

The Figure of King Arthur as a Mirror of Political and Religious Views¹

1.

Chrétien de Troyes said in his *Ywain*: "I agree with the Bretons that King Arthur's name will live for evermore."² This was indeed a prophetic word for Arthur's fame has spread all over the world, and there is scarcely a national literature where he has not found a home.³ Critics have tried to explain this popularity by pointing out that Arthur is an ideal romance figure, a prototype of the good monarch, an archetype or even a kind of Everyman, and that he therefore rightfully possesses a permanent place in the human heart. Some authors have even gone so far as to maintain that he remains recognizable whatever his guise, that he remains true to himself.⁴

¹ This study is meant as a homage to W. F. Schirmer's Oberseminar and to one of his main proponents, Erwin Wolff. As such it goes back to the seminal work of Schirmer's *Die frühen Darstellungen des Arthurstoffes* (Köln and Opladen, 1958). The references have been limited to works of exemplary importance. All major secondary literature can be easily found in the *Bulletin Bibliographique de la Société Internationale Arthurienne*, which appears annually in Paris. See also C. E. Pickford and R. W. Last, eds., *The Arthurian Bibliography I: Author Listing* (Woodbridge, 1982), which claims to be complete up to 1978. The major standard handbook is even today E. K. Chambers, *Arthur of Britain* (London, 1927). A treasure-trove of Arthurian source information not yet fully exhausted is R. H. Fletcher, *The Arthurian Material in the Chronicles, especially those of Great Britain and France* (1906; 2nd ed. New York, 1966). Particularly important for the development of the Arthurian cycle is James Douglas Bruce, *The Evolution of Arthurian Romance from the Beginnings down to the year 1300*, 2 vols. (Göttingen, 1923–24, ²1928, repr. Gloucester, Mass., 1958). I am indebted to several works of Beate Schmolke-Hasselmann, Göttingen, in particular her book *Der arthurische Versroman von Chrétien bis Froissart* (Tübingen, 1980).

² "Si m'acort de tant as Bretons / que toz jorz durra li renons"; Chrétien de Troyes, *Le Chevalier au Lion (Ywain)*, ed. Mario Roques, *Les Romans de Chrétien de Troyes* (Paris, 1980), IV, 2, l. 37 f.

³ Cf. Roger Sherman Loomis, ed., *Arthurian Literature in the Middle Ages* (Oxford, 1959, repr. 1961), abr. *ALMA*, Chapters 6, 7, 12, 41.

⁴ Cf. E. Van der Ven-Ten Bonsel, *The Character of King Arthur in English Literature* (Amsterdam, 1925); R. Morris, *The Character of King Arthur in Medieval Literature* (Woodbridge, 1982).

In contrast to this view, I want to point out that hardly any other figure in literature has been as controversial and as ambivalent as that of Arthur. Under his name, we encounter literary characters who have little or nothing in common with each other in spite of the fact that they can be traced back to the *Dux Bellorum* of Nennius or to related popular traditions. There is the familiar figure of the chivalric Arthur, who is a kind of incarnation of the ideal *suzerain*. At the same time there is also the King Arthur who rules his country like a "swine" (in the nursery rhymes). And, there is the less well known Saint Arthur, who is venerated even today in the churches of France, particularly in Brittany.

The ideal chivalric ruler, swine and saint: how can we account for such a wide range of divergent developments? A number of critics have made investigations into the laws which have determined these tendencies⁵, without – it must be said – coming up with any satisfactory results. The principles delineated, such as what has been termed "epic degeneration", have not proved generally valid or applicable – there are evidently diametrically opposed tendencies.

On the other hand, the various lines of development are not completely indeterminable. The figure of the king is by no means freshly conceived each time as if there were no predecessors; on the contrary, the character of Arthur as found in literature or oral tradition is clearly influenced by antecedent portrayals in the development of the legend.

The presence of a widespread oral tradition is an important factor to be considered. In the beginning, it was probably restricted to the Celtic tribes, thus forming a Celtic *substratum* which influenced all genres of Arthurian literature as a kind of undercurrent of meaning.

This popular tradition had political implications. The Celts on both sides of the British Channel hoped for the return of Arthur. For them he was a kind of Messiah. In anticipation of his coming they engaged if not in active warfare, then at least in passive resistance. The very existence of this Arthurian tradition had its influence on poets and historiographers, on their views of the ideal monarch, and his relationship to his vassals and his people.

New tendencies in the Arthurian legend as it found its way into writing are not least a by-product of this Celtic undercurrent. These developments took two clearly recognizable directions.

⁵ On the principle of the development of epic cycles cf. V. M. Schirmunski, *Vergleichende Epenforschung*, I, Deutsche Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Berlin. Veröffentlichungen des Instituts für Deutsche Volkskunde (Berlin, 1961), p. 116.

First, secular and ecclesiastical authorities reacted to the situation by taking political measures, such as the exhumation of the remains of King Arthur in Glastonbury (Avalon).⁶ More far-reaching in its influence was the adoption of King Arthur by non-Celtic authors and rulers – in particular by the English. They came gradually to regard Arthur as one of their own and gave him a place in the long line of English monarchs. In the process, King Arthur was transformed into the romanticized ideal of a chivalric king, and thereby became a foil and a gauge for the respective reigning monarch. Political criticism of the monarch could be indirectly expressed through criticism of Arthur.⁷ Second, the widespread popularity which this orally transmitted Arthurian poetry achieved – with its attendant and disturbing messianic implications –, was a matter which caused deep concern to the Church. It is well-known that during the Middle Ages the Church sometimes resorted to the policy of undermining the undesirable popularity of secular celebrities by means of their canonization. The case of Arthur is rather complicated, as there is no official proof of such a canonization⁸, but it is evident that in certain quarters of the Celtic population Arthur was venerated as a saint. Religious authors either prepared the way for Arthur's sanctification, or succumbed to the pressure of popular sentiment.

2.

