

Arthurian Authorities: Ideology in the Legend of King Arthur

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This paper will not discuss the origin of the legend of King Arthur, nor its historical development, nor the ways in which Arthurian writers have used their sources, nor the beauties and literary qualities of the legend. Especially not the last. In fact this paper will not discuss the Arthurian legend as a closed literary entity, a pleasant pasture for critical play. Rather, it will treat the legend in the context of social and political forces: the central topic here is the ideological function of the many versions of the Arthurian legend in their periods. The analysis is limited to the legend in Britain and in the associated culture of medieval France. Much of the evidence for what is said here and some developments of these arguments will be found in a forthcoming book (Knight, 1983).

Arthur has always been a version of authority. His legend has realised, through its problems and its values, both the anxieties and the hopes of the sponsoring social formations. The legend is a lengthy continuum of sources for socio-literary study. The origins of Arthur lie in British (that is, Welsh) society around the year 500 A. D. But I am not going to discuss the possible historicity of Arthur. Or not yet: since the 'did Arthur exist' question is no more or less than a recent ideological redaction of the legend, it needs to be analysed later on, in its modern social and historical context.

The central thing about the earliest British references to Arthur is that in them he is a persuasive model of heroic authority. It was crucial to persuade young men to fight and die for the tribe, or existing social organisation and patterns of authority would be swamped by other tribes, Celtic or Germanic. In a pre-Christian culture, heaven was not available as the ultimate inducement to courage, but a decent substitute was found in fame. Your good name would live on, the undying honour of yourself and your family was the reward.

In two early Welsh poems, *The Gododdin* and a lay about the hero Geraint, Arthur is the supreme warrior (see Barber, 1972, for texts). These

poems come directly from the day-to-day culture of the British iron age heroic society; they are functionally evaluative, and Arthur is the recognised standard of heroism and the honour it brings. These poems are quite secular and pragmatic, but elsewhere Arthur's status was augmented by mythological force. In 'The Spoils of Annwfn' and a poem about Arthur's warband great heroic feats have supernatural contexts. Similarly, the notion that Arthur did not die is found quite early in Welsh.

Since pagan religious details were used to strengthen the functional force of Arthur in heroic society, it is hardly surprising that British Christian writers appropriated the hero for their own versions of authority. They created a figure whose power rested on the fact that he was both British and Christian. The two references to Arthur in the *Cambrian Annals* and the list of his battles in Nennius' *Historia Brittonum* are usually discussed as pseudo-history (Alcock, 1971, e.g.) but they are just as end-directed as the hero's other appearances—they merely belong to a social formation with a different ideology.

Whether pagan-heroic or Christian-nationalist, these are only brief references, without any full development. But a larger pattern about Arthur did clearly exist in the early British period, and the surviving major source is the Welsh prose text *Culhwch and Olwen*, one of the stories from *The Mabinogion*.

Culhwch and Olwen is often dismissed, even by Celtic scholars, as a crudely structured, perhaps incomplete, piece of Celtic fancy. But the story contains much more than a few aesthetic frissons. Its structure is not in fact strange or incomplete, or not if you understand how Celtic narrative works, and, more importantly in the present context, it contains a strong ideological structure relating to the period when the story was put together which, for reasons mentioned below, I believe to be the tenth century.

Before Wales was brought under partial Norman and then complete English control, its structure was no more than a collection of separate tribes, each a gathering of extended families with certain of them controlling the tribe because of their warrior skills and resultant economic power. The economy was based on pastoralism and occasional agriculture; the only major supplement came from raiding other communities for cattle or portable goods. But the families had to remain strong: the fact that the chief had the right to admit people into his kin indicates the need to supplement its strength; the huge warband which supports Arthur's family is a fictional resolution to this realistic problem.

The kindred's failure to reproduce itself sufficiently is a central fear in the story. *Culhwch*, one of Arthur's cousins, is cursed that he will only be able to marry *Olwen*, the giant's daughter—and so will either die in the attempt or go wifeless and childless. Another cousin, *Goreu*, is the lone survivor of twenty-four brothers, also victims of the giant. But the failing family is saved, partly by corporate action, but more by extra-family help, ranging from the relative credibility of the warband to the fantastic extremes of help from animals and gods.

