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# The Matter of Britain:
# An Introduction to
# Arthurian Legend

When most Western contemporaries reminisce upon Arthur the King, they inevitably do so with a certain wistfulness, a sense of storybooks and wonders, ideals of justice and romance: they see Disneyesque castle lands, or Kennedy's smile. Arthurian legends are indeed *the* mythology of the anglophone world. Wrapped in the mists of childish memory, they are the childhood photographs of its sense of adventure, every memory shaking with the yearning sense that this is a good, magical world after all, where all women are beautiful princesses, all men glistening knights on horseback, and evil merely monsters to be slain.

Even to those who have knowledge of the stories beyond *The Sword in the Stone* animation and *Prince Valiant*, to the cultured who have bowed and curtsied before Arthur, Merlin, Lancelot du Lac and Guinevere, have grappled with Gawain encountering the Green Knight, hoped with Perceval, been touched by Tristram and Isolde in their fate-crossed love—even to them, the legends recall primarily a pleasant story-book illustration of what medieval times were like (or likely not). And of course, all around they resound as the patronizable seat of somber girlish excitement, such as when Anne of Green Gable opheliaizes "The Lady of Shalott" before she slips off her bargelet into the emerald river beneath the bridge where her bedestined bemusedly waits to consequently rescue her; they form the chivalrous template for how to act adolescent love for men shy with verse and roses, or boisterously steeded with big trucks—and the unwell-spring of dreams of life-long love whence even on their deathbeds not yet disenchanted women murmur princes themwards.

The pivotal medieval reteller Sir Thomas Malory's conclusion to his *Mort d'Arthur* (ca. 1470)—that "some say in many parts of England that King Arthur is not dead, but had by the will of Our Lord Jesu in another place; and men say that he shall come again"—embodies the dream of a golden age encompassing all aspects of life. Thus the Arthurian legends evoke the cultural memory of the Anglo-Saxon and of much of the European passages, ravages, and rebirths of époques faded and revived. Accumulating the hopes and hatreds of the centuries, the highly eclectic mythos interprets this Anglophone dream and memory vivacious in terms historical, mythical, narrative, religious, and sentimental.

The "real" Arthur, however, remains an enigma—if he existed at all. In the sources preserved from close to his lifetime, the historical and mythic qualities of the traditional Arthurian characters and their genuine biographies are an imbroglio difficult to disentangle. Most have, pre-

sumably, some unfabled origin, but often enough it seems the current characters are variously fused from a handful of historical heroes, vestiges of folklore, and memories of Celtic and Norse mythology.

Of the authentic Arthur himself, for example, only four claims can be somewhat safely made. First, given that his historical name Artorius is of Roman origin, and in concurrence with the earliest sources, he was a war leader (*dux bellorum*) in Britain, fighting—probably at the head of Roman-style cavalry units—for the Romanized Celtic Briton petty kings, soon after the Romans withdrew from the island in A.D. 407. Secondly, based either in Welsh southwestern Britain or in those parts of the north inhabited by Brythonic Celts, he defended Christian Celtic Britain against heathen invaders. Interestingly, the earliest Welsh writers mentioning Arthur in the twelfth century *Vita Paterni*—the hagiographies of the saints Cadoc, Carannog, Gildas, and Padarn—describe Arthur as a tyrant who plundered monasteries to finance his wars. Of course, the authors were likely themselves simply put-out monks, and they did note favorably that Arthur carried Christian emblems into battle. It seems the *dux* victoriously battled Picts, Saxons, and the heathen faction among the Britons headed by a predecessor *vortigern* ("high king"). Thirdly, in the later sixth century several Arthurs find mention in the history books, which indicates a bearer of this originally rare name was important and admired enough for people to name their sons after him.

Finally, according to renowned Arthurian scholar Geoffrey Ashe, his true biography perhaps inspired at least some of the story elements in the highly eclectic group of legends, since a very few of them cannot be traced to other sources and remain in essence unchanged whether reinterpreted by Welsh bards, French troubadours, or English laureate poets. Among these remnants are Arthur's leading horse-mounted men into a series of successful battles and his dominance during a few decades in the sixth century when the British Celts held the Saxons and Picts more or less peacefully at bay. He ruled from hill-top fortifications, and preferred an especially prominent one with a name similar to "Camelot". More speculatively, the historical Arthur's wife may have been abducted (or seduced) by one of his lieutenants at home while he himself was campaigning abroad. Although it is unclear where exactly Camlann was, Arthur likely met his end in battle there, as did another prominent figure named Medraut (Mordred).