The fact that Arthur was a Celtic hero was of far greater importance in early Arthurian literature than during the High and Late Middle Ages. The Celts on both sides of the Channel – Bretons, Cornish, and Welsh – regarded him as one of their own. They saw in the king a figure with whom they could identify in order to set themselves apart from the Anglo-Saxons and Normans. To judge by the number and kind of extant documents, the centre of resistance from the beginning of the 12th century on must have been Brittany. Frequently we hear that the Bretons believed unshakably in Arthur's return.

⁶ Cf. the author's "Giraldus Cambrensis und der Tod Arthurs", *Anglia*, 91 (1973), 170–193.

⁷ On the political meaning of King Arthur cf. the author's *The Alliterative Morte Arthure*. A Reassessment of the Poem (Woodbridge, 1981), esp. pp. 15–29.

⁸ Cf. the author's "Saint Arthur", *Bretagne*, 802 (1962), 2, with further bibliographical references on "Saint Arthur".

Learned writers among the Welsh would have refrained from embracing and further contributing to the tales of popular tradition, particularly if they were in the service of the English king as Giraldus Cambrensis was. The Welsh people, however, continued to believe in Arthur and to revere his memory. The political *Song of the Welsh* (13th century) makes it clear that they regarded King Arthur as one of their own:

Virtuosos filii patres imitantur.
Sic Arturum Britones virtute sequantur.
Quam probo quam strenuo monstrant procreantur.
Ut fuit Arturus sic victores habeantur.⁹

A kind of pan-Celtic sense of identity is expressed here. The anonymous author calls himself a Welshman, but greets the related Bretons and Cornish as “cognatos Britones et Cornubienses”¹⁰ – blood-related Britons and Cornish. They must all prove now from what roots they have sprung: “documenta date qua sitis origine nati.”¹¹

In a similar way as the author of the *Song of the Welsh*, many other writers refer to the *Prophecies of Merlin*, according to which the English will one day be driven from the country. This hope is centred on the figure of King Arthur; he became a symbol of the British claim to sovereignty for the oppressed Celts who lived in constant fear of extermination. Just as Arthur once overcame the Romans and made them subject to the British, so too the united forces of the Celts would one day conquer and destroy the Saxon and Norman invaders. In representing Arthur as the relentless enemy of the foreign Germanic tribes, the Celts were expressing their own political feelings towards such groups. Thus King Arthur serves a clear-cut political purpose for the Celtic minority – namely, the expression of their will to survive and of their hope in the future.

Numerous concessions had been made to the stubbornness of the Celts, for instance by Etienne de Rouen, the author of *Draco Normannicus*.¹² In

⁹ T. Wright, ed., *The Political Songs of England*. From the Reign of John to that of Edward II (London, 1839; repr. New York, 1968), p. 57.

¹⁰ *The Political Songs of England*, p. 56.

¹¹ *The Political Songs of England*, p. 56.

¹² Etienne de Rouen (Stephanus Rothomagensis), *The Draco Normannicus*, in R. Howlett, ed., *Chronicles of the Reigns of Stephen, Henry II, and Richard I*, *Rerum Britannicarum Medii Aevi Scriptores* (Rolls Series), 82/2 (London, 1885; repr. Wiesbaden, 1964), pp. 585–781, cited hereafter as *Draco Normannicus*. Cf. R. S. Loomis, “King Arthur and the Antipodes”, *Modern Philology*, 38 (1941), 289–304; repr. as chapter V in R. S. Loomis,

this work King Henry II and King Arthur are contrasted as two super-monarchs. Arthur rules the second half of the world, "altera pars mundi dimidiata sibi"¹³. Henry emphasizes his claim to Neustria and Brittany. Both lands belong to him as the rightful successor of Rollo. He predicts that the yoke of the Normans will weigh even heavier upon the Bretons in the future. But he veils his massive threats and his rejection of Arthur's demand in sugar-coated diplomatic formulae by refusing to relinquish his sovereign titles: "Cedo sed ad tempus"¹⁴, while at the same time postponing outright warfare. He makes it clear, however, that the whole British territory belongs to him and his successors. Then follows a surprising but surely not quite seriously meant turn of phrase. He will govern this country under Arthur's feudal sovereignty: "Jus tibi, pax nobis, totaque terra simul."¹⁵

The consciousness of Arthur's ethnic identity remained alive to the end of the Middle Ages and beyond. In a debate written in 1455 by an anonymous (French) herald¹⁶, the English speaker cites Arthur as the paradigm and nonpareil of English history. The French herald counters with the antithesis that Arthur was British and thus an enemy of the Anglo-Saxons, who consequently had no right to lay claim to him. According to Horst Schroeder, the historical reason for the composition of this debate may have been the Council of Constance (1416), where a bitter controversy arose as to whether England had the status of an autonomous nation or belonged to the Holy Roman Empire as postulated by the French.¹⁷

In general it can be said that with greater distance both in time and place from the political issues at stake, the use of terminology became more vague. Gottfried of Viterbo¹⁸, who served at the Court of the Staufers,

Wales and the Arthurian Legend (Cardiff, 1956; repr. Darby, Pa., 1969), pp. 61–76. C. Fierville, "Etienne de Rouen, moine du Bec", *Bulletin de la Société des Antiquaires de la Normandie*, 8 (1875–77), 54–78, 421–442. J. S. P. Tatlock, "Geoffrey and King Arthur in *Normannicus Draco*", *Modern Philology*, 31 (1933), 1–18, 113–125.

¹³ *Draco Normannicus*, l. 1168, p. 703.

¹⁴ *Draco Normannicus*, l. 1277, p. 707.

¹⁵ *Draco Normannicus*, l. 1280, p. 707.

¹⁶ P. Meyer, ed., *Le Débat des hérauts d'armes de France et d'Angleterre*. Suivi de "The Debate Between the Heralds of England and France", by John Coke, Société des Anciens Textes Français, VIII (Paris, 1877).

¹⁷ *Der Topos der Nine Worthies in Literatur und bildender Kunst* (Göttingen, 1971), p. 343 f.

¹⁸ On Gottfried cf. E. G. Gardner, *Arthurian Legend in Italian Literature* (London, 1930), p. 10; see *ALMA*, p. 70 f.

also dealt with the Angles and Saxons in his World History. To him they were the successors of the Macedonians. He does not differentiate between British and Saxon, but rather uses both terms as synonyms. For him the "English nation" represents a unity.

