

CHAPTER ONE

The Holy Grail of Hollywood

King Arthur Films

The Background

King Arthur is perhaps *the* most famous historical figure to emerge from the Middle Ages. This is rather strange, for he is also, with the possible exception of Robin Hood, the one historical figure about whom we know the least in terms of cold, hard facts. Nevertheless, King Arthur is recognized and beloved throughout the Western world. More movies have been made about him than about any other medieval character. Indeed, one recent compilation has identified no less than 262 films, TV shows, and cartoons with an Arthurian theme, beginning in 1904 with the Edison Film Company's silent version of Wagner's opera, *Parsifal*, down to *Star Wars: The Phantom Menace*, the first prequel to the *Star Wars* science fiction trilogy, released in 2000. And this is but the tip of an iceberg of modern Arthuriana that encompasses nearly every other possible medium in the creative arts: novels, short stories, plays, poetry, opera, ballet, choral and orchestral works, musicals, popular music, paintings and illustrations, sculpture, stained glass, tapestries, photographs, comic books, postage stamps and coins, jewelry and silverware, and a variety of trinkets, collectibles, and souvenirs. King Arthur has enlisted the talents of some of the most famous writers and artists of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries: novelists such as Mark Twain and T.H. White; poets such as Alfred Lord Tennyson, Edwin Arlington Robinson, and T.S. Eliot; composers such as Richard Wagner, Alan Jay Lerner and Frederick Lowe, and Richard Rodgers and Lorenz Hart; painters such as the pre-Raphaelites, Dante Gabriel Rossetti and Edward Burne-Jones, and illustrators such as

Gustave Doré and Aubrey Beardsley. Many of these men's productions later became the basis for films. Truly, the modern cult of King Arthur can be said to be an industry all unto itself.

But before one can unmask the modern Arthur, as portrayed on film, it is essential to come to know the medieval one. Almost from the very beginning, there were, in fact, two Arthurs: one being the King Arthur of history, if such a man existed; the other, the King Arthur of legend. King Arthur's myth making had indeed begun by the high Middle Ages, and this was made possible by the fact that so little was known about the real Arthur who was already several centuries old. Because of his obscurity, the King Arthur of history gave way to the King Arthur of legend, who was a far more influential and attractive figure to those who wished to pass on his memory. The King Arthur of history became an ideal blank slate on which succeeding ages could write their own versions of his legend that suited their particular tastes and ideological needs.

There are various and competing theories as to who the real King Arthur was. According to Geoffrey Ashe, he is to be identified with Riothamus, a high king of the Britons who had secured enough peace against marauding Saxons and Picts to lead a large army over to Gaul, corresponding to modern-day France, where he may have ended his life in the late 460s. Other Arthurian detectives, the team of Graham Phillips and Martin Keatman (who also claim to have revealed the real Robin Hood), declare that Owain Ddantgwyn, a Welsh chieftain of the Votadini tribe who ruled at the end of the fifth century, was the real King Arthur. It is not necessary to go into the long and detailed arguments made for each claimant, as neither is conclusive. In fact, most professional historians regard the search for the historical Arthur as a pointless exercise, preferring to instead explore the political and cultural context of his later legend. Although it seems likely that there existed a British leader who assumed responsibility for resistance against invaders after the fall of the Roman Empire, there simply is not enough historical evidence to identify beyond doubt who exactly Arthur was.

What evidence we do have is scanty and scattered in time. The earliest reference to an "Arthur" dates to around 829–830 A.D. in a work called the *Historia Brittonum*, or *History of the Britons*, attributed to a Welsh monk called Nennius. It should be noted that this is three centuries or more after the real King Arthur supposedly lived. Already, Arthur is a largely legendary figure who is capable of superhuman feats of biblical proportions, apparently modeled on the Old Testament champion of the Israelites, Joshua. Arthur is described as the victor of no less than twelve battles against the Saxons, the last being his greatest victory at Mount Badon, thought to have taken place around 500 A.D., "in which 960 men fell in one

day from one charge by Arthur." Except for Badon, hardly any of the battle sites can be verified as having an independent historical existence outside of Nennius' text. The author is, above all, concerned to portray the Britons as a united, favored people of the Lord, in order to contest the unflattering image of them in earlier, pro-Anglo-Saxon histories, such as by Bede the Venerable. Arthur also serves to justify the reign of King Merfyn of Gwynedd in Wales (c. 825–844), whose new dynasty needed an historical precedent, which the author, perhaps a court historian, was only too happy to provide.

By the time we arrive at the next major tale of King Arthur's exploits, his myth making is in full swing. The first so-called "biography" of Arthur was written c. 1135–1138 by the Breton bishop of St. Asaph, Geoffrey of Monmouth, and was incorporated into his *Historia Regum Britanniae*, or *History of the Kings of Britain*. This is an important work, for it lays the foundation for the full-blown King Arthur of legend. The main outlines of that legend are almost all here: the begetting of Arthur through the adulterous passion of Uther Pendragon for Ygernna (later Igraine), wife of Gorlois, duke of Cornwall; the wizard Merlin, whose magic enables Uther to assume the form of Gorlois in order to seduce Ygernna at Castle Tintagel; the enchanted sword Caliburn (later Excalibur), with which Arthur defeats his Saxon enemies; the magnificent court at Caerleon-upon-Usk (later Camelot); the bloody yet victorious campaign against Lucius, emperor of Rome; the betrayal of Arthur by his nephew, Mordred, and by his wife, Queen Guinevere; the final battle in which Arthur defeats Mordred but himself is mortally wounded; and his departure to the Isle of Avalon to be healed, holding out the promise—albeit never explicitly stated—that he will return. Despite the title of his work, Geoffrey of Monmouth was not writing a history at all, although he borrowed much of his material from older sources. Instead, he was composing what was to become known as "the matter of Britain," an account that placed the island at the center of world events, thereby glorifying both Geoffrey's Celtic ancestors and his new Norman masters, whose legitimacy as rulers of lands on both sides of the Channel could only be helped by the precedent of a British ruler campaigning on the Continent. Geoffrey's Arthur also provided a model of a strong monarch, loyally supported by his nation's political community, which no doubt proved attractive during the long civil war that marred the reign of the weak King Stephen (1135–1154).

One of the remarkable things about the King Arthur legend is that what started out as an exclusively British phenomenon exerted such great appeal across the Channel as well. This went against the grain of most cultural contacts between the Continent and the island nation. However, the French "romances" about King Arthur's court, as these were developed

during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries by such authors as Chrétien de Troyes, Robert de Boron, and the anonymous Vulgate Cycle, shifted the focus, naturally enough, from the person of Arthur to that of the French knight, Sir Lancelot. Elements of French pride can be detected in the fact that Lancelot is made out to be the best knight at King Arthur's court, in both arts of love and war. He defeats all challengers to single combat and captures the heart of the most desirable lady, Arthur's queen, Guinevere. It is the Arthurian romances, in fact, that are largely responsible for linking together the martial ideal of chivalry—loosely defined as the code by which a medieval knight was expected to conduct himself in battle—with the ideal of courtly love, which described rules of courtesy and devotion by which a knight would prove himself worthy of the love of his lady. But perhaps the most important contribution the French romances made to the King Arthur legend was their introduction of the Grail Quest. This firmly tied King Arthur to Christianity, as the Grail was taken to refer to the cup used by Jesus Christ at the Last Supper, and the Round Table as the successor to the table used by Christ and his disciples. Yet the paradox is that Lancelot, though he be the "perfect" knight, cannot fulfill the Quest because of his adulterous affair with Guinevere, which ultimately leads to the destruction of Camelot and the death of Arthur.