Whoever the "historical" Arthur was, he was not the wondrously fabulous, aging, high medieval monarch he has come to represent as a literary figment. Much that the Arthurian legends are now valued for—as well as the lack of clarity concerning the "historical" Arthur—arises from the Welsh poetical tradition through which the hero's stories were preserved after the Saxon hordes harried and hounded the battered, broken Britons into the island's western hills. Thus the first preserved mention of Arthur is not in a historical text, but occurs in the long poem *Y Gododdin* from the *Book of Aneirin*, originally written around A.D. 600. Most Welsh poetry was transmitted only orally, as was the Celtic tradition, so that Welsh verse was not more widely collected in books until the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Among these were those telling some of the Arthurian legends, and unrelated stories of their characters, that were then collected into the *Book of Taliessin* and the *Black Book of Carmarthen*. One such story, *Culhwch and Olwen*, which was first recorded in the tenth-century forms the arch-pattern for most all pursuant Arthur-related romances. In these texts, written four centuries after his death, Arthur has already ascended the throne of the benevolent arch-king surrounded by other valiant Welsh heroes such as Bedwyr/Bedivere and Cei/Kay. The complex Welsh poems recall Arthur's rule as an idealized time, and intertwine what is left of the historical account with popular elements of pre-Christian myths: battles with giants, Gwenhwyfar/Guinevere and her triplet sisters, the ambiguous bard Myrddin/Merlin, and such magical places as the apple-isle of Avalon.

The Myrddin/Merlin character is a prime example of such mythological eclecticism. In the medieval manuscripts, he appears in two culturally defined roles: he is a bard in the Welsh tradition, and an enchanter and counselor in the service of Arthur in the English texts. Perhaps reflecting the differing interpretations of his "historical" role, authors frequently describe Merlin in terms half demoniac, half human. When Geoffrey of Monmouth later conflates him with another collected character, Imrys/Ambrosius, the

future sorcerer's ambiguity earns its exposé by inheriting the latter figure's alleged conception by a fiend's rape of a noble nun. Briton heroes of that particular time seem to have had an inordinate propensity towards being fathered on ravished brides of Christ: the sixth century Welsh patron saint Dewi/David, for example, reportedly was the son of a nun raped by a local prince (sometimes said to be a nephew of Arthur's).

Less can be said about a "historical" Merlin than of Arthur. If he existed at all, he seems to have been a truly talented poet of noble background (and contrary to recent attempts at reconstruction, likely *not* a covert druid) monikered, like Shakespeare, "The Bard". The name *Myrddin* seems to have been an adjective connoting inspiration by a Celtic deity of the arts, similar to the Greek Muses. At times, the Welsh Myrddin skirts identity with the ideal Welsh bard, Taliesin, whose name "radiant brow" likewise implies supernatural inspiration.

Additionally, most scholars presume that the "historical" Merlin is closer to the "wild man" or "Merlin Sylvestris" tradition revolving around the Scottish king Rhydderch ap Tudwal. The name of this tradition's Merlin-figure originally was Lailoken, which scholars think derives from the Welsh *llallogan* or *llallawc*, linked to the word *llal*, "other". In the Welsh poem *Cyfoesi Myrddin a Gwenddyd ei Chwaer* ("Conversation of Myrddin and his sister Gewnddyd") recorded in the fourteenth century *Red Book of Hergest*, Gwenhydd (probably the original "Lady of the Lake", Niniane) uses *llallogan* and *lallawc* as she implores her bardic brother for his insights. The term here seems to be an attribute to Myrddin, or a sort of invocation. Most often, *llallogan* is translated "twin brother," "lord," or "dear friend." However, "Lailoken" is frequently used interchangeably with "Lalage," which derives from the Greek word "to babble" or "to chirp." In the Sylvestris tradition, his ruler's demise in battle drives Lailoken mad. He wanders the woods and prophecies there, claiming he is conversing with the dead. Given that Myrddin's version of the tale is rather similar to Lailoken's—that of a noble warrior-bard driven mad by the loss of a loved one in battle who then retreats to the woods to become a wild prophet—given also that the same story is reflected in the seventh-century tale of Irish Suibne Geilt, and that both Myrddin's and the Irish figure's tales include hiding within an apple tree (symbolically associated with the lure of the supernatural), it is likely that the entire episode is a vestige of an older Celtic divine. Some have noted Merlin's repeated association with stags, his preferred steed, and thereby trace him to the Celtic sylvan Pan-like god Cernunnos.

