

The Arthurian Legend and Imperialism:  
Geoffrey of Monmouth, Mark Twain and Hollywood

Thessa Verwolf

3975967

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Utrecht University

Department of English Language and Culture

Supervisor Dr. Marcelle Cole

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## 1 Introduction

America's interest in the Middle Ages and especially King Arthur is visible in the many novels and the abundance of films inspired by the Arthurian legend. The medieval legend provided the United States, a new nation founded upon Enlightenment ideas, with a dark history to move away from; a place to progress from. Americans distanced themselves from "monarchical tyranny" (Bull 28-29) and "backward-looking and hierarchical social systems" (Bull 28-29) by forming the Constitution, the Declaration of Independence and the Bill of Rights. This critical view on medieval times is evident in Mark Twain's *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*. Twain's perspective in this novel is helpful in the debate on the justification of cultural imperialism. A contrasting view of the Middle Ages that emerged in the 19<sup>th</sup> century is a pastoral, romanticized and idyllic image, which stemmed from a desire to reconnect with nature and strive for harmony that was lost in the new industrial society. This "pre-industrial idyll" (Bull 19) is evident in Hollywood films, like *The First Knight* and *King Arthur*.

The Arthurian legend also provided American writers and filmmakers with a fitting backdrop against which America's imperialistic history, both in terms of colonialism and cultural imperialism in its appropriation of foreign culture could be discussed.

This essay will discuss the impact the adventurer, imperialistic and expansionist mindset of this country has had on how the Arthurian legend has been treated by American writers and filmmakers. This imperialistic theme is present in some of the earliest versions of the legends such as Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae* (*History of the Kings of Britain*). Imperialism entails the expansion of an empire, in other words, colonialism. However, the idea of an "informal empire" (Ninkovich 79), which is the scope of influence an empire has over other countries, not necessarily colonies, is more relevant when it comes to cultural imperialism. The dependency theory explains what effects such a dominant world

power can have. Some historians state that “the backwardness was the consequence of the structural requirement of the capitalist “world system” for an underdeveloped periphery” (Ninkovich 80). Of course, to view other, sometimes less advanced countries, as backwards is extremely arrogant. Ninkovich states that:

The concept of informal empire lies squarely at the center of historical debate about American imperialism. It is undeniable that the United States was an imperial power, but historians have not been able to agree on important questions. Was imperialism an accidental minor episode or did it flow ineluctably from an earlier history of expansion? Did the US continue on an imperialist course even after it had abandoned its colonial possessions? (80)

America’s imperial past is complicated and raises several questions. It invites research on public opinion on expansionist policies. The question arises if this mindset originates from a confidence that is inherent in American citizens. Furthermore, Hoganson questions if the male domination in this patriarchal country is a cause of the urge to expand: “Why were Americans so enthusiastic for war and empire? One must look to American definitions of manhood” (81).

Another influential scholar who can shed light on the imperialistic nature of America is Edward Said. He has explored the idea of Orientalism, “which argued that Western scholarship never really took pains to understand the oriental “other,” (...) “the impact that colonialism had upon the self-definition of the colonizers” (82). According to Edward Said, othering is a social construct that demolishes or dismisses other cultures, because they have a strong sense of self. To perceive your own people as chosen by God and meant to rule annihilates the autonomy of other people. One of the reasons why Monmouth’s account of Arthur appeals to imperialists is because Arthur is the main example of a man chosen by God; a King destined to rule. He has that same “primal drive, (...) that republican land hunger in which new territories were being added to the national domain with the expectation that they

would eventually become equal states in the federal Union” (Ninckovich 83). According to Richard Hofstadter, this primal drives comes from what he called the “psychic crisis” of the 1890s. The US was in such disarray, he argued, that the resulting “status anxieties” found an aggressive outlet in foreign policy” (Ninkovich 85). Progressive and aggressive are policies that lie closely together. Twain’s protagonist Hank will find this out for himself when his ideals and his hope for globalization, human freedom and prosperity destroy Camelot.