The tragedy of Lancelot, Guinevere, and Arthur must have had particular relevance to audiences of the late twelfth century, for it probably reminded them of real incidents of treason and betrayal. In 1173–1174, King Henry II of England faced a revolt led by his queen, Eleanor of Aquitaine, and his three eldest sons, Henry, Richard, and Geoffrey. Although Henry II was able to quell the revolt, it poisoned his relations with his family and led to a 15-year imprisonment of his wife. Both Henry and Eleanor were patrons of Arthurian literature. Their court historian, Robert Wace, translated into Anglo-Norman French Geoffrey of Monmouth's history and presented the *Roman de Brut* to Eleanor in 1155. Eleanor's eldest daughter by her first marriage, to King Louis VII of France, was Marie, countess of Champagne, to whom Chrétien de Troyes dedicated his third Arthurian romance, *Lancelot*.

The legend that was forged out of the dim history of King Arthur quickly began to insinuate itself into the historical acts of England's later medieval kings. Thus began a complex symbiosis between history and the legend surrounding King Arthur. The real Arthur of history was not as important as the political and propagandistic uses that could be made of his legend in order to create an historical image of a ruler as the true heir to Arthur's legendary qualities. Already this process was well under way by the close of the twelfth century, not long after the first Arthurian romances had been written. According to the Welsh chronicler, Giraldus

Cambrensis, Henry II instituted a search for Arthur's "grave" at Glastonbury Abbey in Sussex, perhaps in order to quell Celtic unrest that had coalesced around rumors of the coming of another "Arthur." Yet it was not until after Henry's death that in 1190–1191, an excavation uncovered the bones of a large man and a woman under a lead cross whose Latin inscription allegedly read, "Here in the Isle of Avalon lies buried the renowned King Arthur, with Guinevere, his second wife." Probably a pious fraud to bring renown and benefactions to the abbey, which had just suffered a devastating fire in 1184, the "discovery" of Arthur's grave nonetheless was taken seriously enough that nearly a century later, in 1278, King Edward I and his queen, Eleanor of Castile, presided over the translation of what were believed to be the bones of Arthur and Guinevere to the abbey's high altar, where a black marble tomb was installed.

It was Edward's grandson, Edward III, who was perhaps the most skillful and enthusiastic in exploiting Arthur's legacy. In 1344, Edward III staged his own Arthurian event with a public announcement at Windsor Castle that "when the opportunity should be favorable to him, he would set up a round table, in the same manner and condition in which Lord Arthur, formerly king of England, left it." Although Edward's round table never was realized, it probably was the inspiration for his order of chivalry, the Order of the Garter, that survives to the present day. When he died in 1377, Edward was compared favorably to King Arthur by the chronicler, Jean Froissart: "His like had not been seen since the days of King Arthur, who once had also been king of England, which in his time was called Great Britain." However, in death Edward was not entirely successful in controlling Arthurian propaganda. The alliterative *Morte Arthure*, a poem composed toward the end of the fourteenth century, seems to criticize Edward's warlike policies by portraying Arthur as a bloodthirsty and ambitious tyrant, whose war against the Roman Emperor Lucius only brought misery on both sides of the Channel, just as many in the author's own time wanted a respite from the Hundred Years War between England and France.

Ironically, it was during the latter half of the fifteenth century, when England was ruled by a weak king and political chaos reigned during the Wars of the Roses, that there was born what many consider to be the greatest and most powerful expression of the medieval Arthur legend. This was *Le Morte D'Arthur* by the raffish Warwickshire knight, Sir Thomas Malory of Newbold Revel. Malory did not so much author this work as translate, edit, condense, and collect a variety of French and English legends about Arthur and his round table knights and present them as one, relatively unified whole. The great value of Malory's work is the way in which it encapsulates almost the entire preexisting Arthurian tradition. *Le Morte D'Arthur*

is, therefore, a kind of grand summation of medieval Arthuriana from both sides of the Channel.

Malory's twofold status as an active player in the rough-and-tumble politics of late fifteenth-century England and as the author of a work that seems to embody the very soul of medieval chivalry presents something of a conundrum to King Arthur scholars. It is an inescapable fact that Malory wrote *Le Morte D'Arthur* while in prison: At the end of *The Tale of King Arthur*, corresponding to the first four books in Caxton's printed edition, Malory calls himself a "knyght presoner," while at the very end of the entire opus, he requests his readers to pray for his "good delyveraunce" and informs us that "this book was ended the ninth yere of the reyne of King Edward IV [March 4, 1469–March 3, 1470]." Malory was in prison almost continuously from July 1451 until July 1460 and then again from at least July 1468 until October 1470. He died five months later in March 1471. During his first term of imprisonment, Malory was charged with a variety of crimes, including rape, theft, extortion, and attempted murder. His guilt or innocence, however, was never proved, as his case never came to trial. Malory's second term of imprisonment is even more mysterious, as there is no record of him even being charged with a crime, let alone tried. Indeed, the only reason we know that he was in prison at this time is that he tells us so in *Le Morte D'Arthur*.

All of this is hard to reconcile with the same man who extols the virtues of "prouesse," "curtosye," "worshyp," and "honoure" as demonstrated by the "noble actes of chyvalrye" of the roundtable knights. Malory's hypocrisy is nowhere more apparent than at the end of Book 3 in the *Tale of King Arthur*, when the king charges his knights to "allwayes to do ladyes, damesels, and jantilwomen and wydowes socour: strengthe hem in hir ryghtes, and never to enforce them uppon payne of dethe." This from an author who was accused of forcing himself sexually upon a woman, Joan Smith of Coventry, twice, in May and August of 1450. There are any number of possible explanations for the paradox. Joan may in reality have willingly eloped with Malory, especially since it was her husband who brought the charge under a new law that classified even consensual elopement as rape. Alternatively, Malory may not have regarded Joan as a "jantilwoman" worthy of protection. A third possibility is that Malory, feeling the pangs of conscience in his old age, wished to admonish others from doing what he himself could not keep his hands from. In the end, we simply will never know how this obviously complex man married his high-flown rhetoric to his unsavory reputation.

It is clear that from the very beginning, *Le Morte D'Arthur* struck a popular chord among English-speaking readers. There were good reasons for this. Malory's Arthurian saga was the first of its kind to be printed: In 1485

the London printer, William Caxton, was “enprysed to enprynte a book of the noble hystories of the sayd kynge Arthur and of certeyn of his knyghtes, after a cople unto me delyverd, whyche cople syr Thomas Malorye dyd take oute of certeyn bookes of Frensshe and reduced it into Englysshe.” The book subsequently went through five more printings in the next 150 years, and very few of the early editions survive despite their large print runs, suggesting that they were widely accessible and heavily read. As Caxton’s preface indicates, Malory was also the first to make the French romances about Arthur available to the English public, particularly the Vulgate Cycle, containing tales of Lancelot and the Quest of the Holy Grail.

But, above all, Malory and Caxton published *Le Morte D’Arthur* with excellent timing, when the Arthur legend would have resonated with the political and social turmoil so many Englishmen had been experiencing since 1455 during their civil war known as the Wars of the Roses. It seems clear that both Malory and Caxton were well aware of this. Toward the end of the last tale, that of the “Morte Arthur” itself, Malory as narrator addresses his readers with a lament that links events in the story with those of his own times:

Lo, ye all Englysshemen, se ye nat what a myschyff here was? For he that was the moste kynge and nobelyst knyght of the worlde, and moste loved the felyshyp of noble knyghtes, and by hym they all were upholdyn, and yet myght nat thes Englyshemen holde them contente with hym. Lo thus was the olde custome and usayges of thys londe, and men say that we of thys londe have nat yet loste that custom. Alas! Thys ys a greate defaughte of us Englysshemen, for there may no thyngge us please no terme.

This lecture comes just before the final battle between Arthur and Mordred, when “muche people drew unto sir Mordred and seyde they wold abyde wyth hym for bettir and for wars.” Perhaps Malory is scolding his fellow countrymen for likewise dividing the realm into two armed camps, one siding with the Lancastrian party (the Red Rose) as the rightful claimants to the throne, the other with the Yorkist side (the White Rose).