The ruling family also faces threats from outside: the giant himself represents an enemy tribal chieftain, and so does the *Twrch Trwyth*, the giant boar who arrives from Ireland. His ravages include the areas where

early Irish raids and settlements were most common. In addition he attacks the power-base of Hywel Dda, the tenth century prince who tried to gain the overkingship of Wales and whose efforts are ideologically legitimised by the fact that Arthur has the unusual role of 'Chief Prince of this Island'. There are formal similarities between *Culhwch and Olwen* and works produced under Hywel's patronage, and the language of the text is so much older than other Welsh prose fiction that a tenth century date is quite possible. The connection with Hywel explains for the first time the mysterious recording of this particular story long before other Welsh prose.

Culhwch and Olwen represents the fully Welsh Arthur, but a series of accidents made his legend very widely known outside Wales. The main influences were the localisation of the legend in south-eastern Wales and the early and substantial Norman presence in that area; it was both fertile country and a natural salient into Wales. Breton contact with the Normans may have been a factor, but it was the Norman military takeover of Britain which led directly to the first major European work in the Arthurian legend, Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae*, "The History of the Kings of Britain" (c1136)

Geoffrey was a Welshman who adapted native traditions in the interest of the Norman overlords of Britain. Written in dramatic Latin prose, his pseudo-history of the Celtic kings of Britain was actually a fiction realising the Norman sense of glory, their fears of what might destroy that glory, and a fictional resolution of those fears.

Arthur is only one of the British kings, but much the most important. He conquers the Saxons, rules in glory, challenges and defeats Rome, then is destroyed by Mordred, a traitor in his own camp. Above all Arthur is a war-leader, ferocious, powerful, despotic, making a kingdom from a doubtful inheritance. The model of William the Conqueror is clear, and there are strong parallels between Arthur's early wars and those of William, both at home and abroad. Then the problems William's successors, William II and Henry I, had with Normandy are realised in Arthur's first French war against Frollo, who represents their brother Robert, Duke of Normandy. Arthur deals even more firmly with Lucius of Rome, a consoling reversal of Henry's complete failure to handle Louis VI of France, which came to a head in the disastrous campaign of 1124. Not only the major external dramas of the Norman kings are dealt with through Arthur. Internal rebellions were also common; Arthur puts them down in just the same areas as William, but with a culturally pleasing royal benevolence, not William's naked and notorious savagery. The text also realises tensions within the Norman power-group. Family feuds for the throne are a feature of the whole *Historia*, not just the Arthur section, and the dominant model is dissension between brothers, just like that between William's sons. The emphasis favours a weak but morally admirable younger brother—as Henry I liked to see himself. The strange episode when Arthur kills the aggressive phallic giant of Mont St Michel is probably a fictional compensation for Henry's total humiliation by his elder brothers there. He had bought the towering Mount from Robert, but William and Robert combined to take it from him and make him again a landless and so insignificant man.

Mordred's rebellion is the final and destructive thrust, creating that

possibility of treason that the Normans, more than most, always had to consider possible. Against such a threat the text offers the sheer centralised authority of the king, which the Normans worked so hard to establish, and which Geoffrey supported in his lucid and dramatic story.

The *Historia* was enormously successful in its Latin form and members of the Norman elite soon arranged written French translations. Geoffrey's biography of Arthur meshed with the oral tales of knightly adventure that were widespread in French, and a new literature was developed. Chrétien de Troyes is the great original, and much has been made of him as the poet of individuality, the first novelist in verse, the voice of the twelfth century renaissance. His work is indeed elegant, based on single figures, newly learned, newly realistic. But all those qualities relate to sociocultural forces of the period, especially to a double pattern of anxiety and authority that converged on the baronial courts where Chrétien and his followers worked.

Unlike the Normans in England, the French kings did not impose wide authority in France. The great barons feared the actual rule of the king and his increasing interest in trade and cities, already a booming source of income (Köhler, 1974). In the new romances the Round Table offered a comforting image of the king as only one of the great knights, and Arthur is passive except for honouring his heroes—a royal act the barons would accept. The vacuum of royal authority was filled by the emphasis laid on the hero knight who, through his physical power and lonely adventuring, won both honour and a wife who owned a land in her own right.