The present paper explores how the theme of imperialism in Monmouth’s version of the Arthurian legend has continued to serve as a thematic basis for later American literary and cinematographic reworkings of the legend. Chapter 1 analyses the theme of imperialism in Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *History of the Kings of Britain* before moving onto to explore the theme of imperialism, particularly that of cultural imperialism, in Twain’s *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court* and the films *The First Knight* and *King Arthur* in Chapters 2 and 3, respectively. It will be seen that these adaptations constitute both a reflection and an exploration of America’s own imperialistic ways.

## 2 Monmouth's *History of the Kings of Britain*

There are few known facts about Geoffrey of Monmouth's life, which makes it harder to grasp his intentions with his most well-known work, the *Historia Regum Britanniae* (*History of the Kings of Britain*). Monmouth's existence is validated in several charters and deeds that mention his name, as an active figure in the Church, who was appointed Bishop of St. Asaph's in 1151, and a scholar (Huber). Most historians assume that Geoffrey was born in Monmouth, as he identifies himself as "of Monmouth" in all his literature. Noteworthy, is that he rewrote scenes, for example the death of Vortigern, and changed the setting closer to Monmouth. Monmouth had an interest in Celtic Britain and Bretonic politics, which is evident in his work. Many scholars take this as an indication that he came from Bretonic backgrounds, perhaps from a Bretonic family that immigrated to Wales after the Norman Conquest, but this is speculation (Lloyd 466-467). Monmouth explains in his prologue that the *History* stems from a "librum vetustissimum" (most ancient book), given to him by the archdeacon of Oxford (Huber), that he translated into Latin. There are no references, allusions or any other signs found in other literature that proves that this was a real manuscript. Therefore, most scholars question the existence of this source and assume Monmouth mentioned this manuscript to give his translation authority. Monmouth has played an extremely important role in constructing the Arthurian myth. "Geoffrey is responsible for the composition of three Arthurian texts: *Prophetiae Merlini*, *Historia Regum Britanniae*, and *Vita Merlini*" (Huber). *The Prophecies of Merlin* were written under the patronage of the Bishop of Lincoln and were remarkably popular. The dense and complicated text was translated to Middle English and widely used as a guide to political events during the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries, and added later to *the History* in 1138 (Huber). *The History* is a chronological account of the history Britain, "from its legendary settlement by the Trojans up until the Saxon domination of the island. He has most likely taken small snippets of information from Gildas' *De Excidio Britanniae* (*On*

*the Ruin of Britain*) and Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica* (*Ecclesiastical History*) about the alleged warlord Arthur and a few of his battles they mention, and filled the rest in with his extraordinary imagination.

Monmouth's justification of imperialism rests on the Briton's rightful claim that stems from Trojan lineage. This links the Britons with the Romans:

By connecting Virgil's Aeneas with eponymous grandson, Britton, after whom Britannia could then be constructed as having been named. (...) The Britons were thereby immersed in the classical story told by Virgil of the Trojans even before Rome was founded, so claiming a lineage equal, or even superior, in antiquity, hence status, to the Romans (Higham).

Monmouth mentions Trojan history in his first chapters. "After the Trojan was, Aeneas (...) sailed to Italy" (Monmouth 4), his grandson Brutus kills his father and is expelled to Greece. He becomes general of the remaining Trojans. A goddess comes to him in his dream and prophesizes that he will enter a promised island, which turns out to be Albion (Monmouth 21-22). "Here he builds a new Troy, upon the river Thames" (Monmouth 23). Later on, the fall of Troy is projected upon the fall of Britain, from the Briton perspective. Trojan lineage was also used by later monarchs to legitimize regal claims:

The Plantagenet monarchs also found Geoffrey's *History* useful. More than once his fictitious Trojan lineage was used to justify various regal claims. The Tudor and Stuart monarchs also cited Geoffrey's history to support their dynastic successions. The last documented claim of this nature was made by James VI of Scotland. When it became apparent that Elizabeth I would produce no heir, James VI claimed the right of inheritance based on the fact that he could trace his pedigree to Brutus the Trojan and to Llewellyn, the last native Prince of Wales. Eventually, after nearly five hundred years, Geoffrey's "social

utility" came to an end with the English Civil War and the Glorious Revolution, which ushered in a preference for history over legend (Brynjulfson).