Undoubtedly, *Le Morte D’Arthur* also appealed to a wistful nostalgia many of its readers must have felt for an earlier, more innocent time, when there was a more clarified sense of right and wrong. Such yearnings may be said to be universal, but fifteenth-century Englishmen had particular cause to look back longingly to the not-too-distant past, when many of them, including Malory himself, would have witnessed the rise and fall of a northern French empire founded by their warrior king, Henry V, who

died in 1422 at the untimely age of 36. Caxton, with the marketing savvy of a publisher, seems to have picked up on both the nostalgic and contemporary potential of Malory's work. In his preface, he writes that he is printing *Le Morte D'Arthur*:

to the entent that noble men may see and lerne the noble actes of chyvalrye, the jentyl and vertuous dedes that somme knyghtes used in tho dayes, by whyche they came to honour, and how they that were vycious were punysshed and ofte put to shame and rebuke; humbly bysechyng al noble lordes and ladyes wyth al other estates, of what estate or degree they been of, that shal see and rede in this sayd bok and werke, that they take the good and honest actes in their remembraunce, and to folowe the same.

Like good historians, Malory and Caxton want their readers to not only remember the past, but learn from it and apply its lessons to their present situation.

It is hard to say which side Malory was on in the Wars of the Roses, or to be more specific as to how he intended *Le Morte D'Arthur* to reflect his political context. Like that of so many others during this era of "bastard feudalism," Malory's politics were a muddle. He seems to have had an unlucky knack for backing the losing side at different stages of the war. His first term of imprisonment during the 1450s was perhaps largely due to his Yorkist sympathies, whereas the second from 1468 to 1470 was probably in retaliation for his switch to the Lancastrian cause. If there is any consistency in Malory's political career, it is to be found in his loyalty to his local lord, Richard Neville, earl of Warwick, who played a pivotal role in the war as "kingmaker" and who likewise changed sides, although not with the same exact timing as Malory.

Since Malory was a committed Lancastrian at the time he was finishing *Le Morte D'Arthur*, it is possible that he identified Arthur with the Lancastrian king, Henry VI. Henry was known for his religious piety, and indeed after his death in 1471, he was pictured on a church rood screen in Norfolk as a saint. He was also generous, compassionate, and devoted to education reform, as evidenced by his foundations of King's College, Cambridge, and Eton public school. Unusually for a royal, he was also a prude, remaining a virgin until his marriage to Margaret of Anjou in 1445 at the age of 24. Allegedly dominated by his new wife, Henry, who was not a warrior king (this role was coopted by Margaret), perhaps reminded his subjects of the cuckolded side to King Arthur's character. He may also have reminded readers of the Fisher King, called in *Le Morte D'Arthur* the Maimed King Pellam or Pelles, who is wounded by Sir Balin with the "dolerouse stroke" of a magic spear and whose kingdom is straightaway

turned into a wasteland, which can only be healed by Sir Galahad's achieving of the grail. In August 1453, Henry VI went insane and was to remain so for at least the next year and a half, precipitating the protectorate of the duke of York and the start of the Wars of the Roses. On the other hand, there were probably plenty of people who were prepared to compare the York champion, Edward IV, with Arthur. Edward was handsome, well dressed, a courageous leader of men on the battlefield, and, perhaps best of all, descended through the Mortimer line from Welsh kings. His life paralleled Arthur's in some ways, for against great odds, he returned from exile in 1471 to defeat Neville and the Lancastrians and reclaim his crown. Although lacking the literary genius of a Chaucer or a Shakespeare, Malory was astute enough to let his sources speak for themselves and not align them too closely with his political preferences, which might alienate potential readers.

What made Malory's work so influential is that it found great favor not only with his contemporaries but with posterity as well. *Le Morte D'Arthur* ends with the promise of the *Rex quondam rexque futurus* (translated by T.H. White as "the once and future king"), or in other words, "that kynge Arthur ys nat dede, but . . . shall com agayne." This holds great appeal for any society in any age seeking redemption from domestic strife and upheaval. It was Malory's version of the legend that was to provide nearly universal inspiration for modern interpretations of King Arthur, whether on paper, canvas, musical instrumentation, or on film.

The Movies

Films about King Arthur tend to be either very good or very bad. The reason for this may be that, since so little is known about the real King Arthur of the fifth or sixth centuries, and with the long history of inventing legends about him, filmmakers have given free rein to their own imaginations about Arthur, bringing with that creativity both the rewards and risks it inspires. Rarely do films tackle the King Arthur of history. Instead, the medieval setting of these movies is almost always indebted to his legend, which usually can be traced back to Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte D'Arthur* of the fifteenth century. Therefore, the atmosphere of most Arthurian films belongs to the later Middle Ages rather than to Arthur's own historical time period.

There is one film, however (and it is the only one to my knowledge), that makes a brave effort to capture the actual history of King Arthur, as such a man may have existed at the dawn of the Middle Ages: *King Arthur: The Young Warlord* (1975), directed by the team of Sidney Hayers, Patrick Jackson, and Patrick Sady and starring Oliver Tobias as Arthur.

Originally a 24-episode British television series entitled *Arthur of the Britons* (1972–1973), the condensed film version was released in video format only, rather than in theaters. At times disjointed in its storyline because of its episodic character, *King Arthur: The Young Warlord* nevertheless dispenses with Arthur's legend and gives us a credible history of the man. During the brief introduction narrated by Arthur himself, we are served up "the simple facts" of British history "in the time of the sixth century." The island, we are told, "had no one name, no single leader" but after having been abandoned by the Romans was being contested by various tribes, including the Saxons, Angles, Jutes, Picts, and, of course, the Celts, led by Arthur. Significantly, Arthur is here portrayed as simply a local leader trying to end the "plunder, chaos, and bloodshed [that] were a common part of life in these insular communities." He debunks his own legend by telling us that "fierce skirmishes of my youth would grow into major battles in later years. Tales of my exploits would also grow, well beyond the truth of them." This sets a documentary-like tone from the very beginning of the film in which much of Arthur's legend is grounded in a plausible reconstruction of his historical life.

An excellent example of the film's method comes in the very first episode, when Arthur stages his own death in order to lure chieftains of other Celtic tribes into an alliance against the Saxons. Arthur's "funeral" is followed by Arthur himself walking in on the other leaders, who are flabbergasted to discover that Arthur is not dead after all and that they have walked into a trap. In this way, the legend of Arthur's death and promised return from the Isle of Avalon is explained as a political maneuver to unite the contentious Celts against their common enemy, the Saxons. This is quickly followed by the debunking of another legend, the sword in the stone. Arthur challenges his fellow chieftains to pull a sword out from under a large rock: he who does so will become the acknowledged leader of all the Celts. After each man tries and fails, Arthur, in order to persuade them that victory over the Saxons must be a joint effort, gets everyone to lend a hand to the rock and push, allowing Arthur to draw out the sword. Thus, what was in Malory's version an elaborate ritual—Arthur's pulling of Excalibur out of an anvil on top of a stone—designed to demonstrate Arthur's divine right to rule, is here transformed into a lesson in cooperation and mutual dependence.

This distinctly unromantic presentation of Arthur is continued in a later episode that shows Arthur's wooing of Princess Rowena, daughter of Yorath the Jute. Instead of wedding Rowena and making her his queen, Arthur prefers to play the field, for although "moved by many affairs of the heart . . . none brought me to a proposal of marriage. There would be time for that later." Eventually, however, he must fight for Rowena's love with

Mark of Cornwall, to whom she is betrothed. The Rowena character seems derived from Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae* (*History of the Kings of Britain*), where she is the daughter of Hengist the Saxon and a pagan witch who becomes the wife of Vortigern rather than of Arthur. The film also seems indebted to Geoffrey for the character of Ambrose, a Celtic chieftain who, in the first episode, is shown urging his men to march in the manner of Roman legions and who worships the ancient sun god, Mithras. On the other hand, *The Book of Sir Tristram* from *Le Morte D'Arthur* seems to be the inspiration for Arthur's rival, Mark. As played by Brian Blessed, he comes across as Sir Thomas Malory's blustering and jealous buffoon.