The best-known mythic quality of Merlin, however, stems from what is likely a faulty association of the Welsh figure with the Briton Ambrosius (sometimes faultily Celticized as "Imrys", the eternal). It has been suggested that the two figures actually represent St. Martin of Tours and St. Ambrose of Milan, but even when confined within Britain their identities repel one another. The Welsh Myrddin is clearly a Celtic figure, whereas Gildas calls the military predecessor to Arthur "the last Roman," Ambrosius was the leader of the Romanized and Christianized Britons and ruled in competition with another high king, or *vortigern*, who likely led the pagan Celts. The latter may be the "Vortigern" who invited the Saxons to Britain. Later sources like Geoffrey of Monmouth (ca. 1135) and Robert de Borron in his *Les Prophécies de Merlin* (ca. 1200) firmly appropriate a legend concerning Ambrosius to characterize Merlin: Vortigern plans to sacrifice the fatherless, incubus-spawned future sorcerer to assure that his shaky tower remains standing. The lad exposes two fighting dragons under the building's foundations, and interprets them as a prophecy to Vortigern's detriment.

The historical probability that Ambrosius preceded Artorius as major military leader reemerges in Merlin's role as the providential king-maker of the young Arthur, beginning with the future ruler's fathering by a Merlin-enchanted Uther Pendragon on the deceived Igraine, his Merlin-monitored upbringing by the knight Antor/Ector, Merlin's prophecies when Arthur ascends the throne, and the sorcerer's crafting of the Round Table. By the time Borron wrote his *Prophécies*, Merlin's mythic persona remains no more than a caricature fairy figure with *deus-ex-machina* qualities who is finally ensnared by his own witchcraft and damning flirtation with the fairy Nimue/Vivienne.

While most mythical influences on the Arthurian cycle are veiledly Celtic, others, like the Grail, are of unsure origin and constantly change their form: the Grail is variously a cup, a lance,

even a stone, plus various relics. The incorporation of Germanic myth into Arthur's story marks the supreme irony that the Angles and Saxons Arthur combated came to hail him as their own idealized king. While Excalibur itself is most likely a descendant of a sword named Caladbolg belonging to the Irish hero Cú Chulainn, the story of the sword-in-the-stone, for example, may have its parallel in the Norse *Volsunga Saga* (twelfth century). There, the hero Sigurd (who is later absorbed into the *Nibelungen*'s Siegfried) succeeds in pulling the magic sword Balmung divinely sent by the bard/enchanter-god Odin out of an oak after many others have failed. The dragon-slaying episodes of later Arthurian legends likewise descend from the Norse sagas.

The French may be credited with transforming the mythical Welsh Arthur poems and the often bungling pseudo-histories into so-called romance narratives, or legends. Scholars at the turn of the first millennium were well aware of the tenuous presence of fact in the mythical narratives they were transcribing. The ninth-century Irish monk who copied the epic *Táin Bó Cualigne*, for example, added as a postscript: "I, who copied this history down, or rather this fantasy, do not believe in all the details. Several things in it are devilish lies. Others are the invention of poets. And others again have been thought up for the entertainment of idiots."