Tracing the genealogy of the Britons back to Aeneas and Brutus gives them a Trojan past, which in turn gives them authority. Monmouth's idyllic representation and description of Britain stems from the notion that the Britons are the native inhabitants of Britain, and that Britain is the new Rome. "Under its lofty mountains lie green meadows pleasantly situated, in which the gentle murmurs of crystal springs gliding along clear channels, give those that pass an agreeable invitation to lie down on their banks and slumber" (Monmouth 2). They have farmed and placed the foundation of civilization on the empty, barren land and therefore have the right to rule. This idea is a myth rather than historical truth and has ideological origins (Faletra 70).

Imperialism is an eminently important theme in Monmouth. It is the foundation of the *History* on which other elements are built, like good kingship and the glory of Britain. The *History*, can be perceived as a "as a narrative of origins and a justification of imperialism" (Faletra 74), while the Prophecy can be taken as a way of rekindling or validating the hope of Briton ascendance, with Arthur as their leader. The Prophecy serves as an abrupt transition in the middle of the *Historia* and between the rise and fall of the Britons. The symbolic and vague language with an apocalyptic feel, mentions the Red Dragon, the Britons, and the White Dragon, the Saxons and foreshadows the recovery and rebirth of the Britons and how they triumph over their enemies. He alludes to Arthur as the Boar of Cornwall:

The Boar of Cornwall shall bring relief from these invaders, for it will trample the necks beneath its feet. The islands of the Ocean shall be given into the power of the Boar, and it shall lord it over the forests of Gaul. The House of Romulus shall dread



the Boar's savagery, and the end of the Boar will be shrouded in mystery. The Boar shall be extolled in the mouths of its peoples, and its deeds will be as meat and drink to those who tell tales (Monmouth 133).

He refers to the "German worm" (Monmouth 133) returning, by which he means the Saxons.

Monmouth describes Arthur's humble nature and sets it against evil, like Vortigern, but also his enemies and eventually Mordred, his wicked nephew. In allowing the Saxons to retreat after battle, Arthur proves to be a merciful king (Monmouth). He also gives pardon to the Scots and Picts. Monmouth deliberately mystifies Arthur and places him above average people by attributing him with undefeatable magical aid like his shield Priwen with the Mother Mary on it, his sword Caliburn and his lance Ron. (Monmouth) Monmouth calls the young Arthur, crowned at age 15 "a youth of such unparalleled courage and generosity, joined with that sweetness of temper and innate goodness, as gained him universal love" (209). Arthur's virtue stands in stark contrast with his father Uther, who conceived Arthur by tricking Gorlois' wife into sleeping with him. More anecdotes like Arthur restoring ancient, beautiful churches in York aid this illusion. His enemies, but even his father, are demonized in order to glorify Arthur. This construct serves to play down the imperialistic, aggressive ruler Arthur actually embodies. Monmouth has conjured up a claim to the throne and in combination with his kind nature; Arthur is the perfect, heroic king, the Messiah.

The question arises why Monmouth drifts away from this construct at the end of his *History* and lets the King Arthurian myth die slowly, and with him the Briton resurgence. *The History* can also be read as an "obscurantist allegory" (Faletra 75) that can be used to defend Norman hegemony. "Geoffrey's historical narration—linear, genealogical, and individualistic—participates in a wider Norman secular historiography that privileges the potentially limitless temporal and spatial expansionism required for a colonial ideology" (Faletra 72-73).

Around 1150, Geoffrey wrote the lesser-known *Vita of Merlin*, a poem describing the madness and restitution of the famous character Merlin” (Huber). It discusses the reign and death of Arthur. Like parts of the *History*, the language is cryptic and contains many references, again to the Boar of Cornwall. In this *Vita*, Arthur is taken to his sister Morgan. She heals him, but he does not return to Britain and his fame fizzles out. Monmouth mystifies the history of Britain and Arthur’s reign by adding elements of magic to his life. At first Arthur’s legitimate claim to the throne and his imperialistic ambition seem to be the focal point of the *History*, but the *Vita of Merlin* shows that in the end, Arthur does not rule the world anymore and he is replaceable. He reduces Arthur from being the one and only King, to just one of the Kings who gets defeated by the Normans. Monmouth justifies the Norman Conquest, probably because he is writing in an era where the Normans ruled.