That pattern pleased baronial independence. But it was also a dreamlike resolution of a threat felt by many young men who were the bulk of the audience for romance. In twelfth-century France the custom of primogeniture was new; previously the inheritance had been shared out (Duby, 1977). Younger sons had to leave home and fend for themselves. Lands like England or the mediterranean areas under Norman conquest were obvious places, whether the land-taking was rationalised by crusade or not. Equally realistic was the possibility of marrying an heiress: it did occur, but not as often, nor as prosperously, as in the romances.

So Chrétien's plotting offered comfort to two dominant socio-political problems faced by his audience. He also offered a new ideology of behaviour, in chivalry. This, it has been well shown, is not just a sudden desire by people to behave nicely, especially to women. It is a social ideology which rose out of the expansion of the aristocracy to take in what were called *ministeriales*, functionaries of various sorts, especially professional soldiers and bureaucrats, who thrived in the increasingly complex world of the newly large and newly prosperous baronial courts (Köhler, 1964).

Chivalry was an attractive false consciousness which concealed the split between old and new aristocracy by a shared behavioural model (much like the bourgeois moralisation of aristocratic values in the nineteenth century). Chivalry obscured in a cloud of communality the actual process of aggressive individualism by which knight clambered over knight and baron jostled baron in the competitive feudal world. And chivalry also allowed women special respect, which may have had some basis in the neuroses caused by a surplus of males at medieval castles (Moller, 1958-9),

but also responded to the fact that marriage was a distinctly possible way of social climbing.

Chrétien's texts, especially the very influential *Le Chevalier au Lion* (also known as *Yvain*), are an extraordinarily rich mixture of these themes, stressing the aggressive and neurotic masculine individualism of the feudal period. His work was a dominant influence in the formation of the romance genre, and before long his pattern was merged with Geoffrey of Monmouth's. The Vulgate Arthuriad was the completion of this process, telling the whole Arthurian story from sword in the stone to Arthur's mysterious disappearance, with many extensions.

The Vulgate also included the story of the quest for the Holy Grail. Deriving in literary terms from Chrétien's *Perceval*, this was a thirteenth century myth that owed a good deal to the loss of Jerusalem in 1181 and the resultant internalisation of spirituality (Adolf, 1960). It also owed something to the growing power of the Cistercian movement: in the fully developed Grail story where Galahad is the grail achiever, his authority is not only spiritual, it is decisively Cistercian and anti-Benedictine.

The full development of French Arthurian story, with the grail and even the *Tristram and Isolde* story added, has become well known in English through the late fifteenth century redaction by Sir Thomas Malory, often called 'Le Morte Darthur'. Malory translated from many sources, including English ones, for the sizeable audience who could no longer understand French, yet accepted the ideology of chivalry. This was no longer a standard concealment of the greed and aggression inherent to authority based on cavalry. It was an ideology falsified much further in a time of crossbows, professional soldiers, gunpowder and—eroding the social base of chivalry—a rapidly expanding mercantile economy and the cash relations of 'bastard feudalism'. But the importance of an ideological text can lie in what it refuses to see, and Malory deals with a disordered society in determinedly conservative terms.

But his story is not as unrealistic as it might seem: it is a displacement of contemporary reality, not a complete rejection of it. The pattern Malory gives for hundreds of pages is that of knights riding out to put down wrongdoers—a wicked but powerful knight who oppresses good men, some churl who has seized a noble lady, some warrior who obstructs a crossing for money or plunder. It is not a world of dragons (an Italian Renaissance fantasy) and only rarely a world of enchanters, who themselves merely incite bad knights. The pattern of knightly justice is, in fact, remarkably like a streamlined and dreamlike version of fifteenth century justice, which depended on the great men, the magnates and their own followings, to be enacted, if it was enacted at all (Lander, 1977, chap. 7).

The peace-keeping system does not finally work in Malory—as it basically did not in the disturbed fifteenth century. The essential ideology of the Arthuriad is to explain how things go wrong, and explain it in a way acceptable to Malory's conservative audience (which no doubt included many emergent businessmen like Caxton, who accepted the values of the older world, and also many aristocrats turning to business). In explaining how the Round Table collapses, Malory rejects the simplistic Christian

moralisations developed by the French monastic writers. They argued that it was all the fault of Fortune who no man should trust, or it was all the fault of Launcelot and Guinevere and their adultery, or it was all the fault of Arthur who fathered Mordred on his half-sister Morgause and then tried to kill the child in his own massacre of the innocents. Malory gives a complex of reasons, including all those and bad luck as well. But he stresses that, as tensions developed, the leading figures all acted honourably and the catastrophe was both inevitable and somehow mollified by the display of admirable behaviour.