The *idiotes savantes* for whom the French troubadours recreated the British folklore passed on to them by Breton minstrels were the likes of Eleanor of Aquitaine and her daughter Marie de Champagne. Such noblewomen sponsored the newly arisen chivalrous movement, based mainly on the former monk Andreas Capellanus' manual *The Art of Courtly Love* (1170s & 80s). Taking seriously the ancient Roman poet Ovid's (both first centuries) ironic player handbook *Ars Amandi*, Capellanus offered advice on how to pursue adulterous love, or at least cuckoldry. Among nobles, the sacrament of marriage had at the time largely disintegrated into political arrangement so that *The Art of Courtly Love* offered a consciously immoral reprieve of sorts, and became immediately popular. The Church condemned Cappallanus' advice, and insisted on the faithfuls' transmuting their desires into an adoring devotion so nearly religious that many knights chose to worship those married or vir-

ginal women who, to quote from Shakespeare's *Cymbeline*, were "as chaste as unsunn'd snow." Martial noblemen often had little difficulty, then, in espousing the Marian heresy and making the Virgin Mary their object of chivalric idolatry. Thus inspired, the courtly romances of Chrétien de Troyes and others interwove the ideals of courtly love with knights' heroic action, recasting the hitherto stature of rough-hewn warrior-knights as an effigy of fine-mannered, virtuous gentlemen willing to offer up their lives for their ideals, their honor for their lady, and their kingdom for a horse.

Likely inspired by the reputedly talented Breton minstrels, French and Anglo-French noblemen had mused over some of the Arthurian subject matter before Chrétien heard it, and even spread Arthur's fame as far as Italy. The eighth-century Briton Nennius and in the tenth-century Welsh *Annales Cambriae* briefly mentioned the "historical" Arthur, and in his 1136 *Historia Regum Birtanniae* the highly unreliable historian Geoffrey of Monmouth "made" the once and future king's legend by creatively compiling Anglicized and feudalized versions of Arthur's story. By 1155, Monmouth's revision was available as Wace's French translation *Roman de Brut*, already inflected with bits of chivalry. From these far-flung sources, in the late twelfth century Chrétien des Troyes selected the materials for his narrative verse romances and sung forth a series of works seemingly inspired—and certainly following the "boy-meets-girl" plot of—the earlier Welsh work *Culhwch and Olwen*. Chrétien's *Érec et Énide, Cligès, Lancelot le chevalier de la charette, Yvain le chevalier au lion,* and the unfinished *Perceval le conte del Graal* are not as unconcerned with scope, and Arthur's kingship serves as their setting, not their subject matter. Chrétien does away with all pseudo-history, and thus his works are considered the first great *literary* treatments of the Arthurian legends. Arthur's own story, in fact, would find a more able rewriting in the anonymous *La Mort de le Roi Artu* (ca. AD 1230). However, it is Chrétien's characters and narrative emphases that have come to be dominant in Arthurian retellings. De Troyes introduced Lancelot as a major figure, as well as constant returns to the chivalric Round Table motif.

Most of de Troyes' romances are really love-interest illustrations, drawing on the plot of the earlier *Culhwch and Olwen*. As in *Culhwch*, Chrétien's Arthur is an elderly sage who often remains the rather passive ruler of a realm of marvels, and often acts merely as a foil to another narrative. The most prominent of these is, of course, the courtly-love romance of Lancelot and Arthur's wife Guinevere, which Chrétien versified in *Le Chavalier de la Charette*, and which has come to dominate the Arthurian legends. Probably drawing on an earlier Celtic tale of the abduction of a noble lady—and perhaps reflecting the biography of the 'historical' Arthur to an extent— *Le Chevalier* is essentially a recast retelling of a story found in the *Vitae Gildae*, where Melwas, king of Aestiva Regis, abducts Guinevere.

