



Research Paper

Arthur Goes to America: Reinventing Arthuriana in the New World

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ABSTRACT: *The Arthurian mythos and romances are inescapably linked with the British Nation and its cultural aspects. However, the Arthurian subject has received unexpected and resounding acceptance in the New World. America embraces Arthur in the form of literature, movies, television programmes and comic books. This unlikely adoption of a symbol of the British nation and its subsequent adaptation to uniquely American forms raises several theoretical questions. The aim of this paper is to trace the entry of Arthuriana into American popular culture and its resurgence in a climate of political instability.*

KEYWORDS: King Arthur, Britain, America, Culture

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I. INTRODUCTION

The legend of King Arthur and the character himself has been inseparable from the notion of England as a nation in almost all iterations of the myth. In fact, King Arthur as a symbol has been used to propagate a pseudo-history of Britain's origin in the past and contemporary efforts in archaeology and history persist in their atavistic endeavours to unearth a historical Arthur. However, there is also a case to be made in favour of Arthur's unique and extraordinary adaptability beyond a nationalistic project. For a character so deeply rooted in a nation's identity, Arthur's tales travelled across the English Channel and formed the content of Medieval romances across 12th century continental Europe, especially France. (Lacy et al.) The resurgence of Arthuriana during the 19th, 20th and 21st centuries only adds credence to Arthur's remarkable longevity across almost a millennium. Arthur's early arrival in America may have been met with suspicion and antagonism owing to his strong identification with England, but contemporary works have been more accepting of the heritage the King carries along with him. The aim of this paper is to show how the Arthurian myth was integrated into the popular American consciousness through reinterpretations and adaptations of the source material. Apart from this, political uncertainty and anxiety in contemporary America lends an immediate significance to the unshakeable and assured morality that Arthur symbolises.

One of first and certainly the most influential early adaptations of the Arthurian myth, the *Historia Regum Britanniae* by Geoffrey of Monmouth, traces Arthur's genealogy to the legendary hero, Brutus, who arrived to "exterminate" giants and christen the island "Britain". (Lacy et al. 36) The fact that one of the earliest and most influential works on Arthur's supposed origins relies on existing myths and apocryphal sources to contribute to the formation of the corollary myth of a unified Britain is indicative of the way in which national identity and the mythical figure of Arthur were linked from the very outset. Political motives behind the creation and deployment of the Arthurian myth become even clearer in the desire of monarchs to strive towards his mythical ideal. Edward III even went so far as to procure a round table and twelve knights to be seated there. (Lacy et al. 209)

II. REVIVAL IN THE 18TH AND 20TH CENTURIES

The Medieval revival in England of the 18th century called upon the "once and future king" to rise from the dead and save them in a time of economic, political, social and cultural crisis due to industrialisation. The Victorian drive towards the past, conceiving the feudal social structures as more stable and reliable, found its culmination in Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*. Scholars have contested that a national consciousness is a function of narratives that can establish a "national history," in which a community's past and progress is both clarified and validated. (Barczewski, 2) The past became an important framework for understanding the present

and Arthur emerged as a figure who represented this national history for England and was reworked to suit the ideals as conceived and required by Victorian society.

Two centuries later, in the 20th century, the resurgence of the Arthurian legend in popular culture in the post-war period in Britain coincides with economic, political and cultural strife in England, with the collapse of the empire, the economic crisis and the two world wars. Arthur was yet again called upon by a nation that needed an affirmation of a glorious past to quell its fears and anxieties. This relationship between a crisis of identity of the British nation and the revival of the legend of King Arthur is inevitable considering the elemental relationship they have with each other. The British nation was built on the necessary fiction of the Arthurian hero, on the popular notions of chivalry and loyalty, just as King Arthur derives his importance and continued popularity from his deep association with the Island of Britain.