Pro-Norman elements exemplify the dualism in the *History*. According to Faletra and Flint, Monmouth conjures up the Briton genealogy, but ultimately dismisses the Briton revival. He subtly suggests that the Normans are the legitimate rulers, because they have won their ground after crossing the English Channel, through glorious imperialism, just as Arthur did. Just like later King Arthur adaptations, Monmouth takes his audience into account and lets his writing be influenced by his own position and beliefs. In order to not offend anyone, he considers his loyalty to his patrons, “powerful Normans: Robert Earl of Gloucester, Bishop Alexander of Lincoln, Bishop Robert of Lincoln, Waleran Count of Mellent, and even King Stephen” (Faletra 74). Monmouth’s contemporary, the historian William of Malmesbury, discusses the way the decline of the ancient Britons facilitated the later Norman rise. In his work the *De Gestis Regum Anglorum* (*The Deeds of the Kings of England*, c. 1125) he draws attention to the similarity between the fall of the Britons and the Anglo-Saxons and in doing so diminishes the claim on Britain the Britons supposedly had. They, like the Anglo-Saxons crumbled under the imperialistic Norman regime. Evidently, Monmouth constructs his

argument about Arthur being the savior and the rightful king carefully, because rooting too strongly for the Britons sets him against his Norman patrons. He tries to appeal to both audiences; the Normans and the Welsh. He refers to his own Welsh roots, but cannot ignore his current Norman dominated situation.

With his *History*, Monmouth lit the flame of Arthur stories and the romantic atmosphere that surrounds it. Arthur is portrayed as a symbol of masculine force, a unifying authority who can build up a nation fallen into anarchy. Arthur is a foil to Vortigern, an evil warlord without virtue. In contrast, Arthur is a symbol of power, a unifying force who can fix a nation fallen into anarchy. He stands for glory and righteousness and is “a symbol of British strength at its pinnacle” (Faletra 72). Monmouth’s aim at first seems to be to portray a rightful heir to the throne and with him a Briton or Welsh revival. “His crushing defeats of the Saxons, his defiance of the Romans, his crusades on the continent—all these events point to the fact that he is in some sense the *restitutor orbis*, the restorer of peace and prosperity and the redeemer of the waning British people” (Faletra 72). Arthur conquers Ireland, Iceland, the Gothlands and Orkneys and he restores peace for 12 years. In Chapter XI Monmouth praises the, chivalric and gentle manners at court, the women are chaste, fashionable and his court is imitated by others: it is famous. Arthur’s kingdom surpasses all other kingdoms in grandeur. He is feared in Norway, Gaul, Dacia, and Aquitane and throughout the rest of the world. Arthur is brave, kills giants and is a strategist, good warrior and a smart commander. He can rally his army with an inspirational speech (Monmouth 248). Monmouth stresses his Trojan ancestry by portraying an ancient custom of Troy, wherein men and women feast separately (227). This ancestry that Monmouth provided gave the Arthurian legend a colourful background, and his particularly artistic language and romantic view on the legend have caused Monmouth’s work to be one of the most influential sources when it comes to later representations of King Arthur.

### 3 Mark Twain's *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*

Mark Twain's *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* has puzzled many scholars because of its ambivalence towards progress and imperialism. The protagonist Hank Morgan gets hit on the head and wakes up in medieval England, in Arthur's kingdom to be precise. After tricking the simple-minded people into thinking he is a wizard and accepting him as "The Boss", he sets out to change the kingdom and free them of superstition and slavery. His actions can be explained as imperialism, as he uses political and military force to change an undemocratic country into a republic that values 19<sup>th</sup>-century values. Johnson has defined Hank as a "benevolent imperialist" (50) whose aim is to completely revolutionize a nation for the better, which is in his opinion in their best interests. He feels like he is obliged to spread the blessed democratic civilization as he knows it, to free the oppressed. This duty, which he feels has been put upon his shoulders, justifies his rather violent involvement and trickery. He seems to represent America as the supreme interventionist country they later proved themselves to be in the wars in Vietnam and Iraq. Like his country, Hank is the chosen one to help (Johnson 49). This notion makes *A Connecticut Yankee* extremely relevant for modern readers and in the debate on imperialism and the question when intervention and involvement in another country or culture is justified. Twain does not deliver a solution to this question. However, with his comedic tone and irony, he sheds light on how to deal with opposing cultures, like those Hank finds himself caught in and fails to understand.

