost all of the women stay at home. Guinevere herself says, "I was as free as the seabirds, and as wild" (71), but after she gets married, she is found to be in a state of mental turbulence. The fact that she couldn't bear a child for King Arthur starts killing her deep inside, which in turn leads to fear and anxiety. When the king returns to the kingdom, Guinevere is afraid of him, as she says, "I dreaded the king's return... I felt ashamed of my failure as his Queen to conceive his heir" (166). Though the king himself was not mindful of an heir, Guinevere was most of the time upset and brooding over the barrenness. She even asks for forgiveness when she bled and says, "My dear lord, I have – I have failed you" (169).

Guinevere undergoes a lot of pain and agony for not being able to conceive, and it's been five years since she married the High King. She is even more afraid of what the people in the kingdom will say about her and her worthiness. When she wants to escape from the daily routine of the kingdom just like everyone else, Guinevere is much more concerned about the opinions of others in the palace. As she says, "the people began to wonder if I was ill. Illness in a bride meant to them only one thing, and to avoid renewing speculations of pregnancy, I had to show myself again" (162). She risks her private and peaceful time in order to avoid the judgment of others. From a woman of joy and liveliness, she drowned into a woman of sorrow and mourning. When she hears the news of her women getting married and "were carted off to bear sons", Guinevere says, "I bit my lip hard against new tears and lifted my face to the rain" (170). She even hides her pain and tears from others, which in turn makes her gloomy and weak.

Freud says, "The fears hidden in the unconscious brought about a conflict with the conscious mind which could result in mental disturbances such as neurosis, anxiety and depression" (Baron 465). Guinevere in the Queen of Camelot, was even more afraid of the company of her women because she knew what they were talking about. She even goes to a state of imagining things and worries that the women would say, "she cannot give the High King the one thing he most desires: a son of his body... She has failed the High King Arthur as she has failed the people of Britain" (171). All these made her worse, and when Guinevere didn't bleed after the High King left and was feeling sick, everyone hoped that at last, she would have conceived a child. But when she bled after two weeks, people started to gossip even more than usual, which has made her "ill with weeping" (171). No one ever dared to tell this bad news to the High King, who was about to return home.

These miserable events and malicious gossip worsened her anxiety and made her extremely vulnerable and depressed. Guinevere says, "I had pressed my hands against my ears to stop the sound of words. This way lay madness. For five long years I had endured this humiliation before Arthur's subjects; had daily felt their eyes upon my waistline, daily heard their whispering behind my back" (171). This creates low self-esteem in Guinevere and increases hypertension and depression within her, as she says, "Even in my dreams they pursued me, with their frightful pity and their contempt" (171). Every day she is haunted by these thoughts so much that she can't escape from other's impressions, even in dreams. She starts to grow more stressed when she sees pregnant women and children filling the streets of Camelot.

All these suffocate Guinevere and make her stressful so she starts to isolate herself from others in order to avoid their scornful comments. She begins to underestimate her worth and says, "I alone among them all, had failed to grow past childhood, was less than a woman and a wife" (171). The fact that she couldn't render an heir to the king brought down her mental health, thereby making her feel low and less worthy. The anxiety of seeing other women pregnant and women with kids made her realise that she was no longer a woman. This makes her more anxious and leads to trauma, as she says, "Alone among them all, I could not bear. And in failing, I failed the High King of Britain" (171). Guinevere starts to develop guilt and feels responsible for not satisfying the role of a queen as well the duty of a woman.

Freud says, "The ego resorted to defence mechanisms when an individual experienced anxiety, such as tension and nervousness, as a result of inappropriate impulses" (Baron 456). One such protective mechanism is repression, which involves pushing undesirable thoughts from consciousness into unconsciousness or attempting to forget them. It alludes to the ego's subliminal attempts to bury and conceal worrisome thoughts in order to prevent them from coming to light. One can avoid their impact on the conscious world by doing this. Likewise, in Queen of Camelot, Guinevere tries to repress her anxiety and deliberately tries to escape from the contemptuous and malicious gossip of others. She says, "I choked back a sob and wiped my eyes. I had to escape!

Rain or no rain, I must get out. I was Queen. If I chose to go, I could go. None of them, could stop me” (171). Since being in the palace makes it more stressful, she tries to get rid of that place and wishes to seclude herself from others.