III. ARTHURIAN REPRESENTATION IN AMERICA

The representation of Arthur thus becomes a problematic one in America, a nation that in many ways discovers its own identity as a negation of 'britishness'. However, it is crucial to remember that America too fashioned an identity of its own through the process of mythmaking, creating cultural forms and a "national history" of its own in a way similar to Britain. The American Dream is perhaps the most pervasive and well-known myth, promising equality and opportunity to all who reside there, regardless of who they are and where they come from and resonates with the idyllic conception of Camelot as egalitarian and idealistic. Certain American values remain, however, in contrast with British ones and therefore Mark Twain's *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* parodies these values that seem to him overblown and out of proportion, even as he recognises certain common ideals that stay consistent in the two nations and perhaps are instructive to all humanity in general. Alan and Barbara Lupack describe Twain's use of the Arthurian myth as such:

Connecticut Yankee is important for many reasons: it lacks the acceptance of romantic ideals typical of much nineteenth-century literature; it rejects the notion of the knights of Camelot as models of virtue, an approach that is common in both literature and social organizations influenced by Tennyson; and it deliberately deflates what Twain regards as the literary and moral pretensions of the *Idylls of the King*. At the same time, however, Twain recognizes in Connecticut Yankee (as he does in other of his works) that there can indeed be some nobility not of birth but of character even in the people he chooses to mock. And Twain appreciates the fact that some of those who preach democracy and capitalism are little better and, perhaps sometimes, even worse than Arthur's legendary benighted knights. (Lupack and Lupack 35)

At the same time, other American writers like Louis Albert Banks and Ulysses S. Grant approached the Arthurian tales differently, choosing instead to see the knightly ideals as visions of courageous achievement, deriving from them moral instruction with a conspicuous American disposition. For example, in his book *Twentieth Century Knighthood: A Series of Addresses to Young Men* (1900), Banks tells his fellow countrymen that "We do not all have splendid physiques, and some deeds of hardihood in which the old knights rejoice are beyond our power, but the higher deeds of the loftier chivalry, of upright thinking, of pure conduct, of self-denying devotion, are within the reach of every one of us." (Banks 129) Banks further advocates a knight's simplicity of character and chivalric virtues using the illustrative anecdote of Abraham Lincoln's carrying a trunk for a little girl so that she would not miss her train.

There also emerged Arthurian youth clubs that dealt in teaching young children the chivalric codes of knighthood and children's books like Lillian Holmes' *Little Sir Galahad* (1904) and Horace M. Du Bose's *The Gang of Six: A Story of the Boy Life of Today* (1906), strongly influenced by Tennyson. Annie Fellows Johnston's *Two Little Knights of Kentucky* (1899) is especially relevant in how it portrays "New-World chivalry", saying in her epigraph: "Knighthood has not passed away. The flower of Chivalry has blossomed anew in this New World, and America, too, has her 'Hall of the Shields.'" (Johnston 116) Most of these American works were deeply indebted to Tennyson's *Idylls*, as the Lupacks explain.

The model of moral knighthood that was influenced largely by Tennyson and adapted in the American Arthurian youth groups and in related popular literature was no doubt behind the interest in the latter part of the nineteenth century and the early twentieth century in retellings of the Arthurian legends for young people, especially young boys. (Lupack and Lupack 75)

Howard Pyle was one of the most influential in Americanising the Arthurian legends. An illustrator by profession, Pyle produced a tetralogy of children's books based on Malory's *La Morte d'Arthur*. However, Pyle was a thorough American. Even his obituary in *The New York Times* could not fail to comment on his 'intense Americanism'. In *Rejected by Men*, Pyle rewrites the story of Christ's crucifixion in an American setting. Pyle democratized the knightly values and imbued the Arthurian tales with American ideals.

Pyle's democratization of the legends takes other forms as well. He tells a number of tales in which knights take on the duties or the appearance of the lower classes or associate with them; and he introduces characters from the lower classes into both his text and his illustrations. Pyle treats some of the well-known stories, such as Gareth's working as a kitchen servant and Launcelot's riding in the cart; but he gives these two

stories prominence and he seems to associate them by making them the first and second tales in *The Story of Sir Launcelot and His Companions*. It is especially interesting that Launcelot responds to the jeers of those who think it unseemly for a knight to ride in a cart by saying that "the adventure which I have undertaken just now to perform is in itself so worthy that it will make worthy any man who may undertake it, no matter how he may ride to that adventure". (Lupack and Lupack 86)

The Arthurian legend continued to influence American writers throughout the following decades, including some of the most celebrated American novelists like Fitzgerald, Faulkner and Hemmingway. Their works on the Arthurian legend were responses to the legend itself, viewing it through distinctly American perspectives and at the same time, just as the early Arthurian works like *Historia Regum Britanniae* had done, thrust the Arthurian legend into the American consciousness, albeit with a view to recognising an American sense of self by distilling from the tradition only what suited the young American subjectivity.