Lancelot, in fact, is not originally an Arthurian figure at all: his name suggests continental origin, and he first appears as Arthur's nephew in the German Ulrich von Zatzikhoven's *Lanzelet*, without any reference to Guinevere. Zaztikhoven sends Lancelot on a typical series of quest adventures, several of which incidentally end in marriages to retired damsels in distress. Lancelot's lineage is certainly royal; while nursing her husband, a king dying of a broken heart in exile, the future paragon's mother leaves her child out of sight on a lakeshore, from whence a water maiden promptly abducts him. Lancelot matures in the care of his foster-mother, the Lady of the Lake and her court of 10,000 maidens. In Zatzikhoven's telling, Lancelot redeems himself and comes into his dead father's inheritance. Chrétien reduces the unusual in Lancelot's upbringing, confining the Lady of the Lake's strangeness to a mirage. Instead, the troubadour focuses on a similarity between Lancelot's passage to and from otherworlds with that of Guinevere's in another of Zatzikhoven's tales to find occasion for their treacherous *tête-à-tête*. Ulrich's interpretation of the abduction-motif has Guinevere ravished by the magician Falerin, who hides her in an otherworld. Chrétien may have made Lancelot the friendly culprit of such a story to parallel the popular legend of Tristram and Isolde as versified in Gottfried von Strassburg's *Tristan*.

Critics have noted that Chrétien's stories often seem artificial in tone, and that Lancelot remains a character without one, indicating that the romance narratives were meant as "every-knight" illustrations of courtly chivalric love—a function they still have. Chrétien's take adds some sense of nobility and an assenting romantic sentiment to the treacherous *amour* that is unusually benevolent.

Even as a minor character, Guinevere had preoccupied legendwrights throughout time. A fragment of Welsh poetry names the capricious early Arthurian companion Kay as her abductor; in another, Gawain seduces her. Later, as in Geoffrey of Monmouth, it is most often the murderous usurper Mordred with whom she willingly commits adultery. In any case, the affair always ends badly for all concerned. Lancelot's treachery brings an end to the Round Table and to Camelot. War breaks out culminating in the battle of Camlann where Arthur is slain. In the poetic texts, Guinevere usually retires to a convent after her husband's death, while the pseudo-histories usually have her killed. In Layamon's retranslation of Wace's *Brut* (ca. 1200), for example, Guinevere drowns herself. Among the common people, her memory is reviled and no one offers prayers for her soul. Alfred Lord Tennyson will later go so far in his *Idylls of the King* (1889) as to declare Guinevere and Lancelot's adultery the root of most evil at Arthur's court, marking it as the corruption that allows barbarism to overrun the glorious Britain of Camelot.

The limited virtuous capacities of chivalric love find a treatment in the fourteenth-century Middle English poem *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, where the noble knight and later mortal enemy of Lancelot resists the most explicit enticements of his enigmatic host's wife with great difficulty while he waits to be beheaded by the other-worldly green giant for in turn having failed to decapitate the discolored monster the previous year.

The continental romances not only introduced the idea of courtly love to the Arthurian legends, but also the decidedly religious strain of the Holy Grail Quest legend. In this Quest, one or more knights take upon them the perilous search for the Grail, or Graal, which is elusive to all but the worthiest. The quest's inherent traits of mysticism and self-denying devotion reflect the teachings of Bernard de Clairvaux of the Knight Templars, who encouraged faithful Christians to seek beatific visions through arduous self-purifi-

cation so they could re-enact the quasi-marital union of the soul with the Divine. Bernard incidentally was among the foremost patrons of copiers of the Arthurian cycle.

The origin of the grail motif is disputed, but it made its original appearance as what seems to be a pagan cult object, with Gawain the hero. In the Celtic tradition, the grail consists of all or any of four different objects: the invincible sword Excalibur, the unerring white lance covered in blood, the stone of destiny that future kings must stand upon while being crowned, and the so-called cup or cauldron of plenty. By the time Chrétien de Troyes and his contemporary Wolfram von Eschenbach wrote their respective versions of the Grail Quest, Perceval replaced Gawain as the central hero (only to be later in turn supplanted by Galahad), and each of the grail aspects had taken on an explicitly Christian meaning. Excalibur became an attribute of the just king, which is why Arthur could wield it, but Bedivere has to cast it back into the Lake. The blood on the lance was that of Jesus, pierced by the centurion Longinus during the crucifixion. The stone gradually transfigured into the alchemist *lapis philosophorum*. The cup, most importantly, came to hold the blood and sweat of Jesus crucified, the wine-vessel of the Last Supper spirited to Britain by Joseph of Arimathaea.