The film ends with Arthur waging peace rather than war with his Saxon enemy, Cerdic. The truce ends abruptly through the accidental slaying of a Saxon by a Celtic knife thrower. Throughout *King Arthur: The Young Warlord*, the legendary image of Arthur as a heroic warrior king ruled by destiny is constantly downplayed. The film comes as close as we probably will ever get to the King Arthur of history. But it is not the Arthur that most audiences have learned to expect or come to see.

One aspect of Arthur's history that is not addressed in *King Arthur: The Young Warlord* is Christianity and its conflict with the pagan religions it eventually displaced. This is ostensibly the subject of our next Arthurian film, *The Black Knight* (1954), directed by Tay Garnett and starring Anthony Bushell as King Arthur and Alan Ladd as the movie's main character, John, the Black Knight. Like *King Arthur: The Young Warlord*, *The Black Knight* does not owe its storyline to any legend about Arthur. This does not mean, however, that it tries to be historically accurate. As a reviewer noted in the *Monthly Film Bulletin* for October 1954, "The film is gleefully disrespectful of history and tradition." In fact, *The Black Knight's* history is a complete mess. Its characters are culled from widely separated time periods during the early Middle Ages: Arthur from the late fifth or early sixth centuries; "Sarracens," or Muslims, who invaded Europe from North Africa during the early eighth century, but who got no further than Poitiers in southern France, let alone as far north as Britain; and Viking marauders, who landed in southern and eastern England for the first time toward the end of the eighth century. Cramming all these historical figures into one time setting is like putting soldiers from the American Revolution, the Civil War, and World War II into one battle.

The only historical aspect of the film remotely plausible is the plot line of Arthur and the Black Knight as the champions of Christianity against pagan forces within the realm. The earliest source on Arthur, Nennius's *Historia Brittonum* (*History of the Britons*), describes him at his eighth battle at Castle Guinnion as wearing "the image of the Holy Virgin Mary on his shoulders; on that day the pagans turned in flight and were slaughtered in

great numbers through the grace of Our Lord Jesus Christ and of his Holy Mother, the Virgin Mary.” According to the Anglo-Saxon historian, Bede the Venerable, Christianity came to Britain as early as 156 A.D. under King Lucius. But the island did not become fully converted until the mission of St. Augustine of Canterbury in 597. Even then, Augustine and his fellow missionaries were advised by Pope Gregory the Great that pagan temples and even animal sacrifices “should not be destroyed, but . . . that they should be transferred to the service of the true God.” Contrast this tolerant approach with a scene in *The Black Knight* that purports to explain how the magnificent megaliths of Stonehenge became a ruin. After he executes the pagan high priest of the “sun god” (actually, Stonehenge is thought to have been used for astronomical calculations), Arthur orders his knights to “destroy this evil place. Scatter these stones and let them lie as witness in years to come of heaven’s wrath against the evil practiced here.” Evidently, Christians who actually confronted paganism in the so-called “Dark Ages” were more enlightened than their twentieth-century imitators.

As noted above, *The Black Knight* prefers to invent its own plots rather than borrow these from Arthurian legend. There is no mention here of the Grail, Lancelot and Guinevere, Merlin and Excalibur, or Mordred and Avalon. Nevertheless, the film is indebted to Malory for the names of several of its main characters. For anyone familiar with *Le Morte D’Arthur*, the film becomes even more bizarre when one realizes that its characters take on almost polar opposite identities to those they possess in the original. Palamides (played by the horror film star, Peter Cushing) is the movie’s villain and the inveterate archenemy of Christianity, which in turn is embodied in the character of John, the Black Knight. In Malory’s world, however, Sir Palomides, although also a Saracen, converts to Christianity by the end of *The Book of Sir Tristram* and becomes a model of piety to the other knights as they begin their Quest of the Holy Grail. Even more astonishing is the transformation of Lady Linet, in the film a sweet, good-natured, adoring young thing played by Patricia Medina, but in *Le Morte D’Arthur* is a shrewish, sharp-tongued creature who incessantly mocks and scolds her champion, Sir Gareth, for having been a “kychyn knave” at Camelot. The film’s choice of black for its hero’s colors is also extremely odd, for in Malory’s *Tale of Sir Gareth*, the “knyght of the Blak Laundis” is actually slain by Sir Gareth, who, as a humble kitchen boy working his way up to knighthood, most closely resembles John, whom we see at the beginning of the film working at his forge as a common blacksmith. The oddity of a Black Knight for a hero is only amplified by the fact that in the same year, 1954, another Arthurian film was released, *Prince Valiant* (based on the comic strip by Hal Foster), which had its villain, Sir Brack, assume an identity as the Black Knight.

The Black Knight is a bad film made only worse by its poor production values. It is impossible to take an Arthurian film seriously when it shows medieval knights riding off into a distance that includes ye olde telephone poles, or when jousting falls off their horses *before* they are struck with a lance. (During the filming of these outdoor action scenes, all shot at various castle locations in Spain, Garnett was perhaps distracted by the fact that he was also on his honeymoon.) Added to these visual embarrassments is the sound of Alan Ladd, a popular American film star, attempting to pronounce Anglo-Saxon words such as "boon" (meaning a favor or blessing) while English actors all around him pronounce them effortlessly. A columnist for *Time* magazine parodied Ladd's accent brilliantly in a merciless review of November 8, 1954: "Nay, more, nor kann this knight e'en parler ye Englysshe langue, bot muttereth mayhappe in Frensshe, as, 'Yagottalissena me. Englans gonnabeen vaded.'" Fortunately, this was Ladd's only foray into the Middle Ages, a casting against type for an actor more at home in modern crime thrillers and Westerns. Yet he was by no means the only 1950s screen cowboy to be brought down by a stray experiment in a medieval film. Two years later, John Wayne (who obviously had not consulted Ladd about the wisdom of his venture) did an equally, if not more, disastrous turn as Genghis Khan, the thirteenth-century Mongol leader, in *The Conqueror* (1956). Both performances are so awkward it seems that the actors themselves realize they are in the wrong picture. The only reason *The Black Knight* and *The Conqueror* are noted by film buffs is that they have the dubious distinction of making most lists of the worst films ever made, films that are so bad they are (unintentionally) funny.

Even so, *The Black Knight* is worth noting in a work on film and history because, with few exceptions (such as Sergei Eisenstein's *Alexander Newsky*, to be discussed in Chapter 3), it is perhaps the most politically driven film ever set in the Middle Ages. As the Arthurian scholar, Alan Lupack, has pointed out, *The Black Knight* needs to be viewed in the context of the "red scare" that swept America during the early 1950s. Americans' paranoia concerning its Cold War Communist rival, the former Soviet Union, and concerning real or imagined Communist subversives "in our midst" suffuses and informs the entire film. Indeed, once one realizes that *The Black Knight* has an ulterior motive besides simply bad entertainment, it begins to make perfect sense.

The year of the film's release, 1954, marked a watershed in the "witch hunts" against suspected Communist spies and traitors, led by Senator Joseph McCarthy of Wisconsin. By that time, more than six million people, including 350 movie stars and crew members working in Hollywood studios, had been subpoenaed and questioned by McCarthy and his House Committee on Un-American Activities. Those who refused to

cooperate and confess to having had Communist sympathies or to name names of fellow suspected Communists were blacklisted or imprisoned. Despite the sheer improbability of such a large conspiracy, an air of reality accompanied all the hysteria due to the fact that America was involved in a war with a Communist enemy—North Korea, backed by China and Russia—and by the fact that a married couple with two young sons, Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, were put to death by electric chair in 1953 for passing atomic secrets to the Soviets. Given such pressure, it is easy to see how Tay Garnett and his screen writer, Alec Coppel, would have wished to give a medieval melodrama such as *The Black Knight* a highly “patriotic” gloss.

Yet the irony is that by the time the film was playing in the theaters, McCarthyism was on the wane. The previous year, 1953, removed two bugbears that had supplied ammunition to the Red baiters: Joseph Stalin, leader of the Soviet Union, who died in March, and the Korean War, which came to an end in July. At the same time, McCarthy began to overreach himself. Decrying “21 years of treason” in the U.S. government, he took on the Department of the Army, and by implication President Dwight Eisenhower himself, claiming that there were spies in the Signal Corps. Barely a month after *The Black Knight* was released, McCarthy was publicly condemned by the U.S. Senate on December 2, 1954, for having “acted contrary to senatorial ethics and tended to bring the Senate into dishonor and disrepute.” Never has a film dated so quickly.