Freud says that the Id is completely unconscious and that it follows the pleasure principle. It was unable to weigh the possible costs of pursuing this objective as it just desired complete and instant gratification. Trying to satisfy a lot of the primal desires would quickly get quite problematic. In Queen of Camelot, Guinevere also faces a lot of trouble when she immediately gratifies her innate urge to escape from the palace and hostile people. When the king was away, she rode alone, even after several warnings, so as to find solace from her destructive surroundings. This worsens her situation, as she falls into the trap of Melwas, who abducts her and plans to marry her. This incident makes her feel low and frustrated. She says that “I was no longer so valuable as a hostage; once, perhaps, but a childless queen?” (175).

Guinevere is in a deep sense of regret and guilt; she starts imagining things, and this becomes a great threat to her self-esteem and challenges her perceived competence or worth. She feels dejected and lonely; she starts to console herself, saying that Arthur would also like to get rid of her. She says, “He could put me away, give me to Melwas, binding his neighbor to him, and leaving himself free to marry a woman who could bear him sons” (175). Guinevere develops an inferiority complex, often manifesting herself as worthless, which in turn results in anxiety, fear, and depression. She is not able to rationalize anything; rather, she emotionally collapses and finds it hard to accept things as they are.

### **Journey of Resilience**

Anxiety can be the shadow of unmet expectations and the whisper of self-doubt. To overcome it, one must confront the threats to self-esteem and illuminate the path to self-acceptance. Guinevere, who felt very low, starts to gradually realise her worth through the unending love of King Arthur. Arthur helps her realize her worth, and then he assures her that it is she who is more important to him than the child. When Guinevere was doubtful whether Arthur would accept her, he renewed their love with an open arm by saying, “There is more to life than breeding children, and I do not wish to do without you” (194). He becomes the harbour for the storm-battered ship, Guinevere.

Arthur’s selfless love made Guinevere stronger and less mindful of other people’s opinions. He made it clear to her that breeding children is “a broodmare’s duty” says Arthur. He says, “Your duty is to be my companion. Stay at my side. Give me your company by day and the pleasure of your person at night, when you will. I am content” (169). He then and there makes sure that Guinevere feels special and loved. This helped Guinevere build her fractured self and establish better self-actualization. Byron Egeland says “Resilience has been described as the capacity for positive outcomes despite challenging or threatening circumstances” Once, when the king was in trouble, it was Guinevere who helped him with her prompt actions. If not for her, the kingdom would have been torn into pieces due to internal conflict between the petty kings.

Arthur was mourning deeply for the loss of Merlin and locked himself in his chamber. He did not allow anyone to see him, and Lancelot says, “He is so deep in his grief he knows not what he risks” (243). When the kingdom and the knight were unsure of what to do, Guinevere bore the responsibility of leading the kingdom during her husband’s inaction. She commands them to give Arthur’s sword, his cloak, and the dragon brooch. When everyone asked Guinevere about her plan, she said, “I don’t know yet, really. But I have an idea. I will not appeal to his heart, but to his honour. I will threaten to lead the troops myself” (243). Knights were afraid of Guinevere’s actions, saying that only Arthur had ever touched it, but Guinevere rationalised it by saying that the sword belonged to her ancestor as well.

Guinevere says to Arthur, “If you will not lead your troops to save Britain, I will do it in your place. I will not let her go down into the dark, even if I am only a woman” (249). When Arthur saw Guinevere holding the sword, he was shocked and ignited. Only then was he able to realise the emergency situation that needed his attention and immediate action.

Elizabeth Edwards says, “Resilience is accepting your new reality, even if it’s less good than the one you had before. You can fight it, you can do nothing but scream about what you’ve lost, or you can accept that and try to put together something that’s good” (34). Likewise, Guinevere in Queen of Camelot accepts reality instead of blaming herself and becomes resilient and determined enough to help the king and his kingdom when they were in trouble. As Arthur himself says, “I was weak and allowed myself to be blinded. But this woman has opened my eyes” (252). This shows the evolution of a woman who was afraid of people and their scornful words, who demeaned herself and considered herself unworthy, into a woman resilient enough to inspire and lead the mighty King Arthur.

### Conclusion

In the quiet corners of the mind, anxiety weaves a narrative of self-doubt. Threats to one’s self-esteem linger in the shadows, awaiting the pen of resilience to rewrite the story of worth. From self-doubt, Guinevere accentuates herself as a resilient woman trying to save her kingdom from ruin. This article demonstrates the resilience of Guinevere; in the beginning, how she is scared of people and their contemptuous words, she treats herself with contempt and thinks she is unworthy, transforming into a woman who is strong enough to inspire and lead the powerful King Arthur. Thus, this paper ascertains the evolution of Guinevere from encumbrance to resilience in Nancy Mckenzie’s Queen of Camelot.

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