Twain subtly juxtaposes Hank's outrage at slavery with his desire to enslave the courtiers to his factory. Hank 'trying to fix it' (Twain 138) is a prime example of imperialism; he critiques foreign vice, but he is blind when it comes to his own. Twain shows the reader multiple interpretations of this ambiguous subject of imperialism in undemocratic countries (Johnson 50). Johnson states that Twain does not believe benevolence to be a righteous reason for imperialism and he states that "kind intentions are rarely sufficient, in Twain's mind, to

establish moral superiority” (59). According to Field, all Americans were essentially benevolent imperialists: “What Americans, whether travellers or missionaries or businessmen, wanted of the outer world was the freedom to pursue happiness, to do their thing, to operate insofar as possible unhindered by arbitrary power or obsolete ideas. Proud of their own self-determined independence” (Field 667). This statement focuses on the individual American and therefore simplifies governmental expansionism and ignores events like the Iraq war and Vietnam. According to Field, historical writing on American imperialist past puts too much emphasis on the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Historians seem to have constructed the imperialistic past of America on selective reading, which ignores the focus there has been on solving their own problems, like economy and infrastructure, above imposing their culture on other countries, and defending their own country before expansion overseas (Field 645-646). Another problem with identifying imperialist America is that it overlooks secular enterprises overseas that do not represent America as a nation. The American navy is used as a prime example of expansionism, although it was mainly meant to defend rather than explore and expand: “The creation of the new American navy in the last two decades of the century was an event of undoubted importance, which might, at first glance, seem to provide bureaucratic evidence for an expansionist policy. But navies can be designed for various purposes: there is no necessary connection between naval building and commercial expansion or colonization, and battleships do not equate with empire” (Field 652). Field mentions “faceless imperialists” (651), because naming influential imperialists who actually achieved something is hard. According to him, the list of anti-imperialists is much longer, and he includes Twain on this list. However, he contradicts himself in this passage:

The Industrial Revolution, commenced in England, had leapt the Atlantic to produce a still greater economic expansion. On the scales of civil liberty and representative democracy none could match the British and Americans. Nor

had any other societies deployed so many missionaries and mechanics to carry the gift of salvation, whether by conversion or modernization, to those who dwelt in darkness (Field 648).

What Field is stating is that there was religious and technological expansionism but not to the extent later generations believe it to be. The legacy of ideologists does not represent the whole imperialistic history of America. A historic event that has actually occurred exemplifies the state of communication between America and the rest of the world much better than misquoted imperialistic ideas:

The revolution in communications that occurred with the coming of ocean cables. As these progressively joined together the already existing regional telegraph nets, those in the Western world who possessed the requisite skills and inclinations found it possible to administer modernity, public or private, at previously unheard-of distances. Without this development, it seems proper to suggest, the world would not have witnessed the late nineteenth-century growth of multinational enterprise, the particular kind of reactive and competitive European imperialism that marked the 1880's and 1890, or the rash of international crises of the closing years of the century (Field 660-661).

At the beginning of *Connecticut Yankee*, the narrator is reading *Le Morte d'Arthur*, which satisfies his nostalgia and romanticism he connects to this medieval past. There is a sense of escapism, which is totally destroyed by Hank's story. Hank de-romanticizes courtly life when he talks about its filthy humor and its lack of hygiene. The gluttonous aristocratic court dwellers are naïve, cruel and simple like children. Twain then strongly contrasts the aristocracy with the peasants and slaves, who are treated badly and have no purpose but to work for the nobles. He condemns their superstition and religion, which is another form of slavery to Hank. Basically, "Hank wants to "boss" the country into shape for a republican

