

ARTHUR: SAINT AND SINNER



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King Arthur* has often been seen as an archetypal monarch who always remains true to type.² This is surprising in view of the multifarious representations of Arthur in world literature. Scarcely another figure is as ambivalent, multiform, and variegated. In the romances, we encounter him as the chivalrous monarch, and in the ballads as a degenerate villain. In the nursery rhymes he appears as Arthur the swine, but in the churches of Brittany as Arthur the saint. How can we account for these disparate and even contradictory literary developments? Generally valid laws for such processes (e.g., the concept of "epic degeneration,") have not found common acceptance. There are, however, certain determining factors which have led to the lines of development mentioned above.

One of the most influential factors is Arthur's ethnic origin. If there was a historical Arthur, he was a Celt who defended the country against the invading forces of the Angles and Saxons. Thus it is not surprising that the oral tradition of Arthur is Celtic in origin, stemming from Breton, Cornish, and Welsh folklore. The nucleus of the belief in Arthur's return is also part of this tradition. It has often been pointed out that this belief posed a threat to several English sovereigns. Thus the excavation of Arthur's bones in Glastonbury (Avalon) can be seen as a political measure directed against the Celtic hope.³ Henry II ordered the exhumation of Arthur's remains and personally indicated the location where digging was to begin. Of course, King Arthur's body *was* found, and thus Henry was able to



After the MS Fr. 12559, fol. 125, Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris.
Arthur was first designated as one of the Nine Worthies in the *Voeux du Paon* (c. 1310), composed by a jongleur, Jacques de Longuyon, for the Bishop of Liège.

demonstrate to the Welsh that King Arthur was safely dead and definitely would not return. And yet the Celts cannot have been over-impressed; up to the beginning of this century they clung to the belief with stubborn persistence.

Arthur was thus a figure of political identification, a focus for the Celtic hopes of all the different groups oppressed by powerful neighbors as well as those who were no longer lords in their own land. If Arthur were to return one day, they pointed out to both Saxon and Norman, he would destroy their enemies and restore their proper rights. In this line of literary development,

King Arthur is represented as an unyielding enemy of the foreign Germanic tribes. He serves a clear-cut political purpose as an embodiment of the Celtic minorities' desire for independence and survival.⁴ Throughout Europe, it became a proverbial saying that the Celts were still waiting for Arthur's return, and ultimately, it became a standing ethnic joke—a means of characterizing the Celts by their gullibility.

Yet the Celtic substratum has colored a good deal of Arthurian literature and lent it a distinct flair. The knowledge of Arthur's ethnic identity endured to the end of the Middle Ages and even down to the present day. With the growing temporal and spatial distance from the underlying political events, however, indifference to the inherent ethnic questions increased, and nearly all the racial distinctions became vague. Thus



Gottfried of Viterbo (13th century) no longer differentiates between the British and the Saxons: for him, both are successors of the Macedonians and the English nation represents a unity.

In a similar way, the enmity of the British against the Anglo-Saxons faded into oblivion. After the 14th century, the terms *British* and *Britain* were more and more frequently applied to all inhabitants of the British Isles. It was therefore quite normal that the English kings should integrate themselves into the long line of monarchs following Arthur, thus adopting him as their ancestor.

Several English kings were hailed as *Arturus secundus*. Frequently, historiographers compared the times of the reigning monarch with that of King Arthur to claim that the glorious days of the legendary ruler, so they said, had returned. Arthur became the measure of the

living monarch—a model at times difficult to emulate. There are entire genres of literature which exploit the figure of Arthur in order to make political comments on reigning royalty without causing direct offense. Criticism of the dynasty was voiced in the form of criticism of Arthur. Numerous Anglo-Norman and early French romances follow this tendency, and according to recent research, they were intended for an audience in England. Most of them present an unchivalrous Arthur who has betrayed all the ideals of knighthood and who has therefore been deserted by all his vassals. This is, for instance, true of the romances *Yder*, *Rigomer*, *Hunbaut* and others.⁵

Of course, such features of degeneration are not confined to the romances. It is probable that they were paralleled by similar developments in popular literature. A number of authors believe that Arthur's degradation is a reflection of popular stories which increasingly devaluated the image of the king. In the ballads, for instance, we find a very ordinary, at times even vulgar Arthur, who is as low as a cart-driver and has no similarity whatever with the hero-king of courtly romance. This kind of literature is not at home in the high courts of kings and aristocrats, but it belongs rather in male gatherings around the beer table, in taverns, and at country fairs. The related background of this popular tradition has not yet been thoroughly investigated and the missing links are many. But one line of development—that which leads to the nursery rhyme—is clearly recognizable. During the 1920s, an inn-keeper, of all people, quoted an Arthurian nursery rhyme in the village of Tarn Wadling, a place well-known through medieval Arthurian romances:

When as King Arthur ruled this land,
He ruled it like a swine;
He bought three pecks of barley meal
To make a pudding fine.⁶

All nursery rhymes on King Arthur are said to be part of ballads or songs which have been lost and cannot be reconstructed. However, it is obvious that there was a marked decline in the sociological audience level and at the same time a cultural downgrading of the literature involved. One of the tangible results is the degenerate and corrupt King Arthur who rules his country "like a swine." Thus two different tendencies, neither genetically nor intentionally related to each other, conjoin to the same end: namely the conscious devaluation for political reasons and the popular "debunking" of a slightly old-fashioned hero.

No matter which turn the regard for King Arthur took, he was a reality which could not be ignored. Clergy and church confronted him again and again, and particularly for many monks, Arthur was a thorn in the flesh. The missionary fanatics objected to Arthur because he was not a paragon of Christian virtue, acting at times, in direct opposition to Christian concepts. Even the early saints' legends portray the king as a

barbaric, cruel, and not at all exemplary man, usually in order to display the personalities of the saints to better advantage. But some authors with an interest in Christian proselytism took a completely opposite approach. Since they could not blot out the memory of the famous king, they exploited his notoriety and transformed him into a Christian hero. This process is already recognizable in the *Historia Britonum* of Nennius (c. 800), where Arthur carries the image of St. Mary on his shoulders and where his victories over the pagan Saxons are attributed to Jesus Christ and His Holy Mother.

Later interpolations in Nennius make Arthur a crusader who fights the Saracens in the Holy Land. Some manuscripts recount his expedition against Jerusalem though without dwelling on the conquest of the Holy City and the usual battle descriptions. Great importance is attached to Arthur's piety. One version says that King Arthur erected a cross in the Holy Land to the measure of the original cross of Christ, that he prayed and fasted in front of this cross, and that it brought him victory over his foes.⁷

From here, a line of development can be traced to the figure of Arthur as a model of Christian spirituality. In the thirteenth-century *Perlesvaus*, the author says that no individual king since the crucifixion of Christ has contributed as much as Arthur to the spreading of the Christian faith.⁸ According to the author, a voice from heaven summons the king to a quest for the Holy Grail to unite the orders of heaven and earth, of the Old and New Testaments. Arthur himself sees the Grail in five different forms, one of them a chalice. He has replicas made of it, and distributes them throughout his realm so that they can be used for the celebration of the Eucharist.

Nennius' account of Arthur's bearing the image of St. Mary was repeated by several authors. There is a widespread tradition, whose probable origin was Geoffrey of Monmouth, that Arthur carried the image of St. Mary on the inner side of his shield. Giraldus Cambrensis points out that the reason for this devotion was Arthur's love of the Lady Chapel in Glastonbury. Several homiletic authors take advantage of this story to praise Arthur's behaviour as pious and exemplary. Other writers follow their lead, among them John Lydgate, who calls the king a "well of worship," "highest of princes," and the "greatest emperor of Christendom." His depiction of King Arthur ends in a kind of apotheosis similar to the stellification of pagan deities with Arthur "crowned in the heavenly mansioun." Among Christians, in the *Voeux du Paon* (c. 1310), he is venerated as one of the Nine Worthies, a motif which soon spread throughout European literature.

Arthur's connections with the Church became more involved. Vincent of Beauvais, for instance, in his *Speculum Historiale* (13th century), claimed that Arthur only waged war to come to the aid of the oppressed Church.⁹ In this way, Arthur was elevated to an

exemplum bonum and a model for all Christian kings. In Alain Bouchart's *Grandes Chroniques* (1514), the Virgin Mary herself comes to the aid of Arthur by veiling the hero's shield with her cloak, thus confounding his antagonist Frollo and causing his death.¹⁰ As a sign of his gratitude, King Arthur has the first Church of Notre Dame built in Paris.