Yet, while they reinterpreted the Arthurian legends in distinctly American ways, each was inspired by different aspects of them: Fitzgerald, by the Grail quest, which became for him a metaphor for modern man's search for meaning; Hemingway, by the Fisher King, whose story provided an analogue for a modern society so bereft of values that it seemed a type of the wasteland in need of revival; and Faulkner, by the chivalric virtues of questing knights like Gawain and Tristram, which recalled the increasingly-forgotten values of his traditional and beloved South: "courage and honor and pride" ("The Bear," GDM 297) and love of the land. (Lupack and Lupack 135)

John Steinbeck had a much more intimate relationship with the Arthurian myth. There are clear allusions to the Arthurian myth in many of his works including his first novel *Cup of Gold* (1929). His most significant contribution, however, to the Arthurian tradition was his novel *The Acts of King Arthur and His Noble Knights* (1975), unfinished but published posthumously, a complete retelling of Malory's *Le Morte D'Arthur*. Steinbeck maintains the original structure of the story but explores the psychological underpinnings of the characters and uses a more modern and easily understandable form of English, opting for a "living retelling" of the myth. Steinbeck's focus on individual psychology can only be the result of contemporaneous social currents and the value of individuality in American society.

It is clear that these distinguished American novelists, all having contributed to the Great American Novel in the service of an American culture that was inventing itself, found in the Arthurian myth something that was malleable to the requirements of an American sensibility. In reinterpreting the myth and fashioning New-World chivalry out of the medieval tales of Arthur and his knights, they were incorporating the Arthurian myth as something that transcended national boundaries and had an edifying value that was detached from any geographical minutiae. They were reinventing the tradition of the Arthurian myth altogether.

Steinbeck's aggrandizement of these passions and his presentation of one of their number as a modern Arthur is, moreover, of a piece with the use of the legend for social purposes found in Pyle, in the Arthurian youth groups, and in Phelps's stories; and it is consistent with the image of Arthur and his power presented by Bridges, Twain, and Beard. All of these works suggest that there is an American tradition of democratizing the Arthurian legends by parodying the figure of Arthur or downplaying his power, or by suggesting that Arthur's true nobility comes from basic human qualities, not from an accident of birth. (Lupack and Lupack 195)

In spite of a considerable amount of cultural production between 1900 and 2000, the question of the wholesale adaptability of the Arthurian legend to American requirements still remains. There are a few reasons for Arthur's past and contemporary relevance to American culture. While it is fair to say that Arthur does not have the same nativistic value in America that he symbolises in Great Britain, Arthur has always remained a figure of popular appeal in the imagination of the common American. One of the reasons for this may be found in relation to a central theme of Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*. American novelists by and large have used the Arthurian legend and its significant symbolism to tell stories about modernity and the human condition. Nick Carraway's disillusionment with the American Dream and nostalgic longing for a more Romantic and adventurous past that is foreclosed to him echoes the 19th century turn to Medievalism. The stability and security of western values and morals now under threat of disintegration, the American consciousness turns to the stability of an idealised point in the past where moral codes are preordained and the self is not fragmented as in Eliot's *The Wasteland*, a major influence on Fitzgerald's work. Apart from this, the Britain and The United States of America are both conglomerate nations, built through erasure of localised identity in favour a larger unified whole with an entire cultural ethos built to justify this. As David E. Pfanner puts it,

The iconic status of the King Arthur of popular culture goes far beyond the comics however and arises from cultural myths that are uniquely American such as the pragmatism, optimism and drive associated with the winning of the frontier, including the defeat of the native Americans so popular in western films. During the settling of the west, the heroic sheriff or renegade gunslinger (an individual often outside normal society) made sure that socially disruptive forces, outlaws or Indians, were eliminated or kept in check. King Arthur is called upon to do the same. (154)