The Black Knight's pro-American, anti-Communist agenda can be discerned from the very start of the film, when it also shows itself “disrespectful” to Arthurian tradition. The film opens with John laboriously hammering a sword on an anvil, rather than drawing it magically out of one, so as to emphasize the American values of hard work over the whims of inheritance. Next we see Linet, who, instead of cursing John for his low birth, lovingly tells him that just because she's an earl's daughter “doesn't make me any better than you are. A birthright's an accident, nothing more.” Sir Ontzlake, a very minor character in *The Tale of King Arthur* from Malory's masterwork, becomes a crucial character in the film, since he, too, embodies the American dream of rags to riches, or, as the director, Tay Garnett, expressed it in his memoirs, “one of those boot-black-to-President things.” Ontzlake serves as John's mentor throughout the film, an example of how “kighthood is a flower to be plucked,” since he, also, “was not always a knight. . . . Some are born to kighthood; I was not. There comes a time in every man's life when he must fight for what he wants most. I did just that.” Such egalitarian sentiments would have horrified medieval men like Malory, who assumed that everyone had an immutable status in society—whether it be knight, priest, or peasant—and for whom the rags-to-

riches story of Sir Gareth is possible only because Gareth, unbeknownst to others, is nobly born in the first place.

Later Ontzlake (played by André Morell) serves yet another role in the film: as a kind of CIA/FBI recruiting officer for John. In order to convince John to spy on Arthur's covert enemies at Camelot, Ontzlake spouts something that very nearly could have been taken right out of the mouth of McCarthy: "There is treason all about us and it must be stamped out before all of us—you, I, and King Arthur himself—are overwhelmed." John is then instructed by Ontzlake to undertake a top secret mission—of which Arthur will deny all knowledge should he be captured: to infiltrate King Mark's castle at Tintagel with the help of a mole, an "old woodcutter whose loyalty is to Arthur." More is at stake here than the gay court life at Camelot. John is also the last hope of Christianity, which is made manifest in a scene where the abbot of the new monastery blesses him as "a good Christian" just before the abbey is attacked by Palamides's Saracens disguised as Vikings.

As a Cold Warrior in medieval garb, John faces two kinds of enemies, one from without and another from within, that correspond to those perceived during the red scare. The Saracens—Sir Palamides and his sidekick, Bernard—are clearly the suspicious foreigners and inveterate "infidel" enemies of Christianity. But, at the same time, they function as enemies from within, for Palamides is also a knight of King Arthur's Round Table. The threat from traitors inside the realm is further underlined by the fact that Palamides is in league with King Mark, another trusted member of Arthur's court and, what is more, a native. Mark is a pagan who, like Palamides, is out to destroy not only Camelot but Christianity as well. He fears that the new religion will make the English "people united beyond belief," acting as a kind of loyalty oath demanded of all Arthur's subjects, himself included. Mark therefore represents the "Godless Red" who appears in so many anti-Communist films of the late 1940s and early 1950s. In addition, *The Black Knight* follows a familiar pattern set by other Cold War films in "tainting" its villain with homosexuality. When not wearing his outlandish "red" armor, Palamides wears outlandish makeup and jewelry.

Both sides prove willing to use subterfuge and skullduggery to achieve their ends. Palamides and his cronies dress up as Vikings when making their raids, and Mark pretends to be a "baptized Christian king . . . to deceive Arthur." Meanwhile, John assumes an alternate identity as the Black Knight in order to "go undercover," to borrow espionage parlance. The difference, of course, is in their morals. As in other Cold War films, the villains in *The Black Knight* remorselessly condone the most heinous crimes, including murder, rape, and backstabbing of each other, while the hero refuses to stoop to such means even against his enemies. The most violent

John becomes is when he punches out Bernard and performs on Palamides a back-flip maneuver that could have been scripted by the World Wrestling Federation.

If *The Black Knight* was out of date already by the end of 1954, it will seem positively reactionary to most audiences today who become aware of its politics. Judging by the spreading popularity of pagan wedding ceremonies and Wiccan groups on American college campuses, many young people would empathize more with King Mark and his high priest rather than with the prudish Arthur, Ontzlake, or John. Indeed, the most recent reincarnation of the Arthur legend, the television miniseries, *The Mists of Avalon* (2001), based on the novel by Marion Zimmer Bradley, privileges the druidic cult of the "goddess" as equal to Christianity in status and power in Celtic Britain. McCarthyism is so discredited nowadays that any film that identifies with its ideology risks derision. It is significant that Garnett, when reminiscing in 1973, preferred to explain the film as an allegory of the American Dream rather than of the Cold War, which he does not mention at all. *The Black Knight* is an object lesson in the dangers of tying an historical film too closely to a modern cultural climate or mood. While granting the film relevance to its immediate audience, its political subtext renders it obsolete to posterity.

It is a curious fact, therefore, that later Arthurian films have nonetheless continued to imitate *The Black Knight's* premise, along with its mediocrity. Will Hollywood never learn? In 1963, a film called *Siege of the Saxons* duplicated, at times scene for scene, the basic plot line of *The Black Knight*. The most recent reincarnation of what has been dubbed "The American Middle Ages of Democratic Possibility" is *First Knight* (1995), directed by Jerry Zucker and starring Sean Connery as King Arthur. Like John, the hero of the film is a self-proclaimed "common man" who rescues his lady and the kingdom from the forces of evil. This humble hero is none other than Lancelot, played with cocky swagger by Richard Gere, another actor who, like Ladd, is more at home in modern settings. *First Knight* demonstrates that it is just as willing as *The Black Knight* to disregard original source material while borrowing its characters' names. As Zucker confided to Louis Parks of *The Houston Chronicle*:

I was worried about deviating from "The Legend," but there is no one legend. When we were working on this script, someone gave me a book that had hundreds of deviations of the legend in it. They're all different. Aficionados may be upset, but I'm making a movie for mainstream audiences.

But even mainstream audiences cannot help but pick up on *First Knight's* embarrassingly outlandish costumes and props, which include "shoulder

shields," hand-held crossbows, and outfits that seem straight out of *Star Trek*. In this respect, Zucker seems bent on supplanting Garnett.

The difference is that, while following *The Black Knight* in casting aside all history and legend in telling its own version of the Arthur story, *First Knight* has nothing substantial—political or otherwise—to put in place of the void that can make Arthur's world relevant to ours. The best Arthurian scholars can come up with is to say that *First Knight* is an allegory of a 1990s-style conflicted male—Gere's Lancelot—seeking masculine identity and fulfillment from an older role model—Connery's Arthur—when besieged by a strong female type—Julia Ormond's Guinevere. But in order for a film to have a coherent message, it must at least know what the context of that message is. *First Knight* takes place in an almost complete historical vacuum: It may as well be set in another dimension as in sixteenth-century Britain. Indeed, so dismissive is the director of history that he is rumored to have blurted out to a reviewer that he didn't give a "fuck" about the Middle Ages. With a contemptuous attitude such as this, no wonder *First Knight* carries no conviction.

Aside from Garnett's second stab at the Arthurian genre, *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* (1949), based on Mark Twain's 1889 novel of the same title, the only musical film version about King Arthur is *Camelot* (1967), directed by Joshua Logan and starring Richard Harris as Arthur. This is based on the Lerner and Loewe musical that debuted on Broadway in 1960. The play, in turn, was derived from *The Once and Future King*, a four-volume novel completed in 1958 by T.H. White, who, like Twain, was indebted to Malory's *Le Morte D'Arthur* for inspiration. *Camelot* is similar to *Connecticut Yankee* in that it aspires to be a lighthearted romantic comedy, at least through its first half. It then follows the stage play in abruptly turning to a dark and somber mood with the budding love affair between Lancelot and Guinevere (played in the film by Franco Nero and Vanessa Redgrave) that will presage the downfall of Camelot. Some criticized the film's casting of its lead roles with Harris and Redgrave, who had to follow the act of Richard Burton and Julie Andrews on Broadway.