That itself would be a highly consoling notion in a period like Malory's when the feudal aristocracy was well aware that authority was slipping from its grasp. But the ideological meaning of the *Authuriad* is more specific than that: at least at the end the story it deals with the fading of a particular person's authority. There has been dispute about Malory's identity, but there seems now no good reason to doubt the old candidate, Sir Thomas Malory of Newbold Revell in Warwickshire. Throughout an active and sometimes violent life he was a Warwick man, serving in various ways the great Earl of Warwick, the kingmaker as he was called. He gave his great power to the Yorkist cause in the Wars of the Roses, he helped Edward IV to the throne in 1461 and steadily fell out with him after 1464 and helped put Henry VI briefly back on the throne in 1470, the year by which Malory finished his *Arthuriad*.

Warwick was celebrated as a paragon of chivalry in his period (which helped gloss over some real habits, such as piracy and arrogance). There are strong parallels between him and Sir Launcelot, the greatest of Arthur's knights. In the last two books, where Malory is undoubtedly at his most original and effective, he has created a contemporary version of how a great king and his greatest baron fall out steadily, and finally become opposed in civil war. Both of them are honourable and Launcelot is given an especially sympathetic treatment. He has a noble basis for his dissent from the king in his love for Guinevere, and he has a whole series of splendid actions which often resemble Warwick's own publicity conscious 'noble' behaviour. Malory's presentation of Launcelot acts as a general consolation for a debilitated chivalric authority, and also as a specific idealisation of its leading figure.

After Malory the Arthurian legend soon came to seem non-authoritative: too medieval for humanists, too catholic for protestants, too royal for republicans. Spenser did know and use the legend, but it was both classicised and allegorised. His knights are moral virtues, not medieval barons; his Prince Arthur is a fit mate for Gloriana, the Faerie Queene herself, and so, in the time of Elizabeth I, he can have only a conceptual and fanciful authority. The unfinished *Faerie Queene* never had a solid socio-economic base—Spenser's cognomen 'the poet's poet' reveals the limits of his range in his period and his impact since then.

In 1691 Dryden produced *King Arthur*, but it is hardly a major contribution to the legend. It is only the book for a masque, and its survival has depended very heavily on Purcell's music. Dryden went back to Geoffrey of Monmouth for his source because Latinity lent a certain authority in classicised culture. Milton, it is well known, thought about the

Arthurian epic, but decided it was too royalist and too catholic—and perhaps too unhistorical as well. Malory was not reprinted between 1634 and 1816 and it is usually said that during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the Arthurian legend went underground.

That is only true if by 'above ground' you mean belonging to the metropolitan literary elite. In fact, during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries Arthur survived very healthily in other places, where authority did not depend on the values of the classically educated bourgeois elite. Arthurian place-names were common, and Arthurian traditions about many other places remained alive right through this period into the present. There was some literature about Arthur, too, ranging from the work of old fashioned authors like Blackmore, through ballads and folk-tales which lived largely in oral form to nursery-rhymes and fairy-tales, where heroes like Jack the Giant Killer and Tom Thumb came to Arthur's court as Launcelot and Tristram had done before them. King Arthur was not underground: he was alive and well if you ventured out of Oxbridge and the London bookshops. Children, the provincials, the illiterate, the unfashionable, they all wondered at Arthur. Not a bad audience, and one that was exploited when the king's authority again became of interest to the literary elite in the nineteenth century.

There are many reasons why medieval material became popular in the later eighteenth century and why the widespread Gothic taste of the nineteenth century developed. Many of the reasons are more concerned with politics and social authority than literary history has recognised. Those who found the democratic pressures of the emerging period oppressive found the hierarchical certainties of medieval culture consoling; those who blamed modern disturbances on commercialism and rationalism would equally find little to threaten them in the past (Chandler, 1970; Girouard, 1981). Of deeper basic importance is the formation that Lukacs points towards in his discussion of Scott (1962). The ideological self-consciousness of the new urban bourgeoisie, he argued, was culturally created against a distant historic background and an equally distant nationalistic world-view. In the space left by the omission of intimate and unacceptable socio-economic reality, the new false consciousness of individualism could be developed: the bourgeois view of the world and the self found the unreality of medievalism very helpful, a cultural Crusoe's island for creating that new and ideologically authoritative self-concept.