America, like Britain, is built on the basis of myths that figure the sense of nationhood and community and allow for an identification that exceeds geographical proximity, without which there would not be a sense of a nation. These myths depend on a certain adaptability and reproducibility. The Arthurian myth is especially suited to this operation insofar as the Arthurian myth originates as an adaptation of a non-British figure to a symbol of britishness Heike Paul writes on precisely this aspect of the nation-building myth in their introduction to *The Myths That Made America*.

Each of these foundational myths allows us to access American culture(s) from a specific angle; each of them provides and contains a particular narrative of meaningful and foundational 'new world' beginnings and developments in the history of the United States of America as well as iconic visual images and ritualistic cultural practices that accompany and enhance their impact and effect. Yet, these myths are not fixtures in the American national cultural imaginary: The explanation for their longevity and endurance lies in their adaptability, flexibility, and considerable narrative variation over time and across a broad social and cultural spectrum. (Paul)

Contemporary Arthuriana in America has taken on distinctly American forms and separated itself completely from the traditional mythical complex, even as it establishes certain key events in the myth that have become rigid and inflexible. Disney's animated film, *The Sword in the Stone* (1963) has fixed into the American consciousness (and that of the world) the notion of Arthur as the quintessential rags-to-riches American hero, realising the American dream. His hesitancy to keep the throne in the end however, is suggestive of the malaise that has become associated with positions of power in the modern world. A similar hesitancy towards absolute power is revealed at the end of Molly Cochran's *The Third Magic*. Arthur, King by Dennis Lee Anderson sends Arthur in the early stages of World War II. Arthur is sent there by Merlin to recover Excalibur and the book that foretells the future but is intimately involved in the war effort. Here Arthur is no longer a leader of men but is rather depicted through his struggle with handling contemporary technology and his personal rivalry against Mordred. *Camelot 3000*, a futuristic story based in the year 3000 where Arthur awakes to save the human race from an alien invasion and his half-sister, completely reinvents the Arthurian tradition by presenting the mythical characters in an exclusively American cultural form, the comic book, and marks Arthur's adoption as an American cultural icon, a superhero no less, dissociated as far as possible from his moorings in England. This can be seen in the way Arthur soon shifts from calling himself the king of all England to the king of the entire world in the comic and establishes New Camelot in what resembles a space station.

IV. CONCLUSION

Arthur has once again become relevant in 21st century America at another point of economic, political and cultural instability. (Ferrara) Global economic crises, the rise of terrorism, the lingering prospect of nuclear war, immigration and the inefficacy and disillusionment with democratically elected governments has led to a rise in conservative beliefs in America and the world. In 2017, two movies based on Arthur's myth were released in America, *King Arthur: The Legend of the Sword* and *King Arthur: Excalibur Rising*. The former is directed by Guy Ritchie and produced by Warner Brothers, an American production house. Both champion simplistic Medieval retellings of the Arthurian myth that reinforce conservative and atavistic values. In the current political climate, the resurgence of King Arthur in popular media can be read as an ideological call for a return to simpler, feudalistic moral codes and to ascribe a sense of certainty to the imagined fundamental beliefs and values of the American peoples that are wholly integrated with the popular consciousness. The cover art from the fourth issue of *Camelot 3000* anticipates a severe breakdown in democracy and a popular appeal for a strong, charismatic leader to lead them out of destitution. The people have lost faith in democracy and would rather have King Arthur re-establish and extend his monarchy. It predicts the rise of popular but dictatorial leaders in times of crisis when the established societal systems fail to deliver.

The Appropriation of Arthurian myth has a long and complicated history in America but continues to be integral to the American consciousness perhaps today more than ever. Arthurian myth has a close association with the formation of the American Dream but also with the disillusionment with it. The ideal of knightly chivalry is a vanishing point that organises a spiritual dimension and offers an imaginary direction for the American Dream but also guarantees its failure since it is always beyond reach and unattainable.

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