Since, like the *Connecticut Yankee* films, *Camelot* trivializes its literary source, it doesn't have much of anything interesting to say about either the history or legend of King Arthur. Yet *Camelot*, both in its stage play and movie versions, is unique in that its presentation of medieval history exerted a powerful influence upon its contemporary modern context. This is rather the reverse of how film and history relationships usually work. As exemplified by *The Black Knight*, most often it is modern preoccupations that color, to one degree or another, our perceptions of the Middle Ages.

The Lerner and Loewe musical on which the film is based appeared a mere three weeks after the election of one of the youngest, most handsome,

and most romantic presidents in U.S. history, and one whose first lady was more than a match for him in all these qualities. When John F. Kennedy was assassinated on November 22, 1963, his tragically curtailed presidency seemed ripe for an Arthurian makeover. It was the president's widow, Jacqueline Bouvier, who began Kennedy's apotheosis into Arthur shortly after his death, when she confessed to the journalist, Theodore White:

At night, before we'd go to sleep, Jack liked to play some records; and the song he loved most came at the very end of this record. The lines he loved to hear were: "Don't let it be forgot, that once there was a spot, for one brief shining moment that was known as Camelot."

Lerner and Loewe's mythical Camelot and its "one brief shining moment" was quickly taken up by Kennedy historians as a symbol to sum up the president's legacy. The "Camelot School," as scholars sympathetic to Kennedy came to be known, included Theodore Sorensen, Kennedy's long-time aide and speechwriter, and Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., a Harvard academic whom Kennedy had recruited to be among the "best and the brightest" serving as advisers to the president. Their experiences in the White House lent authority to their hagiographies of Kennedy as a modern-day Arthur figure. Kennedy himself at least partly collaborated in his Arthurian image making. He invited composers Lerner and Loewe to the White House to play songs from the musical for a private audience. His mother, Rose Kennedy, recalls in her memoirs published in 1974 that her son as a boy loved to read A.M. Hadfield's *King Arthur and the Round Table*.

Yet Kennedy's "Camelot," much like the musical itself, was more about style than substance, more illusion than reality. It took more than a decade before historians began to objectively reassess the Kennedy presidency, to uncover the rampant philandering, crippling disease, hair-trigger brinkmanship, covert operations, and ghostwriting that underlay all the glamor and glitz. Strangely enough, despite these subsequent exposés, the Camelot image of Kennedy retains a powerful hold on America's popular imagination. As noted with *King Arthur: The Young Warlord*, it's as if the public prefers the fairy-tale legend of Arthur/Kennedy to the inconvenient facts of history.

It should not be imagined that such an appropriation of the Arthur legend by a modern politician is entirely harmless. Adolf Hitler, after all, was enamored of Wagner's operas, *Lobengrin* and *Tristan und Isolde*, whose Arthurian themes no doubt contributed in the Führer's mind to an heroic conception of himself and his country's destiny. Kennedy's Arthurian associations, although surely not as sinister as Hitler's, nevertheless are disturbing to those who demand a strict adherence to the original conception



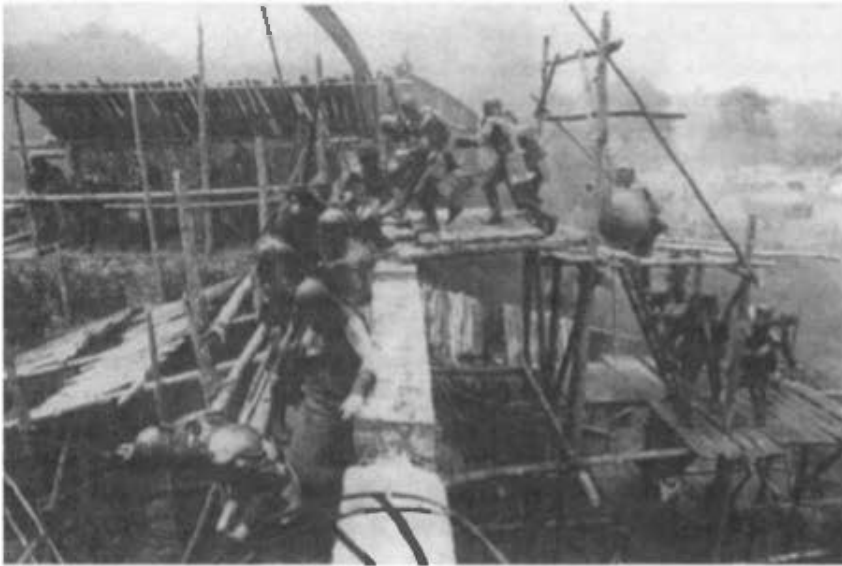
Lancelot (Franco Nero) brings Sir Dinadan back to life as King Arthur and Guinevere (Richard Harris and Vanessa Redgrave) and their court look on in *Camelot*.

in the U.S. constitution of a true republic. Largely due to its skillful manipulation of the Camelot image, the Kennedy family was treated like royalty by popular news magazines during the commemoration of the twentieth anniversary of JFK's death: *Newsweek* called the assassination a "regicide" of "the young prince," while the *New Republic* christened the Kennedys "our first and only truly royal family." This comes dangerously close to establishing a de facto dynasty, an expectation that a Kennedy has a right to rule, which JFK's political heirs, his younger brothers Robert and Ted, were able to use to their advantage. To preserve the Camelot image, JFK's widow and other family members were not adverse to resorting to censorship and secrecy, to the point that one of Kennedy's biographers, William Manchester, compared his "persecution" by them to "a kind of American *Nach und Nebel Erlass* [a Hitler decree]."

By 1967, when the movie version of *Camelot* came out, America was beginning to question its involvement in Vietnam and experience an imperial hesitancy that is perhaps echoed in Arthur's song of self-doubt, "What went wrong?" sung at the opening of the film. The country was ready for

the return of the “once and future king,” for another Kennedy presidency. That this was no idle fantasy of the Camelot School was demonstrated in March 1968, when a “fan” from Evanston, Illinois, one of 5000 urging Senator Robert Kennedy of New York to run for the Democratic nomination for president against the incumbent, Lyndon Johnson, invoked the Arthurian metaphor that had been cultivated by his elder brother: “Please reconvene the round table. We want Camelot again.” *Camelot* therefore captured not only the disillusionment, but also perhaps the hopes of its audience that it would see the rise of another Arthur-like politician to redeem the turmoil that had set in since Kennedy’s assassination. Indeed, if there is any political message to be read in the movie, its timing would suggest not so much an homage to JFK as an appeal, similar to that of the Evanston fan, to his brother and putative successor. In the event, LBJ announced that he would not seek a second term, while RFK did decide to run. The dream of an Arthurian resurrection in Bobby Kennedy, however, was cruelly blasted on June 5, 1968, when he was gunned down at the Ambassador Hotel in Los Angeles after winning the California primary. His death, coming two months after the assassination of yet another charismatic and inspiring public figure, Martin Luther King, Jr., seemed to mark a turning point in the history of the 1960s. With no more Arthurs to unite and lead them, Americans embarked on the bitterly self-destructive denouement to that decade.

Just as *King Arthur: The Young Warlord* is the one film that attempts to grapple with the Arthur of history, so *Excalibur* (1981), directed by John Boorman and starring Nigel Terry as Arthur, represents Hollywood’s best effort to capture visually the Arthur of legend, as this has come down to us in Malory’s *Le Morte D’Arthur*. Yet Boorman’s film was not the first to openly proclaim that it was bringing Malory’s epic to the silver screen. In 1953, the MGM spectacular, *Knights of the Round Table*, with an all-star cast of Mel Ferrer as Arthur, Robert Taylor as Lancelot, and Ava Gardner as Guinevere, announced in its opening credits that it was “based” on *Le Morte D’Arthur*. (Boorman’s closing credits say instead that his film is “adapted from” the book.) A souvenir booklet that was issued along with the film further claimed that MGM researchers had stuck “close to the facts,” whatever these might be, in Malory’s “studious work.” Despite this declaration of documentary-like intent towards the legend, *Knights of the Round Table* is a typical Hollywood melodrama that focuses, almost to the exclusion of all else, on the “love angle”—the doomed triangle between Arthur, Lancelot, and Guinevere. *Excalibur*, although giving full play to the romance between Lancelot and Guinevere and its betrayal of Arthur, nonetheless engages Malory on a more comprehensive and deeper level.