Both Chrétien for his unfinished *Perceval le conte del Graal* and Wolfram for his *Parzival* drew their material from a common source, an otherwise unknown poet by the name of Kiot. The narrative itself is probably of Celtic origin and first told in *Syr Percyvelle of Galles*. In both tellings, Perceval is the son of a widow of nobler lineage than his father who brings him up in ignorance of his heritage and in isolation from the world in order to spare him his sire's violent death. As providence will have it, the characteristically innocent Perceval happens upon a knight who impractically lectures him on manners. Perceval adheres to what he is told and ends up raping a sleeping noblewoman in all courtesy, offending Arthur's court with his lack of civility, killing a knight, and having to prove his heritage by setting out on a series of ennobling adventures. In Chrétien de Troyes' *Perceval* and Eschenbach's *Parzival* the young questor accidentally stumbles upon the grail castle, but does not realize its significance, and, wanting to

display good manners, fails to inquire into it. Chrétien's graal, incidentally, is the blood-filled cup it will remain hence, whereas Wolfram's is of stone. Once Perceval realizes what he has left undone, he spends the remainder of his days attempting to recover the Holy Grail's presence.

In later versions of the Grail Quest, Perceval is in turn replaced by Lancelot's spiritually pure bastard son Galahad. (Literarily, this knight may actually have had its source in the eleventh-century Welsh *Mabinogi*, as Peredur, Son of Evrawc.) Galahad, too, in spite of being the sinless contrast to his adulterous father, can only permanently attain the grail in death.

The narrative strains of history, myth, romance, and religion in Arthurian legend entangle in the semi-authoritative source of Arthurian legends for moderns, *Mort d'Artur* by the fifteenth-century knight Sir Thomas Malory. Taking the de-historicizing impulse of the romance troubadours to heart, Malory seized the sixth century hero Arturus by the throat and then, as John Steinbeck remarks, "put his knights in fifteenth century armor and imposed the twelfth-thirteenth century code of knighthood against a curious depopulated and ruined countryside, which reminds us of England after the first plague and ruined as the Wars of the Roses made it." Malory drew on the so-called "post-Vulgate" stories of the thirteenth century as well as on the French lays and their translations. Consequently, in Sir Thomas's telling Mordred is considered the king's bastard son by his sister Morgaine, Excalibur is clearly associated with the magical Lady of the Lake, the calamities of Arthur's later realm are ended only by Galahad's death attributed to the slaying of the suffering Grail king Pellean by the Round Table knight Balin (subsequently murdered by his twin Balan), Tristan joins the Round Table, and thus the destruction of Arthur's kingdom is advanced by King Mark of Cornwall, Isolde's husband. Most importantly, however, Malory sheds all pretense of pseudo-historicity and thus paves the way for the Arthurian legends to once again become myth—this time the national mythos of Tudor England.

With the Renaissance, whatever values may have been originally associated with the legends of Arthur now were reduced to inspiringly sentimental fairy tales (in the more meaningful sense). As J. R. R. Tolkien explained in his lecture

"On Fairy Stories," "It is the mark of a good fairy-story, of the higher or more complete kind, that however wild its events, however fantastic or terrible the adventures, it can give to child or man that hears it, when the 'turn' comes, a catch of the breath, a beat and lifting of the heart, near to (or indeed accompanied by) tears, as keen as that given by any form of literary art, and having a peculiar quality"—that of joy, or in this case, encouraging enthusiasm. To the Renaissance writers Michael Drayton in his *Polyolbion* and in the *Faerie Queen* by Edmund Spenser, for example, the Arthurian tales are treated as more or less fictitious, but respected as an important part of the inspiring English national mythology, a fading memory losing its narrative power, and thus its artistic attraction.

In the wake of three centuries of literary neglect, Arthur the King regained popularity during the era of Victoria the Empress, thanks in part to medievalizing tendencies in pre-Raphaelite art and in Newman-inspired religion. Of course, the politer preferences of the chivalrous ideas, too, revived with the rise of the post-Romantic bourgeois gentleman. Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*, which depends heavily on Malory, became a bestseller in Britain in spite of being poetry. Other prosodists like Swinburne, Morris, and Browning, too, treated Arthurian themes and motifs. Their view of Arthur the King evoked the golden age of a simpler England lost, the high ideals of which were to be exemplary for their own contemporaries, even more so as social and political reforms eroded the aristocratic classes whose puritanical principles demanded a poetic authority to wean them from the presumption that vulgarity is simply the conduct of other people, and from the anxiety that they, like the boorish degenerate gentry and the seedy, foul-toothed proletarians, could resist anything except temptation.