Up to the time of the Tudors, the fact that Arthur was a hero of the British people remained both well-known and relevant; the enmity against the Anglo-Saxons came to be forgotten, however. Geoffrey of Monmouth had at first been criticized for relegating the great Anglo-Saxon kings to the position of mere sub-kings or predecessors and successors of King Arthur. But now Arthur was gradually beginning to be seen as an Englishman, or he was treated as an immediate predecessor in the long list of insular monarchs.

It should be noted that Arthur also becomes a viable medium for local and subsidiary political purposes. Nicholaus Cantaloupus, for example, produced a document in the 15th century according to which King Arthur granted a number of privileges to the University of Cambridge in the year 531, among which was the exemption from all secular servitude and from all regal taxes, great or small. He mentions *en passant* that at this time cows and sheep were grazing in the meadows that were later to become Oxford, while the University [of Cambridge] had already been in existence for more than three hundred years.¹⁹

3.

The English royal family used the legendary name of King Arthur in much the same way. Numerous English kings saw themselves as *Arturus Secundus*.²⁰ Henry II and Edward I had the remains of Arthur exhumed and reburied with pomp and ceremony in order to destroy the British separatist element and in order to present King Arthur as a symbol to the entire nation. King Arthur was de-celticized and anglicized. Even in *Lazamon* we read: "þat an Arður sculde zete cum Anglen to fulste."²¹

¹⁹ Nicholaus Cantaloupus, *De Antiquitate et Origine Universitatis Cantabrigiae*, ed. Th. Hearne, in *Thomae Sprotti Chronica* (London, 1719), pp. 267–269. Cf. Richard Parker, *The History and Antiquities of the University of Cambridge* (London, 1622), pp. 6, 16 f.

²⁰ Cf. G. H. Gerould, "King Arthur and Politics", *Speculum*, 2 (1927), 33–51. Idem, "King Arthur and Politics again", *Speculum*, 2 (1927), 448.

²¹ G. L. Brook and R. F. Leslie, eds., *Lazamon: Brut*, EETS OS, 277 (London, 1978), II, 750, l. 14297.

Here Arthur is called the saviour of his former enemies, but of course Lazamon was thinking of the entire population of the British Isles, not merely of the Anglo-Saxons. The indiscriminate use of terminology mirrors a historical process which began during the Middle Ages and which even today has still not been brought to a conclusion – namely the coalescence of the various ethnic groups that populate the British Isles. As early as the thirteenth century the terms *Saxones* and *Angli* are sometimes used to refer to the Normans; *Anglia* and *Britannia* are similarly used indiscriminately. Arthur is called *Rex Angliae* several times, even by authors who are still aware of his origin.

The consequences of Arthur's adoption are far-reaching. The king could now be accepted, romanticized, and idealized by his former enemies. He became not only the King of the English, but also the prototype of an ideal monarch. Thus the process by which Arthur was anglicized was accompanied by his "internationalization". He was invoked outside England as a symbolic figure whenever prestige, power, and the aristocratic way of life were at stake – and this not only in courtly circles, but also on the ministerial level and in the urban middle classes.²²

But the broad appeal of Arthurian ideals is not restricted to the Middle Ages, and certainly not to Europe. Modern versions of the Arthurian legend are found in almost every part of the world – the Japanese *Kairo-kō* by Natsume Soseki written in 1906 being only one example.²³ Every country and every age found its own approach to Arthur and his world, and imbued them with their own special meaning. The great success of the musical *Camelot*²⁴ in the U.S.A. is due not least to the fact that President John F. Kennedy and many other Americans regarded the Arthurian legend as a model of an ideal society.²⁵

The last stage in development of the legend and figure of King Arthur to date is universalization. In fantasy, science fiction and film, the evidence is manifest. After C.S. Lewis' subtle extension of Arthurian legend

²² Cf. W. Störmer, "König Artus als aristokratisches Leitbild während des späteren Mittelalters, gezeigt an Beispielen der Ministerialität und des Patriziats", *Zeitschrift für Bayerische Landesgeschichte*, 35 (1972), 946–971, with further references.

²³ Cf. T. Takamiya and A. Armour, "Kairo-kō: A Dirge", *Arthurian Literature*, 2 (1982), 92–126.

²⁴ S. Sadie, ed., *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* (London, Washington, Hongkong, 1980), here: R. Byrnside, "Loewe, Frederick", vol. XI, 130 f.

²⁵ T. H. White, Interview with Jackie Kennedy, *Newsweek* 62/25, Dec. 16, 1963.

to interstellar space²⁶, there are now galactic adaptations of the same material – for instance in the film *Star Wars*.²⁷ Merlin (Obi-wan Kenobi), Lancelot (Han Solo), and Guenevere (Laya) are figures easily recognized by any Arthurian, and universal though trivialized in their appeal. The producers had difficulties with King Arthur. Interestingly enough, they split him into two persons – the Principle of Evil “Darth Vader” and the Principle of Good “Luke Skywalker”. For a popular film, this is an astonishingly apt diagnosis of the archetypal character of King Arthur. It highlights the dichotomy which marks the opposing poles of Arthur’s development through the ages – the saint and the sinner.

4.

Criticism of King Arthur is found in the earliest Celtic and Latin versions.²⁸ Often it seems as though Arthur’s path through world literature resembles the biography of a living human being: from the youthful boisterous warrior to a static figurehead, and further to either saint or sinner. Such tendencies have been pointed out by Russian folklorists. But sometimes the criticism of Arthur is actually levelled against the ruling king. In such a case the figure of Arthur acts as a kind of scapegoat, as the target of objections no one would have dared to raise openly against the actual king. This was a widespread practice during the Middle Ages. It became a proverb which is still current today, “Beat the dog before the lion”. Since no one dared to punish the lion, they beat the dog, who could not defend himself: “As by the whelp chasted is the leon.”²⁹

Sometimes Arthurian literature throws off its thin disguise and becomes unabashed ideological literature. It is either directed against the king³⁰ or

²⁶ Cf. *Out of the Silent Planet*, 1938; *Perelandra*, 1943; *That Hideous Strength*, 1945; *Till we have Faces*, 1956.