Tennyson's audience was dominantly bourgeois and his *Idylls of the King* was both a major example of newly medieval art and an important force in developing the taste and need for such art. The poem took a long time to produce but the bulk of it was written in two bursts, in 1856-9 and 1868-72. These two periods produced idylls which are now interwoven through the whole poem, but if they are read in order of their composition and original publication it becomes clear how Tennyson handles social issues in the poem, in particular how he both examines and defends the authority of the powerful Victorian male.

At first he had in mind the politics of the family, not the state. The first four idylls, published in 1859, take the role of women as their central issue. In fact they are much more woman-based than Arthur-based. 'Vivien' (later

'Merlin and Vivien') really comes from the French sources in the introduction to Southey's 1817 *Malory* and Tennyson drew on the *Mabinogion* for 'Enid' (later split into 'The Marriage of Geraint' and 'Geraint and Enid'). *Malory* provided some material for 'Guinevere' and more or less all of 'Elaine' (later 'Lancelot and Elaine': the addition of male names seems part of the containment of these troublesome women).

The first two of these idylls, 'Vivien' and 'Enid', were to be published under the title 'The True and the False'. Tennyson abandoned the title but not the idea. In the four idylls he both raises and crushes the notion of female authority within the family—specifically against the male as husband or lover. The specific threat is the impact sexuality can have on the male, making him lose his independence and dominance. This was a major contemporary issue (Johnson, 1975). It is clear that the new isolation of the family unit (Stone, 1977) both emphasised and threatened the role of the husband and father. His patriarchal authority had to be forced ideologically on the wife who provided or supervised all the emotional and physical needs of the family—she was in a position of genuine and dynamic authority. The direct physicality of her power is especially disturbing and has to be repressed by the non-physical, absent, moral authority of the patriarch—so morality mediates financial power, the essential process of bourgeois ideology. The first two idylls in particular create powerfully, urgently, the familiar Victorian figures of the harlot and the madonna in Vivien and Enid. The second two idylls support that pattern—Guinevere combines the sexual sin of Vivien and, finally, the wifely submission of Enid. 'Elaine' replays the sexual sin from the male viewpoint and sympathises deeply with the male sinner and the anguish it causes him. The four idylls stand together as a powerful and widely applauded statement of a totally patriarchal position on the family in a period when that male authority was felt to be under pressure—apart from the inherent pressures inside the family, a divorce bill was being put through parliament.

Tennyson later said he had the whole idylls planned from the start but this appears to be a rationalisation. He certainly seems to have been satisfied with what he had done in 1859, and said he felt 'Guinevere' made a good ending to the Arthurian story. When he returned to Arthurian idylls it was with a quite different topic in mind, a wider concern with authority and its problems wider than those of the family. The new 1869 idylls deal with broad-based social issues, especially the weakening of traditional deference to authority.

'The Holy Grail', the first to be written, offers social reform as a king's proper role. Arthur disapproves of the quest for the Grail. In part a rejection of the Oxford Movement's introverted spirituality, this also acknowledges the Christian Socialism espoused by Tennyson's friends Kingsley and Maurice. But in Arthur's final speech Tennyson makes it clear he sees social work not as an end in itself, but as a painful path towards a transcendent heavenly peace for the individual: the first of a series of withdrawals from social reality and its attendant problems. Having confronted those forces, the poem now and in future will steadily withdraw from them and provide various consolations to a conservative, and still male, authority under threat.

'The Coming of Arthur' was written next. It is socially conscious, yet the issue is not necessary reform but the anxiety of rule. The central problem is to discover what gives Arthur authority to rule. This is argued in terms of his birth, assuming that power, property and birth are all interwoven. That conservatism is supported by heavenly consolations when real social disorder is envisaged. Leodegran dreams of a king who fails to control a brawling world, but is seen in certain command only when the dream conveniently shifts to heaven. The threats to authority actually posed on the turbulent slopes of nineteenth century commercialism and democracy are not confronted, but ideologically elided heavenwards.