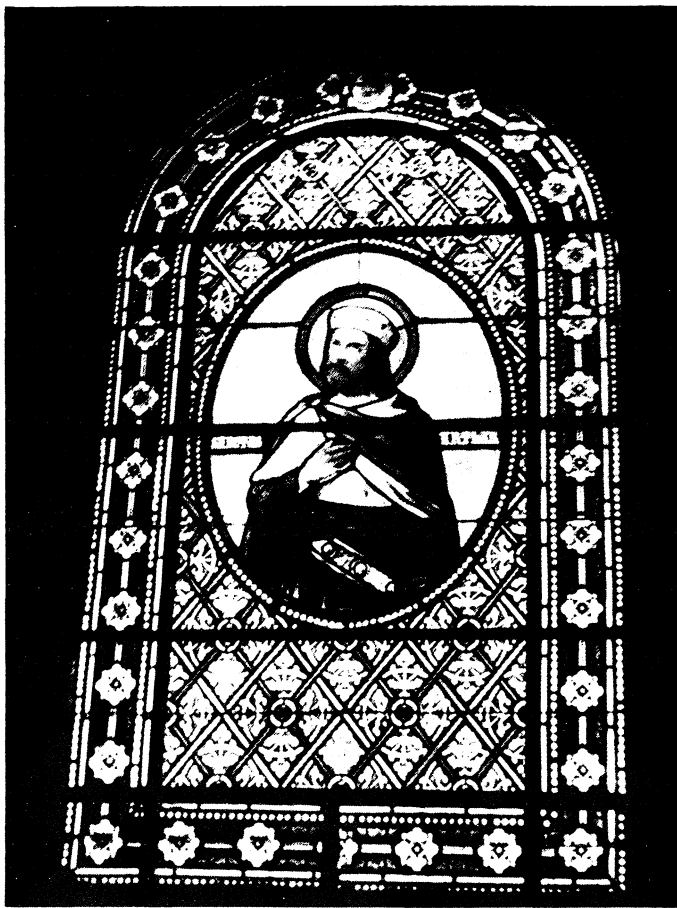
In the end, Arthur even achieved bodily assumption into heaven in the *Vera Historia* (Hayle's version, 13th century). This honor had so far been reserved for Enoch and Elias in addition, of course, to Christ and His mother Mary.¹¹ The ascent motif seems to have captured the imagination of later authors like a barbed hook. In *Henry V*, Shakespeare has the Hostess state that Falstaff was certainly not in Hell, but lay in Arthur's bosom. According to all authorities this is a simple mistake for Abraham's bosom. But in view of the fact that the Hostess is well-versed in medieval folklore and that there are several other authors who envisage Arthur in heaven, I prefer the bard's original reading. In our day, C. S. Lewis says in his novel *That Hideous Strength*: "For Arthur did not die but our Lord took him to be in the body till the end of time and the shattering of Sulva, with Enoch and Elias and Moses and Melchisedec, the King."¹²

In the light of all this, it is perhaps not so peculiar as generally supposed that ill persons prayed to Arthur as a Helper in Need, as John Major informs us.¹³ Arthur evidently not only stood on the threshold of sainthood, but a saint he did become, if only in the eyes of some of the people. In 1933, the famous hagiologist Grosjean received an inquiry from Spain. A certain Cathedral-Church (unfortunately, Grosjean later had forgotten which one) had received a generous donation, but under a condition not easily fulfilled—namely that one altar be consecrated to St. Arthur. Closer investigation revealed that the donor was not thinking of just any St. Arthur, but of the famous king of romance who had enjoyed great popularity in late medieval Spain.¹⁴ Grosjean, at that time certainly the most competent judge in the field of Celtic hagiography, stated regrettingly that on the basis of all evidence available there was no justification for the veneration of Arthur as a saint. All the greater was his dismay when in 1948 the same question was posed again. This time it was not the notion of an extravagant church benefactor, but an already existent stained-glass window in Ile-aux-Moines, Morbihan, that caused consternation. The *Sanctus Arthur* represented there was beyond a doubt the famous king of romance. He wears a white cap and cape, both lined with ermine.

This time Grosjean could not deny the existence of a cult of St. Arthur. The church window, he said, was proof of the fact that Arthur had been venerated as a saint, at least in Brittany. There is further evidence. The archbishopric of Rennes wrote in response to my inquiry that Arthur was listed among the Breton Christian names ("Arthur figure sur la liste des prénoms bretons") and that his Feast Day was the sixth of October. The list was published by the Librairie de

Bretagne (17, Quai Chateaubriand, Rennes) and was sent to me by Father Grégoire Ollivier (Abbaye Saint-Guénolé Landévennec, Finistère). In regard to Arthur's Feast Day my correspondent expressed his doubts that there was an official basis for the tradition, but a further look through the list shows that there are even more questionable saints, demanding greater suspension of disbelief: Guenièvre (January 3rd), Iseult (no date), Morgane (September 22nd), Perceval (April 16th), and last but not least, Tristan (May 4th).