²⁷ *Science Fiction Times*. Magazin für Science Fiction und Fantasy, 24 (1982), no. 2,7; no. 11,6: Reviews.

²⁸ Cf. J. S. P. Tatlock, “The Dates of the Arthurian Saints’ Legends”, *Speculum*, 14 (1939), 345–365.

²⁹ Ed. F. N. Robinson, *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer* (London, 1957), “The Squire’s Tale”, l. 491, p. 133. See “Explanatory Notes”, p. 720, on l. 491. On the political relevance of King Arthur and his Table Round see E. Köhler, *Ideal und Wirklichkeit in der höfischen Epik*. Studien zur Form der frühen Artus- und Graldichtung (Tübingen, 1956), *passim*.

³⁰ Cf. *Der arthurische Versroman*, p. 203.

it is made subservient to the objectives of historical kings and princes. This is evident from the vantage point of the 20th century. It is, however, debatable how evident the direction of criticism was at the time. With good reason it has been pointed out that a great number of Arthurian parallels to Edward III and Henry V are already to be found in the *Historia Regum Britanniae* of Geoffrey of Monmouth and can thus hardly be ascribed to the political intentions of fourteenth- and fifteenth-century authors.³¹

And yet it is evident that many Arthurian stories are not mere entertainments but have political overtones. The introduction of the Round Table, for instance, found for the first time in Wace's *Roman de Brut* (1155) had great significance politically, though by no means in the way Erich Köhler has postulated in his book *Ideal und Wirklichkeit in der höfischen Epik*.³² Köhler does exactly what nearly all medieval authors did: he sees King Arthur in the light of the prevailing ideas and tendencies of his time, by making the Table Ronde a democratic institution, an outward sign of the ideal relationship between a monarch and his lords who are all subject to the laws of chivalry. In reality, all French and English works say exactly the opposite: the word "equality" refers exclusively to the barons. In Wace and all later authors the king himself dines on a dais (Wace, ll. 1913 ff.), Arthur has not surrendered his privileges at all by founding the Table Round; he has certainly not become *primus inter pares*. Thus the Table Round is by no means a democratic institution. That is why Schmolke-Hasselmann has called it "one of the shrewdest inventions of British political propaganda"³³. And yet the misconception of a democratic Table Round has had its consequences down to the present day, if only in the form of ideals and models.

In Wace's eyes Arthur has already ceased to incorporate the idea of *regnum* under which Geoffrey of Monmouth had seen him.³⁴ This kind of devaluation became a trend which has been continued down to the present. In William of Malmesbury's *De Antiquitate Glastoniensis Ecclesiae*³⁵

³¹ Morris, *The Character of King Arthur*, p. 1 f.

³² B. Schmolke-Hasselmann, "The Round Table: Ideal, Fiction, Reality", *Arthurian Literature* II, ed. R. Barber (Woodbridge, 1982), pp. 41–75.

³³ "The Round Table: Ideal, Fiction, Reality", p. 61.

³⁴ *Die frühen Darstellungen des Arthurstoffes*, pp. 41–53.

³⁵ J. A. Robinson, *Two Glastonbury Legends* (Cambridge, 1926). B. Schmolke-Hasselmann, "King Arthur as Villain in the Thirteenth-Century Romance *Yder*", *Reading Medieval Studies*, 6 (1980), 31. Text edition of *Yder*: Heinrich Gelzer, ed. *Der altfranzösische Yderroman*, Gesellschaft für romanische Literatur, vol. 31 (Dresden, 1913).

we find a possibly interpolated episode in which King Arthur plays the role of a knight errant. The knight Yder alone is active. He had been dubbed a knight at Christmas in Caerleon and had been given shield and sword. His following battles against the giants on Mount Ranae are won single-handed. Arthur's only function is to mourn the apparent death of the knight, for which he feels responsible due to his tardiness in coming to the aid of the young hero. This kind of narrative was on the way to the French romance in verse, Arthur himself, at the beginning of his career as a figurehead and a moral degenerate.

In the Anglo-Norman version of the *Yder-Romance*³⁶, which centres on the same hero, Arthur is openly criticized for his bad character. The poem was written about 1208, during the reign of King John (1199–1216). This king was not an Arthurian enthusiast like his predecessor Richard, who had regarded himself as the rightful heir of King Arthur, and who had given Excalibur to the King of Sicily in 1191.³⁷ John had the young Arthur, Prince of Brittany, killed who should have ascended the throne in John's place, and who had been regarded by many as a kind of *Arturus redivivus*.

A number of monasteries did not like John's behaviour either. In Glastonbury Abbey, which had been associated with King Arthur as early as the reign of Henry the Second, active resistance grew among the monks. The King, together with Bishop Savary, attempted to place the Abbey under his jurisdiction in 1214. Glastonbury was besieged by troops belonging to the King and the Bishop. The monks sent a petition to the Pope, who intervened in their favour.

The poem *Yder* was written at the same time – probably even under the spell of these events at Glastonbury Abbey.³⁸ King Arthur has gone through an astonishing transformation. He is jealous, hungry for power, cruel and wicked. Yder had expected to find all the knightly and courtly ideals incorporated in the person of Arthur. Instead, he has to face the fact that the much praised King is on a par with the murderous Kay, and that he is waging unjust wars, as for instance against Talac. Yder goes to the aid of Talac in his fight against Arthur and wins several duels against Kay. Yder is just as disgusted with Arthur as Ywain and Gawain are. All the

³⁶ *Der altfranzösische Yderroman, passim.*

³⁷ "Rex autem Angliae dedit ei (Tancredo regi Siciliae) gladium optimum Arcturi, nobilis quondam regis Britonum, quem Britones vocaverunt, Caliburnum" (6 March, 1191), *Gesta Regis Ricardi*, ed. W. Stubbs, II, 159, quoted in *Arthur of Britain*, p. 274.