The interest of the British poet laureate and his colleagues coincided with the Wagnerian revival of Teutonic mythology, which included *Tristan* (1859) and *Parsifal* (1882), although not Arthur proper. Wagner's inspiration was by no means a chivalrous trajectory; rather, the ranting composer sought to resurrect the Teutonic strengths he perceived dormant through his völkisch mysticism. Where Tennyson was concerned with the ideals and sentiments of neo-chivalry, Wagner was preoccupied with the mythic dimensions, and replaced any inherent ideas of holiness with a quest for empowered compassion.

Characteristically, the twentieth century greeted the traditional legends with calls for updating and fundamental reinterpretation, careful scholarly scrutiny of its sources, and the combination of more or less qualified rewritings in light of personal contemporary agendas characteristic of much so-called historical fiction. The last of the traditionalist mohicans was American poet Edwin Arlington Robinson (of "Miniver Cheevy" and "Richard Cory" fame). His three blank verse poems "Merlin", "Lancelot", and "Tristram" capture the legends in conventional forms, but he assigns his heroes a psychology, and one fitting the dark, disenchanting dilemmas of the modernist West. More famous are the British T. H. White's rewriting of Malory, *The Once and Future King* (1958) and *The Book of Merlyn* (1977). White's works inspired the Disney adaptation *The Sword in the Stone* (1963), but, more importantly, were clearly cast as biting satire of contemporaries. His tales sport a naïve and fallible Arthur, a gandalfesque, bungling, providential Merlin (complete with Archimedes, the owl), older knights clearly modeled on public school-groomed retired British army officers who ramble boorishly over their port, nonsensical never-ending quests, and lectures by Merlyn on such topics as totalitarianism and anarchy. To top it off, White makes a point of Merlin knowing the future because he lives his life backwards. The humorous work does away with any poetic elements, ending up a mock-fairy tale complete with anachronisms, political allegory, and pacifist commentary.

The legends subsequently received a high literary treatment by American novelist John Steinbeck, who emphasized the humanity of the king and the vassals as realistic characters in his *The Acts of King Arthur and His Noble Knights*. Even more scholarly, philologists at Oxford such as Charles Williams and C. S. Lewis attempted to restore mythological meaning to the legends by placing them back into researched contexts, and complimenting them as they saw fit. Charles Williams' poetry collections *Taliessin Through Logres* (1938) and *The Region of the Summer Stars* (1944) are considered major, spiritually

complex contributions to the grail idea as the unorthodox thinker has Welsh bard Taliessin retell the Arthurian cycle from his poet perspective. Part of Williams' attempts to reinfuse meaning to the material is his use of traditional motifs in criticizing modernist materialism, as when his Modred claims the grail's best use is to drink from it at dinner. C. S. Lewis resurrects Merlin for his own modernist critique in the novel *That Hideous Strength* (1945), pitching him against the obliterating evils of technological nihilism. His Christian druid-wizard pays the price of his own dabbling in magic by becoming the imperfect vessel of divine wrath against the technological occult, transforming the somewhat-pagan into a mighty Elijah-figure. Lewis also edited some of Williams' Arthurian criticism—often amounting to a reinterpretation of the texts—and complemented them in the so-called *Arthurian Torso* (1948).

