English 300: Merlin

Thinking about Mark Twain's
A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court

Samuel L. Clemens. from "The New Dynasty," 1886:

"Power, when lodged in the hands of man, means oppression – insures oppression: it means oppression always: not always consciously, deliberately, purposely; not always severely, or heavily, or cruelly, or sweepingly; but oppression, anyway, and always, in one shape or another."

George Washington Cable. from remarks made at a memorial service for Clemens on 30 November 1910:

[Cable and Clemens browse through a bookstore in Rochester, New York.] Presently I went over to him and said that I had not found anything that I thought would interest him, and asked him if he had found anything. He said no, he had not; but there was a book he did not remember any previous acquaintance with. He asked me what that book was.

"Why," I said, "that is Sir Thomas Malory's Morte d'Arthur." And he said, "Shall we take it?" I said: "Yes; and you will never lay it down until you have read it from cover to cover." It was easy to make the prophecy, and, of course, it was fulfilled. He had read in it a day or two, when I saw come upon his cheekbones those vivid pink spots which every one who knew him intimately and closely knew meant that his mind was working with all its energies."

Samuel L. Clemens. from his Notebooks and Journals, c. 1884:

"Dream of being a knight errant in armor in the middle ages.

Have the notions & habits of thought of the present day mixed with the necessities of that. No pockets in the armor. No way to manage certain requirements of nature. Can't scratch. Cold in the head – can't blow – can't get at handkerchief, can't use iron sleeve. Iron gets red hot in the sun – leaks in the rain, gets white with frost & freezes me solid in winter. Suffer from lice & fleas. Make disagreeable clatter when I enter church. Can't dress or undress myself. Always getting struck by lightning. Fall down, can't get up. See Morte D'Arthur."

Samuel L. Clemens. from a letter to Mary Mason Fairbanks about A Connecticut Yankee, 16 November 1886:

"The story isn't a satire peculiarly, it is more especially a contrast. It merely exhibits under high lights, the daily life of the time & that of to-day; & necessarily the bringing them into this immediate juxtaposition emphasizes salients of both. . . .

Of course in my story I shall leave unsmirched & unbelittled the great & beautiful characters drawn by the master hand of old Malory (if he drew them – at any rate he gave them to us) – I am only after the life of that day, that is all; to picture it; to try to get into it; to see how it

feels & seems."

Samuel L. Clemens. from The Autobiography pf Mark Twain, passage written or dictated 5 December 1906:

"A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court was an attempt to imagine, and after a fashion set forth, the hard conditions of life for the laboring and defenseless poor in bygone times in England, and incidentally contrast these conditions with those under which the civil and ecclesiastical pets of privilege and high fortune lived in those times. I think I was purposing to contrast that English life, not just the English life of Arthur's day but the English life of the whole of the Middle Ages, with the life of modern Christendom and modern civilization – to the advantage of the latter, of course."

Daniel Carter Beard [illustrator of A Connecticut Yankee]. from "Mark Twain, the Man, as Dan Beard Knew," 25 April 1910:

" 'Now,' he [Clemens] said, 'Mr. Beard, you know the character of the Yankee. He is a common, uneducated man. He's a good telegraph operator; he can make a Colt's revolver or Remington gun – but he's a perfect ignoramus. He's a good foreman for a manufacturer, can survey land and run a locomotive; in other words he has neither the refinement nor the weakness of a college education. In conclusion I want to say that I have endeavored to put in all the coarseness and vulgarity into the Yankee in King Arthur's Court that is necessary and rely upon you for all the refinement and delicacy of humor your facile pen can depict."

Sylvester Baxter. from a review of A Connecticut Yankee in the Boston Sunday Herald, 15 December 1889:

"Of all the extraordinary conceits that have germinated in his fruitful imagination, nothing more delicious has ever occurred to Mark Twain than that of running riot among the legendary times of our ancestral race by placing 'A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court.' . . . There is a most audacious rollicking around among the dusty bric-a-brac of chivalry – which is not handled at all gently – and a merry tossing about of poetic finery in a way that ruthlessly exposes in their literal ugliness the illusively mantled facts. . . . Through the book there is a steady flowing undercurrent of earnest purpose, and the pages are eloquent with a true American love of freedom, a sympathy with the rights of the common people, and an indignant hatred of oppression of the poor, the lowly and the weak, by the rich, the powerful and the proud."

[anonymous review of A Connecticut Yankee]. from the London Daily Telegraph, 13 January 1890:

"At this holiday season, in books and newspapers, on stage and in drawing-room, the poet and the painter, the author, the actor, and the dramatist compete with one another to bring before young and old scenes and suggestions of beauty, heroism, purity, and truth. One writer is an

exception. Mark Twain sets himself to show the seamy side of the legendary Round Table of King Arthur's time. He depicts all the vices of feudalism – the licentiousness of the nobles, their arrogance and insolence to the middle classes, their neglect of the poor, their hours of gluttony and idleness, varied by raids and brawls and riotous disorders. He describes how a Yankee visiting the Court uses modern inventions, defeats the best warriors, and redresses the wrongs of the poor. It is quite possible that a serious purpose underlies what otherwise seems a vulgar travesty. . . . A book, however, that tries to deface our moral and literary currency by bruising and soiling the image of King Arthur, as left to us by legend and consecrated by poetry, is a very unworthy production of the great humorist's pen. . . .