³⁸ On the interpretation cf. *ALMA*, p. 375 f.

same, there is a reconciliation between the three, a solution of the problem not quite warranted by the text and therefore called "an apotheosis of courtoisie and largesse" by Schmolke-Hasselmann.³⁹ It is of particular interest that the King blames all his vices on the bad counsel of his vassals, and this is a clear indication of the direction of criticism. The author of *Yder* is not alone in his attitude. Several French works between Chrétien and Froissart, largely meant for English patrons and audiences, present the image of an unknightly King Arthur with a weak character. He is repeatedly reprehended and admonished by his vassals. Occasionally the poet himself criticizes Arthur, as for example in *Hunbaut*, a thirteenth-century romance.⁴⁰

In *Rigomer*⁴¹, the knights of the Round Table set off to save Lancelot. The poet names the knights who leave the court for the quest, and there are no less than five Ywains among them. Others volunteer for Gawain's expedition, and in the end there are five hundred knights willing to go to his aid. When Arthur sees that half of his knights intend to desert him, he flies into a rage and swears to burn or hang anybody who leaves the court without his permission.

This kind of outburst over knights leaving *en masse* for purposes other than those which Arthur has in mind – the quest of the Holy Grail being one of them – is characteristic of Arthur's new situation. He is a king who no longer complies with the rules of knighthood. In *Perlesvaus* and in the prose *Lancelot*, Arthur is obviously being criticized. The king's "vilanie" is emphasized at frequent intervals. The poet explains this as a sign of the king's decadence. Thus it is the knights who are on the side of the code of knighthood, and it is Arthur who has betrayed this very code. The knights undertake duties which were the privilege of the king himself in courtly Arthurian literature. However, the most interesting feature is that Arthur fights without success against the crumbling of the old order of knighthood and the centrifugal forces, thus destroying the court.

Many critics have seen the source of Arthur's decadence in the mass of popular tales dealing with the legend. William of Malmesbury, for instance, insists that there are all too many popular tales about King Arthur which are nothing but *nugae*, that is, vain and false lies, whereas

³⁹ "Arthur as Villain", p. 35. Cf. *ALMA*, pp. 369 f.

⁴⁰ J. Stürzinger and H. Breuer, eds., *Hunbaut* (Dresden, 1914).

⁴¹ W. Foerster and H. Breuer, eds., *Les Merveilles de Rigomer* (Dresden, 1908–1915). Cf. *ALMA*, pp. 385–387.

the king was worthy of being celebrated in history books.⁴² Again and again we hear about the *fabulosi britones*, who make up all sorts of tales about King Arthur which do not contain a grain of truth. The belief in the return of Arthur belongs to the same realm but cannot be treated in detail here⁴³, it has very often been connected almost proverbially with naivety and dumbwittedness.

It is a well-known fact that a number of other kings suffered under the stubborn belief in Arthur's return. The exhumations of Arthur mentioned earlier were intended to deal the final blow to the myth of his "return"⁴⁴, but such was not to prove the case. It is evidently not possible to eradicate a popular folk myth in this manner. At the turn of this century an old man asked archaeologists near Cadbury, which is only a stone's throw from Glastonbury, "Have you come to take the King out?".⁴⁵

Popular belief in Arthur's return shows that a widespread oral tradition must have existed originally in Celtic regions – and spread from there throughout Europe, North Africa, the Near East – in short to the whole of Christianity.⁴⁶ The orally disseminated stories about King Arthur probably had very little contact with literary traditions. Because such tales were regarded as spurious and despicable, they contributed to the devaluation of King Arthur in the eyes of serious writers.⁴⁷

In the process of more historically oriented research it became increasingly clear that most stories about King Arthur did not belong to the

⁴² "Hic est Artur de quo Britonum nugae hodieque delirant; dignus plane quem non fallaces somniarent fabulae, sed veraces praedicarent historiae [...]", *De Rebus Gestis Regum Anglorum* (c. 1125), ed. W. Stubbs, I, § 8, 342, quoted in *Arthur of Britain*, p. 250.

⁴³ Cf. *ALMA*, pp. 64–71.

⁴⁴ See the reports on the exhumation by Ralph of Coggeshall (*Arthur of Britain*, p. 268) and Giraldus Cambrensis (*Arthur of Britain*, pp. 269–274). Cf. the author's "Giraldus Cambrensis und der Tod König Arthurs".

⁴⁵ *ALMA*, pp. 64–71, p. 69 f.

⁴⁶ On the legend of Arthur's return cf. Mary Scanlan, *The Legend of Arthur's Survival* (Columbia Univ. Diss., 1950), University Microfilms, Ann Arbor, Publ. No. 1896. L'Abbé de la Rue, *Essais sur les bardes, les Jongleurs et les trouvères Normands et Anglo-Normands* (Caen, 1854), I, 73. (= espoir Breton); I, 73 (return of King Arthur). On oral transmission of the legend cf. Alexander Ostmann, *Die Bedeutung der Arthurdtradition für die englische Gesellschaft des 12. und 13. Jahrhunderts* (Diss. Berlin, 1975), pp. 13–21.

⁴⁷ In this context Polydore Vergil is of particular importance. In his *Anglicae Historiae Libri XXVI* he calls Arthur an important Briton, but says that nearly all tales circulated about him belong to the tradition of the common people; *Polydore Vergil's English History, etc.*, ed. H. Ellis, Camden Society, Series No. I, 36 (London, 1846; repr. New York, London, 1968), p. 121 f.

realm of the historian but rather to the genre of Robin Hood and *Fyn-Mak-Coull*. Thus William Stewart says that as many lies were told about both ballad heroes as about King Arthur.⁴⁸ Even though the 17th century still saw the *HRB* as an historical work in accordance with the intentions of its author, critical voices grew in strength, as did the reservations about its historicity.⁴⁹

Through the influence of Arthurian stories, anecdotes, legends, ballads, etc. on practically all literary genres, the image of the monarch was decourtified, vulgarized, and reduced to the level of the trivial and banal. In the romances, in particular, and in the ballad-type narratives which succeeded them, a tendency towards degeneracy and decadence in the image of Arthur resulted.⁵⁰ What emerged was a morally corrupt King Arthur, who was often used as an *exemplum malum* or presented as the incarnation of a number of flaws and sins.