In conclusion, I would like to draw attention to the



Photograph by Karl Heinz Göller

A stained glass window in the parish church of Ile-Aux-Moines, Morbihan. It was donated by Thomas Louet about 1880. The artisan is unknown. The figure is commonly referred to as Saint Arthur.

fact that even today, King Arthur retains both his religious and his political significance, even if the authorities of Church and State object. I told the parson of Ile-aux-Moines that I had made the journey to this small island in the Atlantic solely as a pilgrimage to St. Arthur. He retorted indignantly that he had tried for years to get rid of that troublesome church window because there *was* no St. Arthur.

Just recently, I wrote a letter to His Royal Highness, Prince Charles of Wales, to find out why one of the names he had given his son was that of Arthur, and whether he connected any political implication with the

name (as had been suggested by several newspapers).¹⁵ The Prince had the following reply sent: "The suggestion made by you, while interesting, was not in their Royal Highnesses' mind when they made the choice they did. Their Royal Highnesses chose the name Arthur . . . for the simple reason that they both very much like it."¹⁶

Church and State, priest and prince may be right, but they are in no position to dispute what the author of the *Alliterative Morte Arthur* said concerning the fate of King Arthur:

So many clerkis and kynges sall karpe of zoure dedis
And kepe zoure conquestez in cronycle for euer . . .

(3444-5)



Notes

*This essay is a short version of my plenary lecture on "The Figure of King Arthur as a Mirror of Political and Religious Views," held at Kalamazoo in 1983. For the full length paper cf. *Functions of Literature*, ed. Ulrich Broich et al. (Tübingen, 1984), pp. 55-79.

²Cf. E. Van der Ven-Ten Bensel, *The Character of King Arthur in English Literature* (Amsterdam, 1925), and R. Morris, *The Character of King Arthur in Medieval Literature* (Woodbridge, 1982).

³See my article, "Giraldus Cambrensis und der Tod Arthurs," *Anglia* 91 (1973), pp. 170-93.

⁴Cf. G. H. Gerould, "King Arthur and Politics," *Speculum* 2(1927), pp. 33-51; p. 448.

⁵B. Schmolke-Hasselmann, *Der arthurische Versroman von Chrétien bis Froissart* (Tübingen, 1980).

⁶E. K. Chambers, *Arthur of Britain* (London, 1927), pp. 189 ff.

⁷Cf. F. Faral, ed. *La Légende Arthurienne: Etudes et documents*, 3 vols. (Paris, 1929 [repr. 1969]), III. pp. 1-62.

⁸W. A. Nitze and Th. Jenkins, eds., *Le Haut Livre du Graal, Perlesvaus* (Chicago, 1932-37).

⁹Vincentius Bellovacensis, *Speculum Historiale* (Dvaci, 1624 [repr. Graz, 1965]).

¹⁰Alain Bouchart, *Grandes Chroniques* (Nantes, 1886).

¹¹M. Lapidge, "An edition of the Vera Historia De Morte Arthuri," *Arthurian Literature* 1(1981), pp. 79-83.

¹²C. S. Lewis, *That Hideous Strength: A Modern Fairy-Tale for Grown-Ups* (London, 1945), p. 337.

¹³John Major, *A History of Greater Britain*, Publications of the Scottish History Society, 10, transl. and ed. Archibald Constable (Edinburgh, 1892), p. 67.

¹⁴In Jakob Torsy, *Lexikon der deutschen Heiligen, Seligen, Ehrwürdigen and Gottseligen* (Cologne, 1959), col. 58, two further persons named Arthur are listed in addition to the Blessed Arthur (Whiting) of Glastonbury:

Arthur Bell, venerable Franciscan Priest in England, Guardian in London; imprisoned for the Faith, hanged, drawn and quartered in Tyburn near London, December 11th, 1643;

Arthur O'Nelly, blessed, Trinitarian Priest from Ireland, missionary to the Mohammedans; burned alive as Martyr for the Faith, November 1st, 1282.

On Whiting, cf. Arthur (Whiting) in: Basilius Senger, *Zweitausend Vornamen* (St. Augustin, 1979), p. 26.

¹⁵*The Guardian*, June 29, 1982; *Frankfurter Allgemeine*, June 29, 1982; *The Daily Telegraph*, June 29, 1982; *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, June 29, 1982.

¹⁶Letter to the author from the Hon. Edward Adeane, Oct. 5, 1982.