The stories of King Arthur that will come down to us represent in legendary form not any historical fact, but an ideal of kingship and knighthood which had birth in the hearts and aspirations of mediaeval men. This was their ideal of what a King amongst his warriors ought to be, and the beautiful image has fired the thoughts and purified the imagination of millions of men and women for many generations. Will this shrine in human souls be destroyed because a Yankee scribe chooses to fling pellets of mud upon the high altar? . . ."

William T. Stead, from "Mark Twain's New Book: A Satirical Attack on English Institutions," February 1890:

"In selecting for the Novel of the Month Mark Twain's new story, A Connecticut Yankee at the Court of King Arthur, I am aware that I expose myself to many remonstrances. There is a certain profanation in the subject, and withal a certain dulness in its treatment. It is not a novel; it is a ponderous political pamphlet, and so forth and so forth. . . . It is notable for its faults quite as much for its virtues, and for the irreverent audacity of its original conception as much as for the cumbrous and strenuous moralising which makes it at times more like one of Jonathan Edwards' sermons than a mere buoyant and farcical bubbling up of American humour. . . .

Tennyson sand the idyls [sic] of the King, and as long as the world lasts Sir Thomas Malory's marvellous old Romance will fill the hearts and the imaginations of men with some far-off reflection of the splendours and the glories of that child-like age. But truly he sand 'the old order changeth, giving place to the new,' of which can we have a more notable and even brutal illustration than the apparition of this vulgar Yankee realist, with his telephones and his dynamite, his insufferable slang and his infinite self-conceit, in the midst of King Arthur's Court, applying to all the knighthood of the Round Table the measure of his yard-stick, – the welfare of the common man? . . .

There is much strange misreading of history caused by the extent to which Mark Twain has allowed the abuses of institutions to obscure their use."

Charles Wibley. from "Musings Without Method", Blackwood's Magazine, 1907:

"Mark Twain the humourist is a bull in the china-shop of ideas. He attempts to destroy what he could never build up, and assumes that his experiment is eminently meritorious. When, as in A Connecticut Yankee at the Court of King Arthur, he gave full rein to his fancy, he achieved such a masterpiece of vulgarity as the world has never seen. His book gives you the same sort of

impression which you might receive from a beautiful picture over which a poisonous slug crawled. The hint of magnificence is there, pitilessly deformed and defaced. That Mark Twain is in perfect sympathy with his creature is perfectly evident. He frankly prefers Hartford, Conn. to Camelot. He believes that in all respects his native land is superior to the wisest and noblest society that the eye of Arthur saw or any other eye has see."

James M. Cox. from "The Machinery of Self-Preservation", 1960:

"But Hank Morgan is more than merely an agent of ridicule; he goes beyond burlesque to threaten the whole existence of the past – any past. The image of Camelot in which he erupts is a 'soft, reposeful summer landscape, as lovely as a dream and as lonesome as Sunday. The air was full of the smell of flowers and the buzzing of insects, and the twittering of birds, and there were no people, no wagons, there was no stir of life, nothing going on.' Here is one of the most ambivalent descriptions so recurrent in Twain's work. It is almost sentimental, almost, indeed, a cliché, . . .

Even Morgan feels the spell of its beauty, but his indignation at the slavery he discovers within its borders arouses him to destroy the sanctuary. . . .

Thus, in much the same way that its motive turns within it from creation toward destruction, the book stands as a turning point in Twain's career. The work is not a destructive act, however; rather it is an incomplete creative gesture, leaving an opening – a ligature – between the form and creative personality of the artist. As such a gesture, A Connecticut Yankee is what we may call Mark Twain's treaty with his Genius, for Hank Morgan in the last analysis is the unmasked demon – the practical joker and compulsive showman – so much a part of Mark Twain's humor. Seen in such a way the book is a great comedian's nightmare of himself, grotesquely exposing the secret manipulator behind the mechanism of the comic performance."

Howard G. Baetzhold. from Mark Twain and John Bull, 1970:

"As for the actual tales from Malory quoted or referred to in these early chapters, their primary purpose was to emphasize the readiness of this 'childlike and innocent' lot of people to accept as gospel any account of chivalric exploits, no matter how extravagant. The fact that Merlin's story puts the audience to sleep reflects not on the tale itself, but on the fact that the garrulous magician has told it so many times. For here Merlin is not presented as a sinister force but as a bumbling egotist, whom the clever Yankee will have little trouble outwitting."

David Ketterer. from "Epoch-Eclipse and Apocalypse", 1973:

"The essential similarity between the sinister Morgan Le Fay and our hero, Hank Morgan, becomes increasingly obvious as the book goes on. As Edmund Reiss suggests ['Afterword' to the Signet edition of A Connecticut Yankee, 1963], Hank's surprise at Morgan La Fay's beauty is a means of indicating the ambiguity of good and evil. . ."