This King Arthur has only very little to do with the courtly king of romance. He is as vulgar as a cart driver. An Arthur of this ilk is to be found in some of the popular ballads. But in this case political objectives are hardly likely; it is far more a case of pure joy in debunking a slightly old-fashioned hero and in the toppling of literary monuments. In *Syre Corneus*⁵¹ Arthur is the protagonist of a drinking horn tale. He is represented as a completely uncourtly cuckold who thanks the seducer of his wife for the "good services" rendered in his absence. Ballads of this type have justly been called debasements of the originals. They are based on lengthier romances which predate them. The Arthurian legend was evidently made available to a new audience. The listeners were perhaps to be found in pubs or inns, certainly only in male company where vulgar jokes of this kind appealed to the common taste and would be most appreciated. Naturally, such stories were incapable of suppressing the original image

⁴⁸ William Stewart, *The Buik of the Croniclis of Scotland; or a Metrical Version of the History of Hector Boece*, ed. W. B. Turnbull, *Rerum Britannicarum Medii Aevi Scriptores* (Rolls Series), 6/2 (London, 1858), ll. 27959 ff.

⁴⁹ During the English reformation a kind of anti-Arthurian attitude can be observed. Cf. Francis Thynne, *Chaucer. Animaduersiones etc.*, ed. G. H. Kingsley, EETS OS, 9 (London, 1865), Appendix I: *The Pilgrim's Tale* (dated ?1536–40).

⁵⁰ On the ballads, see the author's *König Arthur in der englischen Literatur des späten Mittelalters*, Palaestra, 238 (Göttingen, 1963), chapter 6, pp. 166–174, with a list of texts and bibliography.

⁵¹ H. Hedenus, ed., *Syre Corneus* (Diss. Erlangen, 1904). On the transmission of the legend cf. F. J. Child, ed., *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads*, 5 vols. (New York, 1957), II, 274 ff.

of Arthur as the ideal king. But they paved the way for a development which led to the Arthur of the nursery rhymes.

These nursery rhymes represent the last stage of development – and are thus a conclusion rather than a new beginning. One example is the nursery rhyme on King Arthur, which was recorded in Tarne Wadling, a place well-known through medieval romance. A local inn-keeper recited an Arthurian verse during the nineteen-twenties which is practically identical with the still popular nursery rhyme:

When as King Arthur ruled the land,
He ruled it like a swine;
He bought three pecks of barleymeal
To make a pudding fine.⁵²

Iona and Peter Opie are convinced that all the nursery rhymes connected with King Arthur are parts of older ballads or songs, though we unfortunately cannot reconstruct their original forms.⁵³ It is impossible to say whether or not things went downhill with King Arthur in a linear form. But one line of development, at least, ends with a degenerate Arthur.

5.

The methods used in the devaluation and degradation of King Arthur were in part drastic and disrespectful, but some were also subtle and sophisticated. At any rate they were, on the whole, only partially effective. Evidently it was not possible for the authors to undermine the political relevance and the popularity of the Arthurian myth. Arthur remained very much alive, and not only in the literature of the Celts,

⁵² Printed in *Arthur of Britain*, p. 189f. One of the Nursery Rhymes says:

When as King Arthur ruled this land,
He ruled it like a swine;
He stole three pecks of barleymeal
To make a bag-pudding.

Printed in W. S. Baring-Gould and C. Baring-Gould, *The Annotated Mother Goose* (New York, 1967), p. 142. Also in other Nursery Rhymes Arthur is a thievish king, cf. *The Annotated Mother Goose*, p. 142.

⁵³ On Nursery Rhymes about King Arthur see I. and P. Opie, *The Oxford Dictionary of Nursery Rhymes* (Oxford, ⁵1966); I. and P. Opie, *The Oxford Nursery Rhyme Book* (Oxford, ³1960), s. v. "Arthur".

which has been styled a revenge of the imagination upon the Anglo-Saxon and Romance civilizations.

The Celts sang the praises of their king with a heartfelt zealous devotion, probably in several kinds of narratives.⁵⁴ From the middle of the twelfth century their bards spread these tales to Normandy and Northern France, and later on through the whole of England, France, Germany and Italy.⁵⁵ We do not know very much about the Breton singers and their tales, but we do know that Arthuriana became the material of traditional popular narrative throughout Europe. More important, this literature was fused with historical reality, so that in this respect the clear-cut boundary between fiction and contemporary history became blurred.

King Arthur took up residence in the realm between history and myth, and from there took possession of the fantasy and thought of those people for whom he was less a matter of personal attachment than an inescapable presence. This is most of all true of clerics and monks, for whom the messianic hopes connected with Arthur must have been a thorn in the flesh. Moreover, in most of the tales the king was far from being a paragon of Christianity. Since the authors could not hope to blot out the memory of Arthur or its widespread popularity, they transformed him into a Christian hero.

The tendency towards a Christian idealization can be recognized as early as Nennius' *Historia Britonum* (early 9th century), where Arthur bears the image of the Virgin Mary "super humeros suos" and where victory is attributed to Jesus Christ and St. Mary. As a Christian warrior against the pagan Saxons, Arthur became a kind of Fighter for the Faith, *defensor fidei*. In later Nennius interpolations, Arthur turns into a crusader who goes to the Holy Land in order to fight the Saracens.⁵⁶ Some manuscripts recount this journey to Jerusalem, but do not stress the battles against the pagans, which are only mentioned in passing. They do, however, emphasize the piety of King Arthur. Similar to St. Oswald in Denisesburn, Northumbria, Arthur raised a cross of the same size as that of Christ, prayed and fasted for three days in front of it, and through it gained the victory over his foes.

There are also narratives which stress King Arthur's piety in other

⁵⁴ On the role of the Breton bards cf. *ALMA*, Chapters 6, 7, 11.

⁵⁵ (Pseudo) Alanus de Insulis, ed. G. Raynaud de Lage, *Alain de Lille* (Paris, 1951), pp. 13–15.