Then 'The Passing of Arthur' (an expanded version of the early elegy for Arthur Hallam) refers clearly to the increasing weakness that the ruling class were feeling, as authority 'forgets a dying King'. Tennyson sees the failure of that 'deference' which Bagehot found central to the English constitution. Finally there is a ray of hope, the glimmer of a new dawn as Arthur disappears in his barge. But it is a faint hope indeed. And so far there is no trace at all of what ideological writing really must have, someone to blame for this weakening of authority. There must be explanations; they are provided in all the major Arthuriads, and they must be acceptable, in tune with the dominant ideology.

It is 'Pelleas and Ettarre' the often overlooked last of the 1869 idylls, which creates this crucial element. Essentially, it re-awakens the anti-woman theme of the 1859 idylls and now applies it as an explanation of disorder not only in the family but in the state at large. There had been a trace of this idea in 'Enid' and 'Guinevere', but it is now massively and urgently mobilised. Pelleas, the archetype of Arthur's new, post-Grail knights, is sexually betrayed by Ettarre: in despair he runs mad with anti-social violence, doubting and flouting the authority of everyone at the Round Table. In the last lines of the idyll, Modred slides onto the stage to predict the end of Arthurian society.

The remaining idylls merely filled in and emphasised the plan visible in the eight idylls available in 1869. 'The Last Tournament' is a largely original realisation of the Arthurian world in post-coital collapse and despair, with Lancelot and Tristram central figures—Tristram is especially powerful with his combination of sexual and political libertarianism. In 'Balin and Balan' Tennyson altered Malory's story to make woman the cause of Balin's violent despair—Guinevere drives him from the court, Vivien stimulates him into a murderous passion. The only remaining idyll was 'Gareth and Lynette' which Tennyson wrote as an early, happy sequence: the way in which his imagination was possessed by gloom is shown both by the need for this idyll, and by the fact that it is lifted almost completely from Malory. To the end Tennyson was imaginatively fired by threats to authority, social and familial.

In order to contrive his ideological response, he had to turn his back almost completely on the real forces of industry and commerce in the period. But elsewhere the Arthurian legend did deal with those forces, and as a result found convincing consolations a good deal harder to contrive, indeed found any acceptable authority hard to discover. Mark Twain's extraordinary novel *The Adventures of a Connecticut Yankee in King*

Arthur's Court (1889) started as a typically Twain-like burlesque, reversing and making fun of Malory, but the novel soon developed as a complex analysis of the contemporary world. Hank Morgan, the Yankee, is a New England democrat with mechanical skills and business drive. He erupts through time-travel into the legend and denounces the oppressive behaviour of the church, throne and aristocracy in Europe both past and present—nineteenth century England is a notable target.

Yet the novel does not confidently support an American, mercantile and democratic authority. Much of what develops is critical of America. Twain raises his own views as an anti-slavery Southerner and a 'Mugwump' Republican in 1884 (Budd, 1962). But the novel goes much further than this. It begins to expose the oppressive nature of industrial capitalism itself, through Hank as an active character.

He is called Sir Boss, like a slave-boss, or even Boss Tweed of Tammany Hall. His jokes can be cruel, his business practices exploitative and humiliating. There is a steady build-up to the stunning ending, where Hank and his apprentices confront the chivalry of England—a new version of the fateful last battle between Arthur and Mordred. Through their use of electrified fences, hydraulic power and gatling guns, the mechanical warriors win—but they destroy the whole land, and themselves die of plague. Twain finally envisages the technological holocaust that the twentieth century has seen come to reality.

The novel traces a compressed history of the industrial capitalist from craftsman to monopolist—Twain himself had experienced that development in America and his imagination projects its future, creating an anxiety beyond easy consolation. The rural beauty of Camelot, the simple nobility of Arthur and Lancelot stand out as values—and so does the family Hank has left in what, in a painfully ironic subtitle, the novel calls 'The Lost Land'. Authority is finally found to rest only in nostalgia, and in the ability to see things clearly.

That pattern is both paralleled and developed in another very popular Arthurian novel, T.H. White's *The Once and Future King* (1958). White wrote a remarkably innovative first book, published separately as *The Sword in the Stone* (1938). It is devoted to the modern dream that authority lies in correct education: White makes Arthur's upbringing by Merlin include natural wisdom, learnt among animals. The hope is that Arthur will be able to contain sheer might within the authority of a wise and natural right. This does not work—neither the Arthurian legend itself nor White's own nineteen-thirties gave such an idea much chance. However, White does not really show how the ideal fails; the three books which follow *The Sword in the Stone* are little more than a mildly psychologised retelling of Malory, with some good whimsical jokes added and the themes of the grail and adultery much reduced.