Uryens' army besieges King Leodagrance's castle in *Excalibur*. On the extreme right, a knight smokes a very anachronistic cigarette.

Some have criticized *Excalibur* for its historical faux pas of portraying Arthur's sixth-century knights in full suits of improbable plate armor, which never seem to come off, even when the knights are making graphic love to their damsels. But this is to confuse the intent of the film—which is to serve us up the legend, not the history, of King Arthur. Gaudily armored knights are entirely in keeping with how Malory's fifteenth-century audience would have conceived of his characters—the past reenacted in contemporary garb. Boorman himself says as much in a couple of interviews about the film. He tells Harlan Kennedy in *American Film*, for example: "I think of the story, the history, as a myth. The film has to do with mythical truth, not historical truth. . . . So the first trap to avoid is to start worrying about when or whether Arthur existed." To Philip Strick of *Sight and Sound*, Boorman pontificates: "Listen carefully to the echoes of myth. It has much more to tell us than the petty lies and insignificant truths of recorded history."

This is not to say, however, that *Excalibur* is, by any means, a perfect rendition of Arthur's legend. Despite the lush cinematography, the film, like *The Black Knight*, occasionally slips into anachronism. What are we to

make, for example, of the knight assaulting King Leodagrance's castle, who tosses away his cigarette just as he is about to scale the walls? More seriously, Arthurian scholars have pointed out the many omissions Boorman has made from Malory's original material: *The Tale of the Noble King Arthur that was Emperor*, *The Tale of Sir Gareth*, and *The Book of Sir Tristram*, for instance, are wholly left out. Moreover, in what remains, characters and events are often conflated and altered almost beyond recognition: The female banes of Arthur and Merlin—Morgause, Nenyve, and Morgan le Fay—whom we read of in *Le Morte D'Arthur*, become one figure, Morgana, in Boorman's film; Arthur's sword, Excalibur, which Malory introduces out of the blue as the sword in the stone, acquires a history in the film as the sword of Arthur's father, Uther Pendragon; Lancelot and Guinevere, whom Malory has caught out in their adultery by Agravain and Mordred, are instead challenged by Sir Gawain in *Excalibur*, while Arthur's brother/son, Mordred (cousin/son in *Le Morte D'Arthur*), isn't even born yet. Even so, these changes can be justified by the necessity to pare down the more than a thousand pages of Malory's printed text and fit them into a just under 2 1/2 hour-long movie. What is more, Malory's own work provides a precedent for just such an endeavor, since he himself did an enormous amount of editing and condensing of the legend when he "dyd take oute of certeyn bookes of Frensshe and reduced it into Englysshe." So Boorman is perfectly correct when he explains to Harlan Kennedy that he is following a long tradition in creating almost anew his own version of the legend. He apparently instructed his actors, "that they are not re-enacting a legend. They are creating it, and so they themselves don't know what's going to happen—it's unfolding."

Still, there is one major alteration that Boorman makes to Malory's legend that I believe is a mistake, because it drains the film of the religious element that is essential to the medieval character of the original. The change comes at the point where the film portrays the Quest of the Holy Grail, corresponding to Malory's *Tale of the Sankgreal* that he allegedly adapted from the French Vulgate Cycle. Boorman transfers the focus of the Quest from Galahad, Lancelot's son who is omitted entirely from the film, to Perceval, and he conflates Arthur with the Fisher King, or the Maimed King Pellam, for whom the Grail will bring healing, both to himself and to his wasted kingdom. Again, these changes can be justified for the sake of clarity in a film that is attempting to distill the unwieldy bulk of Arthur's legend. But what of confusing Arthur with Christ? As the Arthurian scholar, Norris Lacy, observes in his discussion of the film, this seems to happen in the scene where Perceval has his second vision of the Grail at the Castle of Carbonek. A portentous voice offscreen asks Perceval:

Arthur: What is the secret of the Grail? Whom does it serve?

Perceval: You, my lord.

Arthur: Who am I?

Perceval: You are my lord and king. . . . You're Arthur.

Arthur: Have you found the secret that I have lost?

Perceval: Yes: You and the land are one.

A vision of Arthur in shrouded armor fades in and out of this scene, which ends with Perceval finally grasping the Grail cup and urging it to the lips of a wasted Arthur.

The audience is surely thinking in the back of its mind that this is the cup used by Jesus Christ at the Last Supper. Yet nowhere is this stated in the film. (Perceval calls it the "chalice," but does not elaborate.) Indeed, the inference that Boorman leads us to draw is that Arthur is his own savior: He needs no one else—human or divine—to heal himself, except Perceval as a kind of introspective sounding board.

The scene is emblematic of the religious emasculation that takes place throughout the movie. A few references to Christianity occur here and there in *Excalibur*: the magnificent wedding scene between Arthur and Guinevere, presided over by a priest, with the Turin shroud behind the altar and the booming echoes of Kyrie eleison ("Lord have mercy") in the background, or Merlin's lament to Morgana during the ceremony: "The days of our kind are numbered. The one God comes to drive out the many gods. The spirits of wood and stream go silent. It's the way of things, yes. It's a time for men and their ways." Yet even during this overtly Christian sequence, the focus is on the pagan necromancer, Merlin, who, as played by Nicol Williamson, seems to be the real star of the film, stealing nearly every scene he is in. This is no accident, for the Merlin character is given a much greater role here than either in *Le Morte D'Arthur* or in other Arthurian films. (Boorman's original title for the movie, *Merlin Lives*, had to be abandoned for reasons of copyright conflict.) In Malory's version, Merlin is disposed of fairly early, well before the end of the first tale, *The Tale of King Arthur*, when he is trapped under a "grete stone" in Cornwall by the Lady of the Lake, Nenyve. In *Excalibur*, by contrast, Merlin is allowed to survive well beyond the midpoint of the movie, and even then is resurrected in time for Arthur's last battle, with Mordred. At times it almost seems as if Boorman is making up for the bad rap paganism receives in *The Black Knight*, by thrusting Merlin's magic center stage.

Unlike his other changes that clarify the story-line, Boorman's de-Christianization of the Grail legend only leads to confusion. How can Arthur be both king of England and Christ, even in a symbolic sense? Although many kings' and saints' lives during the Middle Ages provided

parallels with Christ's, their persons would never have taken the place of Christ in medieval minds. To do so would have been tantamount to thinking heresy, to raising mortal men to a status rivaling God's. Perhaps Boorman could claim that he is simply following Malory in reducing the religious significance of the Grail Quest in order to cater to the more secular tastes of his audience. (Actually, Boorman says he was inspired by Jessie Weston's pagan reinterpretation of the Grail symbol in Weston's 1920 book, *From Ritual to Romance*.) But the man who argued most vehemently that Malory trivialized the Christian message of the Grail—Eugene Vinaver, in his introduction to a three-volume, 1947 edition of the Winchester manuscript of *Le Morte D'Arthur*—has since withdrawn his case. Unlike some earlier mentions of the Grail by twelfth-century authors such as Chrétien de Troyes, Malory is, in fact, careful to explain the religious meaning of the cup and its connection to Jesus Christ. Moreover, the Grail's appearance marks a transformation of Malory's chivalric ideal from one of earthly values to more transcendental origins, and it is wrapped up in the final message of redemption that plays a large part in the powerful appeal of his work. The religious symbolism of the Grail, at least, must be retained in any film about Arthur that aspires to be medieval. But it may well be that Boorman intends his film to be timeless.