⁵⁶ F. Faral, ed., *La Légende Arthurienne*. Etudes et documents, 3 vols. (Paris, 1929; repr. 1969), III, 1–62.

ways. The *Perlesvaus*⁵⁷ is unique in its mixture of heroism and Christian devotion. Even at the beginning, the author says that since Christ's crucifixion no individual king had done as much for the propagation of the Christian Faith as King Arthur and his knights. A voice from Heaven challenges Arthur as the highest representative of worldly power to seek the Grail, and thus to join the earthly and heavenly order, Old and New Testament, Synagogue and Ecclesia. Arthur envisions the Grail in five different forms. He is particularly impressed by the Chalice, and has copies made of it, so that all the churches in his country can use this previously unknown vessel for the celebration of the Eucharist.

King Arthur is said to have carried a statue of the Virgin Mary in the battle near Guinnion (Nennius), as well as on his way to the Holy Land (Nennius-Gloss).⁵⁸ Some celtologists believe that this interpretation is based on a misunderstanding of the text, and that the reference is to King Arthur's coat of arms.⁵⁹ Giraldus Cambrensis mentions the special devotion which King Arthur had for St. Mary in *De Principis Instructione*.⁶⁰ According to Gerald, he had her image painted on the interior side of his shield out of affection for the Church of St. Mary in Glastonbury. During the battle he regarded the image of the Virgin devoutly, and kissed her feet. Giraldus describes this conduct of the King as exemplary and worthy of imitation.

It is typical of the monkish and clerical tradition that King Arthur grows in piety and Christian virtue. A good example is John Lydgate⁶¹, who enriches the canon of chivalric virtues through the Seven Acts of Charity and other pious deeds. Thus Lydgate demands that knights should always be prepared to defend the freedom of the Holy Church and to respect and honour religious folk.⁶² In all he says, Lydgate exalts and sublimates the image of King Arthur. The King becomes a "well of wor-

⁵⁷ W. A. Nitze and Th. Jenkins, eds., *Le Haut Livre du Graal, Perlesvaus* (Chicago, 1932–37). Cf. "Perlesvaus", in *ALMA*, pp. 263–273.

⁵⁸ Cf. *Arthur of Britain*, p. 239.

⁵⁹ The Welsh word for "shield" ("ysgwydd") differs only in a single letter from that for shoulder ("ysgwyd"). Cf. *Arthurian Material in the Chronicles*, p. 32 f.

⁶⁰ *De Principis Instructione*, ed. G. F. Warner, *Rerum Britannicarum Medii Aevi Scriptores* (Rolls Series), 21/8 (London, 1891), p. 126.

⁶¹ John Lydgate, *Fall of Princes*, ed. H. Bergen, EETS ES, 121–124 (London, 1924–1927). The French text of Laurent de Premierfait is in Volume IV. A separate version of the Arthurian portion appeared in W. Perzl, *Die Arthurlegende in Lydgates Fall of Princes*. Kritische Neu-Ausgabe mit Quellenforschung (Diss. München, 1911).

⁶² *Fall of Princes*, Book VIII, ll. 2756 and 2764.

ship", the "highest of princes" and, finally, the greatest Emperor of Christendom.⁶³ The apotheosis of King Arthur is comparable to that of some heathen celebrities who are raised to the heavens as stellar gods. In place of this deification, however, Lydgate describes a kind of canonization, although only metaphorically, since it was not officially sanctioned by the Church. All terms derive from astronomy and could also be used for the constellation of Bootes with its Arcturus. But the literal sense is only thinly veiled: "Arthur syt crownyd in the heavenly mansioun." Among Christians he is called: "first of the worthi nine."⁶⁴ The latter topos, which goes back to the *Voeux du Paon* (ca. 1310), was to become relevant for Arthur's fame as a Christian Worthy in art and literature (fig. 1,2,3).⁶⁵

In the 13th century this tendency is already noticeable. Vincenz of Beauvais' *Speculum Historiale*⁶⁶ (the fourth part – perhaps not by Vincenz – is called "Speculum Morale") includes a section on Arthur's great merit as a Christian King. In a note, he is called the most Christian of all sovereigns because he rushed to the aid of the oppressed Church in France and Brittany. Moreover, he conquered several countries for the sole purpose of spreading the Catholic Faith there. Evidently this claim set a precedent which was to be imitated repeatedly by later authors. Thus Jean de Wavrin⁶⁷ calls Arthur an eminently pious and faithful Catholic, who undertook all his campaigns solely for the greater glory of the Catholic Church and of the Catholic Faith. According to Wavrin, Arthur surpassed all other kings in this respect, and he enjoyed success solely because of his religious zeal.

From here it is only a small step to Arthur as the *exemplum bonum* of the homilies. The Breton Saint Vincentius (Ferrier)⁶⁸ demanded categorically that the tales of the poets should no longer be preached to the

⁶³ *Fall of Princes*, Book VIII, ll. 2853, 2874 and 2975.

⁶⁴ *Fall of Princes*, Book VIII, ll. 3106 ff. On Arthur's relationship to Fortuna cf. W. F. Schirmer, *John Lydgate, ein Kulturbild aus dem 15. Jahrhundert* (Tübingen, 1952), p. 185.

⁶⁵ Cf. *Der Topos der Nine Worthies*.

⁶⁶ Vincentius Bellovacensis, *Speculum Historiale*, Bibliotheca Mundi Sev Speculi Maioris Vincentii Burgundi Praesulis Bellovacensis ... Tomus Quartus qui Speculum Historiale inscribitur ... (Dvaci, 1624; repr. Graz, 1965).

⁶⁷ Jehan de Wavrin, *Recueil des Chroniques*, 5 vols., eds. W. and E. Hardy, *Rerum Britannicarum Medii Aevi Scriptores* (Rolls Series) (London, 1864–91). Cf. *Arthurian Material in the Chronicles*, pp. 225–230.

⁶⁸ *Tertia Pars. S. Vin. (sic) Sermonum Sancti Vincētij. Pars Tertia: que de sanctis appellari solet etc.* (Lugduni, 1528); cf. the letter F (= fabula). Cf. W. B. Johnson, "The Arthurian Legend in Brittany", *The Nineteenth Century and After*, 98 (1925), 756–766.