Like the Yankee's ideology of industrial progress, Merlin's dream of education and liberal authority is a light that failed. That it shocked White by failing is clear from the fifth book of his Arthuriad, which remained unpublished until 1977. *The Book of Merlyn* has very little narrative, being basically a diatribe about the viciousness of man conducted by Arthur and the animals from his education. Distinctly hysterical, drastically alienated,

the book seems to foreshadow the literary structure of later metafiction and also (like White's own life) points towards the rural fantasies lived out in recent years, where value and authority reside in anything that is not modern.

In general, the twentieth century has seen many versions of the Arthurian legend. Some have been unique, like Edwin Arlington Robinson's narrative poems, combining Malory's story, Tennyson's genre and the literary presentation of the modern novel. Or like John Arden and Margaretta Darcy's trilogy *The Island of the Mighty* which sets early British events in the political context of modern populism—but the play's radicalism, of form and content, has seriously restricted its public performance. Much more widely seen have been the many Arthurian films, which range from Hollywood action romances where Arthur has a wise presidential authority to modern expressions of youthful attitudes like *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* and its hip nihilism and *Excalibur* with its traces of psychobabble and drug-culture.

There have also been several clear categories of Arthurian material in the recent period, each using the figure of Arthur and his legend to buttress certain social and personal positions. One of these approaches turns back to the grail as a source of value and finds authority only in the spiritual realm. The poems of Charles Williams and David Jones have a cult following in Britain, and T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* also exploits this material for its positive aspect as well as for its symbology of a spiritual desert in the modern world. In case this approach seems limited and recherché, there is the resurgence of Glastonbury as a part of the mysterious Britain culture and also the extraordinary success of the recent book *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail*, a farrago of quasi-scholarship which was selling in tens of thousands early in 1982.

Apparently more intellectually respectable is the 'historical Arthur' industry. Some books and a lot of articles have examined the possibility that Arthur did really exist. All the faith-support systems of positive scholarships are used—maps, footnotes, material facts, criticism of sources. Yet a pervasive sentimentality survives: even Leslie Alcock's *Arthur's Britain*, the sanest of the books, had a romantic technicolour dust-jacket. More specifically, these studies all develop the classically bourgeois 'great man' theory of history; they also often insist that this ghostly Arthur was the last of the Romans, so linking the authority of one empire with the fading power of Britain—it is very striking that it is the British, not the Americans, who are fascinated with the authority of the historical Arthur.

The third modern trend is basically related to such historical research. This is the sequence of historical novels which recreate, in more or less scholarly ways, the world of Arthur. Rosemary Sutcliff's *Sword at Sunset* is a classic, but John Masefield and Henry Treece have also produced notable examples and there are many others, including some film versions like the British television series 'Arthur of the Britons'. Mary Stewart's recent trilogy based on Geoffrey of Monmouth is an ingenious variation starring Merlin. These writers all use the quasi-historical material to lend weight to the patterns of bourgeois ideology: a decisive hero, faithful and individualised followers, exciting and finally submissive women, material

success and a place in the triumphant progress of British history.

As a figure of authority under pressure, Arthur has been ideally suited for re-creation time after time as a bearer of the fears and hopes of social formations in different periods. The legend of Arthur is the best known and the longest lasting of the British legends, now at least a thousand years old. But that long period is not in itself a continuity: the legend is not a separate asocial entity, not an object for aesthetic and academic admiration. Rather, it is a series of texts, each related to its contemporary circumstances, especially to the problems faced by authority. To study the legend from its political and socio-economic viewpoint can reveal a good deal about the changing forces in history. It can also suggest a good deal about the political ways in which literary culture can work, handling the historical forces of change in a period, both to express and conceal them. To recognise that structure of meaning is to see the inherent political tendency of the Arthurian legend, and of all other cultural productions—and so it is also to see that treatments of culture which do not express and expose its political aspects are themselves working in a deeply political way. This paper is not a new and politicised version of the Arthurian legend. It is a commentary on the long-ignored political function of Arthur and the authorities he has symbolised.

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