The most contemporary garb of the Arthurian legends, however, has once more departed from art form and returned into the seething lap of the historical romance novel. The major authors of the New Age interpretation of the Arthurian corpus (the authors would probably call it a "recovery") are Marion Zimmer Bradley, otherwise known for her space fantasy pulp fiction *Darkover* series, and the more traditional Mary Stewart. Bradley's take on Arthur's story is dominated by an attempt to impose a matriarchal structure on the pagan elements of Roman Britain, probably under the influence of Joseph Campbell's pupil Marija Gimbutas, who proposed that pre-Christian and especially pre-Indo-European religions were dedicated foremost to a mother-goddess. The view is largely discredited among scholars, but apparently lingers among what seems to be Bradley's other influence—the New Age "neopagan" movement. Throughout her *Avalon* series (beginning with *The Mists of Avalon* in 1983), Bradley persistently advances the polytheist view of nature, pantheist metaphysics, anti-Christian stereotypes, and even ritualistic practices that constitute the largely faulty so-called neopagan understanding of pre-Christian British religion. Bradley's approach, however, has proven widely influential, and the telling of the Arthurian tales as the conflict between pre-Christian and Christian culture (rather than, as in traditional Arthurian legend, between Christian Celts and pagan Saxon invaders), and as "true myth" with believable characters is now the most common method among Arthurian novelists. Also noteworthy is that, like Bradley, most contemporary writers focus on previously marginalized characters, especially women, and that versions of Merlin, not Arthur, tend to be at the center of their narratives.

Almost contemporarily with Bradley, Mary Stewart authored her *Crystal Cave*-series, a creative biography of Merlin. She, too, attempts to recover a "real person" behind the mythological Myrddin figure, and portrays him as less a religious figure than a perceptive and intelligent gifted. There is a host of other retellings, most of which largely mimic Malory in updating the attitudes and world-view positions of the protagonists, and Geoffrey of Monmouth in their concoctive creativity. The post-Tolkienian fantasy romance in its Arthurian incarnation, too, has yet to live up to the genre's ability to convey relevant mythic depth without destroying either the poetic complexities or metaphysical consistencies of their predecessors. Two of the more successful fantasy interpreters in the Arthurian subject matter are probably Stephen Lawhead, who goes so far as to integrate even the Atlantis myth, and Bernard Cornwell, who brings more historical expertise to the task than most others. Adding to the "Celtic" mystique currently *en vogue*, such mythographically pluralist popular fantasy retellings have added an anthropological shimmer to our consciousness of what especially Arthur and Merlin may or may not stand for.

Who, or what, then, is Arthur to the contemporary hearts and minds? The essence and persistent strength of the Arthurian legends has always been the cultural arch-myth his story has become: a larger-than-life figure of high nobility reigns over a near-paradise, only to nobly fall through the tragic flaw that is his humanity, but leaving the hope that beyond history, he will be ruling a gloriously perfect state forever.

Not a few idealists envision in Albion's morn-lit days of just right kingship and courteously gracious knights-errant phantasms of spotless presidents and generous executives whisking to the gates of our-homes-our-castles in luminescent limousines to lay the heads of evil tyrants at our feet, safeguarding the mirth-imbibing treasures of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness (or at

least the spoils of rights, tolerance, and safe retirement)—also known as the Holy Grail. Certainly Kennedy's Camelot and its subsequent porches have always been much more than a rhetorical flourish. They are the resonant fondling of the heartfelt hope for the good glories of a brave Free World. Frankly, the expectations towards an ideal and just Christian king as a moral, political, and military figurehead of a Good Nation *do* differ but slightly from those frequently associated with the glorious burden of the decent, to-the-best-of-my-ability President of a republic that fancies itself a Promised Land with spiritual, ideological, and militant righteousness pervading all its acts and objectives—an attitude not least gleanable from the Manichean rhetoric that arouses its people to "decisive action", and the standards by which the decency of a president is judged to the neglect of his political prowess. In the Anglophone land of amber waves, where Camelot has its mailbox on Pennsylvania Avenue, it is still more important for the head of state to seem good and smile (Arthur)

than to seem able and furrow-browed (the king). Like the Arthur of later legend, he is the heroic CEO who promulgates things peacefully so that all his paragons (that would be us) can quest adventurously for our material wenches.

Arthur is hope. Arthur is enchantment. Arthur is romance. As long as there are holy grails and dreams of the good kingdom, as long as there are *belles dames sans merci* and mists, black knights and dark giants, as long as young Hero will gaze on sleeping beauties sighing "she has a lovely face," Arthur's eternal summer will not fade. Where the merry spawn of Britain is concerned, at least in spirit, "some say . . . that King Arthur is not dead, but had by the will of Our Lord Jesu in another place; and men say that he shall come again"—the once and future king.

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