Fig. 1: Hans Burgkmair [1519], Woodcut of the three Christian Worthies



Fig. 2: Innsbruck, Hofkirche, to the left: bronze statue of King Arthur of England



Fig. 3: Hans Daucher [c. 1486 – 1538], *Temple of friendship*. Hohenlohe Collection, Castle of Neuenstein, Württemberg



Fig. 4: Alain Bouchart, *Les Croniques Annalles de pays dangleterre et bretaigne*

people, but only the Gospel and the Legends of the Saints. As a consequence the Arthurian legend had to be adjusted in several points, sometimes with curious results. Jean des Preis says in his *Mer des Histoires*⁶⁹ that Guenevere was sentenced to death and executed by Lancelot. Mordred, according to the same source, was likewise condemned to death, and immured together with the body of Guenevere, which he devoured. Lancelot became a monk, only to return to Paris at the ripe old age of 177 to recount his earlier adventures.

Alain Bouchart tells us in his *Grandes Chroniques*⁷⁰ (1514) that the Virgin Mother herself granted Arthur the victory over Floлло, who appears as a giant in this version. She interfered directly in the conflict between the two protagonists by veiling Arthur's shield with her cloak (fig. 4). Since the garment was lined with ermine, as Bouchart relates, King Arthur himself and all his successors bore the ermine in their coat of arms.⁷¹ As a sign of his gratitude for the victory King Arthur had the first church of Notre Dame built in Paris. The narrative is therefore an eponymous foundation legend: the famous Notre Dame de Paris can be traced back to King Arthur. The author says explicitly that the King had the church built on the very same site "ouquel est a present leglise de nostre dame de Paris"⁷². The chapter heading says the very same thing even more precisely: "comment artur fist edifier la premiere eglise de nostre dame en lisle de Paris."⁷³

Individual authors carry the elevation of King Arthur to extremes – and sometimes they deviate from orthodoxy in the process. The author of the *Vera Historia* (Hailes-Version)⁷⁴, says that Arthur was assumed bodily into heaven, an honour which had hitherto been reserved for Enoch and Elias in addition to the Virgin Mary and Christ. John Hardyng's Arthur⁷⁵

⁶⁹ Jean des Preis, *Mer des Histoires*, ed. A. Borgnet and S. Bormans (Brussels, 1864–87). Cf. *Arthurian Material in the Chronicles*, pp. 222–224.

⁷⁰ Alain Bouchart, *Grandes Croniques*, ed. H. Le Meignen, Société des Bibliophiles Bretons (Nantes, 1886). The edition cited here is: Alain Bouchart, *Les Croniques Annalles de Pays dangleterre et bretagne*, contenant les faictz des roys et princes qui ont regne ou dit pays . . . (Paris, 1531).

⁷¹ *Les Croniques Annalles*, p. H. III, r.

⁷² *Les Croniques Annalles*, p. H. III, r.

⁷³ *Les Croniques Annalles*, p. H. III, r.

⁷⁴ M. Lapidge, "An Edition of the *Vera Historia De Morte Arthuri*", in *Arthurian Literature I*, ed. R. Barber (Woodbridge, 1981), pp. 79–93; "Hic orbem rexit sed Christus ad aethera uexit Regem tam fortem, nec sensit corpore mortem [...]", p. 92. Cf. Morris, *The Character of King Arthur*, p. 135.

⁷⁵ John Hardyng, *The Chronicle . . . Together with the Continuation by Richard Grafton*, ed. H. Ellis (London, 1812; repr. New York, 1974), p. 145.

is unique in that he receives the three imperial crowns simultaneously in Rome, and, more important, in that he occupies the Siege Perilous of his own right, a privilege which had been granted only to Joseph of Arimathea before him. Arthur thus draws closer to the spiritual chivalry of the Grail.⁷⁶

In view of the situation, it is not so strange as generally thought when John Major tells us that ill persons implored Arthur's aid and trusted in his intervention for their recovery.⁷⁷ At this time Arthur must have been venerated as a helper in time of need.

He can only have been one step removed from sainthood, and a saint he did in fact become, at least in the eyes of the people.⁷⁸ In 1933 the Bollan-dist Grosjean received an inquiry from Spain. A certain cathedral had been promised a large donation on the condition that one altar be consecrated to St. Arthur. An investigation proved that the prospective donor was not thinking of just any St. Arthur, but rather of the famed king of romance, who had enjoyed great popularity in Spain for many centuries. Grosjean, as the foremost expert on Celtic hagiography, replied that to the best of his knowledge there was no trace of a saint's cult.⁷⁹ The very same question was directed to Grosjean a second time in 1948. This time it was not the extravagant request of a church benefactor that posed the problem, but rather an already existing church window in Ile-aux-Moines (fig. 5). The "Sanctus Arthur" represented there is beyond all doubt the famous king of romance. He wears a white cap lined with ermine, and a cape trimmed with the same. This time Grosjean could not deny altogether "aucune trace de culte"; the church window, he said, was proof of the fact that Arthur had been venerated in Brittany as if he were a saint.

In conclusion, I would like to draw attention to the fact that there are several lines of development in the literary history of King Arthur – those leading to the saint and to the sinner being only two of them. Even today, King Arthur retains both his religious and his political significance, even if the authorities of Church and State object.

⁷⁶ *The Chronicle*, p. 132. Morris is wrong in crediting Hardyng with a strong though not explicit expectation that Arthur will gain the saint's or even the martyr's crown; cf. *The Character of King Arthur*, p. 135.

⁷⁷ *Historia*, p. 67.

⁷⁸ Cf. the author's "Saint Arthur", 2; Alexandre Masseron, "Saint Arthur", *Nouvelle Revue de Bretagne* (1948), 394 f.

⁷⁹ Masseron, "Saint Arthur", p. 394.



Fig. 5: Saint Arthur. Stained glass window in the parish church in Ile-aux-Moines

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

So many clerkis and kynges sall karpe of 3oure dedis
And kepe 3oure conquestez in cronycle for ever [...]
(3444 f.)