Our last Arthurian film is, in my opinion, the best interpretation of both the history and the legend of King Arthur. This happens to be the satiric sendup, *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* (1975), directed by Terry Gilliam and Terry Jones and starring the rest of the Monty Python troupe—Graham Chapman, John Cleese, Eric Idle, and Michael Palin—as assorted Arthurian characters. Monty Python's comedy, which is reminiscent of Twain's own irreverence in *A Connecticut Yankee*, works on several levels. For one, Monty Python parodies various legends about King Arthur, including some references that are obscure. The film bucks tradition in that it chooses to focus on Arthur's Quest for the Holy Grail rather than on the romantic triangle of Arthur, Lancelot, and Guinevere, the last never appearing as a character at all. Fairly typical of the Python approach is the scene where Arthur and his knights receive their Quest from a cantankerous God—portrayed as one of Monty Python's signature cartoons: immediately the portentousness of the Quest is undermined by angels' trumpets being blown out their asses.

The legendary characters of each of Arthur's knights are then subjected to similar treatment as they individually pursue the Quest. Sir Galahad, deceived by a "Grail-shaped beacon," arrives at Castle Anthrax, where his renowned chastity is sorely tested by "eight score young blondes and brunettes, all between 16 and 19½." The invincible Sir Lancelot, believing he is rescuing a damsel in distress who may lead him to the Grail,

butchers all the guards and eight wedding guests at Swamp Castle, where he finds only an effeminate bridegroom named Herbert with a penchant for maudlin singing. The Merlin-like enchanter who leads Arthur and his knights to the "Cave of Caer Banough," guarded by a killer rabbit, is an overacting "mangy Scotch git" named Tim. Audiences may be puzzled as to why a Trojan Rabbit shows up at the siege of the Frenchmen's Castle, yet this is no mere bit of Monty Python silliness. It is in fact a reference to a Welsh legend, repeated in the histories of Nennius and of Geoffrey of Monmouth, according to which Britain was founded by Brutus, a refugee of the Trojan Wars. The "Bridge of Death" scene, where a bridgekeeper tells Arthur and his knights that each one "must answer me these questions three, ere the other side he see," seems inspired by an old Welsh poem that has Arthur name all his companions to a gatekeeper, Glewlwyd Mighty-Grasp, before he can enter a fortress.

Monty Python and the Holy Grail also parodies film technique. The famous opening scene, where the sound of a horse's galloping hooves is juxtaposed with the visual image of Arthur and his squire, Patsy, banging together "two empty halves of cocoanuts," is a comic twist on sound fidelity. Lancelot's endlessly replayed attack on Swamp Castle makes a mockery of film editing, normally done to achieve continuity of time and space. Arthur's ridiculously bloody fight with the Black Knight—hacking him to pieces with Excalibur until his dauntless opponent is left with no arms or legs—seems a reference to a French Arthurian film that came out the previous year, *Lancelot du Lac*, whose opening sequence features a close-up shot of a sword severing a knight's head and slicing through a helmet. *Lancelot du Lac*, which is greatly admired by some film scholars for its cinematic technique, may strike other, especially English-speaking audiences, as pretentious; there is thus a rivalry between French and English tellings of the Arthur legend—traceable not only in film but as far back as the literature of the Middle Ages—that also comes in for Monty Python's wicked satire. At one point, Arthur and his Round Table knights find themselves besieging a castle in England manned by a "strange [French] person" who taunts them mercilessly in an "outrageous accent" and who informs them that, rather than join their Quest for the Holy Grail, "he's already got one . . . it's very nice." When Galahad asks the Frenchman, "What are you doing in England?" the Frenchman indignantly replies, "Mind your own business!" But Frenchmen contesting "English types" for control over transmission of Arthur's legend is not so unusual as the bafflement of this scene's characters would suggest.

Finally, *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* makes some very perceptive commentary on historians' efforts to recover the history of King Arthur, and of the Middle Ages in general. One scene where this occurs is the so-called



King Arthur and his knights, Sir Lancelot, Sir Bedevere, and Sir Galahad (Graham Chapman, John Cleese, Terry Jones, and Michael Palin) attempt a parley with the "strange person" inside the French Castle in *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*. John Cleese doubles in the scene as the French knight who taunts King Arthur.

"Marxist" sketch, where Arthur, "riding" in among what appear to be typical medieval peasants, accosts an "old woman," who, it turns out, is a 37-year-old man and member of an "anarcho-syndicist commune." Dennis proceeds to spout some extremely anachronistic Communist doctrine, such as telling Arthur that he became king "by hanging on to our dated imperialist dogma, which perpetuates the economic and social differences in our society," or that "supreme executive power derives from a mandate from the masses, not some farcical aquatic ceremony," such as the delivery of Excalibur to Arthur by the Lady of the Lake. Eventually, an exasperated Arthur attempts to silence Dennis by "repressing" him, which merely confirms Dennis's convictions about "the violence inherent in the system." The joke is that some medieval historians, such as R.H. Hilton, C.H. Brenner,

and Guy Bois, really do apply Marxist theory to the Middle Ages, particularly to the English Peasants' Revolt of 1381, which seems to lend itself to a class-based interpretation. Monty Python is only carrying to extremes the misguided attempts of Marxist scholars to impose their thoroughly modern historical models on the medieval past, where Dennis's obnoxiously combative jargon would sound just as foreign as in a medieval film.

But by far my favorite sketch is the "famous historian" scene, which is the only one that can claim a unifying presence throughout the film. An Oxbridge-looking don in natty tweeds and bow tie, identified as "a famous historian" in white letters at the bottom of the screen, abruptly intrudes his unwanted presence into the film right after Arthur's dismal failure to penetrate the French Castle from inside a Trojan Rabbit. The famous historian proceeds to give a pompous exposition on the previous scene and on what will happen next:

Defeat at the Castle seems to have utterly disheartened King Arthur. The ferocity of the French taunting took him completely by surprise, and Arthur became convinced that a new strategy was required if the Quest for the Holy Grail were to be brought to a successful conclusion. Arthur, having consulted his closest knights, decided that they should separate and search for the Grail individually. Now this is what they did . . .

We then hear the familiar sound of a horse's hoofbeats off camera, but lo! instead of a knight banging cocoanuts together, we get a real knight riding by on a real horse, who fatally slashes the famous historian in the neck with his sword as he utters a suitable warlike grunt. As David Day notes in his essay, "Monty Python and the Medieval Other," there thus commences a struggle between the troupe's efforts to re-create the Middle Ages and the modern world's officious determination to barge in on their overrealistic reenactment. Academic historians may impose their modern interpretations on medieval reality, as seems to have happened in the "Marxist" episode, but here the real Middle Ages takes its revenge on presumptuous historians, cutting them down in midsentence. Nonetheless, the famous historian has served his purpose: to provide a transition to the next scene, but not before his wife cries out in alarm and runs up to stand desolate over her husband's body. For now the chase is on: Arthur's first encounter with the Knights Who Say "Nee" is followed by the famous historian's wife consulting with policemen at the crime scene. Later, after Arthur has used the "Holy Hand-Grenade of Antioch" to destroy the killer rabbit before the Cave of Caer Banough, a detective and two policemen follow the explosion's trail from the shrubbery that was used to appease the Knights Who Say "Nee." Lancelot is then frisked down against a squad car

after crossing the Bridge of Death, and the whole film is put rudely to an end by a policeman's hand covering the camera lens as Arthur is led away into a paddy wagon with a blanket over his head. This abrupt ending comes as a greater disappointment for the fact that it interrupts a rousing battle scene, just as Arthur and his army—portrayed here with impressive realism, despite the leaders “riding” in without horses—are about to storm Castle Arggh! where the taunting French knights still hold the Grail. Yet the anticlimactic finale is appropriate, for there can be no other ending to any modern attempt—be it cinematic or scholarly—to bring to light the entire historical truth of the Middle Ages. Our quest for the King Arthur of history, Monty Python suggests, is a Quest for a Holy Grail that lies eternally beyond our grasp.