revolution, scheduled for the moment after Arthur's demise" (Johnson 51). He puts up a "patent office, factories, (...) a newspaper, a cleanliness crusade, the telegraph, a modernized military, and freedom of religion" (Johnson 51). These reforms are entirely based upon Hanks beliefs, not on what is fitting for the country at that time. He wants Camelot to prepare for "self-rule and modern capitalism" (Johnson 51). His dream is to enslave Camelot to capitalism. However, he does not see it as another form of enslavement, but as liberation. He achieves his power by undermining the authority of the aristocracy and the Knights. He invents the hygiene crusade, which means that the knights have to carry banners with toothpaste adverts. He ridicules and weakens them. Also, he invents the man-factory, where he trains promising individuals. Hank believes that slow, steady and peaceful reform through opportunity, education, health and progress will drag the country out of the superstitious slum they are in. "The inherent attraction of democratic liberty will pull people out of their timid submissiveness and into the republican manliness necessary for self-rule" (Johnson 52). When relating this back to modern time imperialism by America, this gratitude has not been evident. "In the case of Iraq, the results have been mixed, with less fervent shows of gratitude among liberated Iraqis than American leaders expected" (Johnson 52).

Hank has good intentions, which classifies him as a benevolent imperialist. However, there are many arguments against this reading of his character. These good intentions make him indifferent to "the intrinsic value and nobility of the society he so crudely tries to reshape" (Johnson 52). *Connecticut Yankee* is not only a novel that shows the virtues of American democracy, liberty and capitalism. It unveils the lack of understanding the American government, and Hank, have for different values. Their steady faith in their own moral codes is their excuse for imposing them overseas. Besides that, Hank turns out to be quite ruthless and violent towards his enemies when his peaceful reform does not work. He turns to a bloody French Revolution-like event, to overthrow the nobility and rid the people of

their shackles. There is another problem with the categorization of Hank as benevolent, or philanthropic, which is a way of building a nation that will benefit the conquered nation. It is not nation building in order to exploit the nation, or for gain. Nevertheless, Hank benefits substantially from his improvements.

Twain's comments on England reflect a deep-rooted Anglophobia. This could be for the publicity of *Connecticut Yankee* and to strengthen his case for the backwardness of English aristocracy, but he is pretty outspoken and negative. He has "utter contempt for their pitiful Lords and Dukes" (Williams 1) and "the subject of Anglo American marriages, for example, provoked his unrestrained contempt (...) in his notebook he went so far as to suggest that the English dukes "bought" by American heiresses were for the most part syphilitic" (Williams 10). Twain feels like Americans "could afford to look down and spit upon miserable titled nonentities" (Williams 1). When accepting these rather coarse statements, *Connecticut Yankee* is without doubt meant as a satire on English aristocracy, evident in this thought Hank has: "For instance, those people had inherited the idea that all men without title and a long pedigree, whether they had great natural gifts and acquirements or hadn't, were creatures of no more consideration than so many animals, bugs, insects; whereas I had inherited the idea that human daws who can consent to masquerade in the peacock-shams of inherited dignities and unearned titles, are of no good but to be laughed at" (Twain 46). However, there is dualism in his criticism and satire, and it is not solely aimed at England. He condemns the slavery in the Old South in America just as hard as aristocratic England. Nevertheless, he believes that America has evolved from that dark period and England is stuck in and still extremely elitist. "It is now generally agreed that during the late 1880's he went through a phase of extreme hostility to England-especially to English aristocracy-accompanied by high confidence in the beneficence of American democracy, capitalism, and technology" (Williams 2). This powerful animosity towards English nobility changes during



the writing of *Connecticut Yankee*; his general intention shifts. Instead of attacking a small group, he attacks 18<sup>th</sup> century morals. He comments on “al follies as credulity, snobbery, and superstition” in Victorian England and America (Williams 4). Twain’s anti-medievalist and unromantic account of chivalry and courtly life reflects his thoughts on these follies. He applies low burlesque, which is a literary genre that comments on a serious matter in a mocking and crude manner. He describes Camelot as a pastoral at times, but mostly a hedonistic rural and chaotic mess fuelled by ignorance and cruelty. He views the people as “white Indians” (Twain 16), in other words, western savages. This statement has a strong ideology and imperialistic feel to it which again strengthens his sense of superiority. What is noteworthy is that Hank is aware of this 18<sup>th</sup> century supremacy he has over the people of Camelot, and he is unsettled by this realization:

The Boss suddenly and untypically despises his own feeling of superiority to Sandy. He recalls an American trick of placing a tall mirror at one end of a dimly lit room, so that a stranger assumes it is a door which someone is approaching from the other side. After vainly trying to dodge by his own reflection, the stranger calls it a fool, idiot, and ass before realizing that he is addressing himself. Similarly, the Boss concludes, Sandy slobbering over hogs is simply the mirror image of his recent American Presbyterian self. The lesson that we should at least pretend to honor each other's superstitions is perfectly apt and typical of Mark Twain, but it tends to undercut both the theme of moral progress and the character of the narrator, who was originally conceived as an “innocent” mask for satire of religiosity (Williams 9).

Hank discusses the effect different training or upbringing has: “I had to put myself in Sandy's place to realize that she was not a lunatic. Yes, and put her in mine, to demonstrate how easy it is to seem a lunatic to a person who has not been taught as you have been taught” (Twain

128). Furthermore, Hank speaks about the “loftiness and sweetness that rebuked your belittling criticisms and stilled them” (Twain 17). Williams states that Twain’s first intention was to use Hank as a simple, uncoloured or unbiased narrator. Eventually, Hank has become a literate and sophisticated character, who embodies Twain’s ambiguous emotions concerning imperialism.

There is a connection to be made between Hank imposing technology upon Camelot and introducing guns to them, and America fighting a war in Iraq. Technological advancement is a strong excuse in favour of imperialism and Hank seems to equal civilization with technological advancements. Hank imposes progress upon areas that have fallen behind: “In various quiet nooks and corners I had the beginnings of all sorts of industries under way -- nuclei of future vast factories, the iron and steel missionaries of my future civilization. ... I was training a crowd of ignorant folk into experts -- experts in every sort of handiwork and scientific calling” (Twain 55). Remarkably, Twain had not planned technological change to be such an important theme in *Connecticut Yankee*. “Twain planned the Boss’s introduction of steam engines, fire companies, aluminum, vaccination, and lightning rods, but the whole business of technological innovation failed to catch his deeper interest, and it was probably not until the novel was near completion that he added some summarizing passages on this subject” (Williams 7). Twain’s developing pride concerning America’s civilization is reflected in Hank’s attitude towards the people of Camelot. Hank sees himself as the chosen one, which has the consequence that the dominant, authoritative and invasive party, Hank and America, have a superior role over the victims they suppose need help. When characterizing Hank, this sense of superiority is quite indisputable. Twain has used the flawed hero concept we know from Shakespeare to construct Hank. There are many passages that exemplify his patronizing nature:

Yet there was something very engaging about these great simple-hearted creatures, something attractive and lovable. There did not seem to be brains enough in the entire nursery, so to speak, to bait a fish-hook with; but you didn't seem to mind that, after a little, because you soon saw that brains were not needed in a society like that, and indeed would have marred it, hindered it, spoiled its symmetry -- perhaps rendered its existence impossible (Twain 17).

The Boss' flaws cause his downfall in the end; he is condescending, overzealous in his ambition in progress. He is overly confident, a trait that Hank shares with the American government at the time of the war in Iraq. "The expectation that toppling Saddam Hussein's regime would lead to mass jubilation in the streets, and the notion that rebuilding Iraq's infrastructure and providing democratic institutions would be sufficient to ensure lasting positive change" (Johnson 55). Hank, like America in Iraq, provided civilization without understanding the civilization that was already established. Hank does not get the medieval soul, and how it is built on religious fear. "He is shocked to find that, despite his educational and religious reforms, all of his supporters except for a few dozen boys-desert him when the Church declares an Interdict" (Johnson 54). His violent display of force and sensation like the fireworks at the well, impresses the people and install fear in them, but it does not provide the their trust and cannot win their heart. "Like Hank at the end of *Connecticut Yankee*, America is stuck fighting a bloody war, aided by only a handful of allies, against the very people it thought it was helping" (Johnson 55), and evolve into tyranny, and even mass destruction and murder. Twain, who entered an anti-imperialist League, against pacifying the Philippines and against the war with Spain, expresses his sentiments in the ending of *Connecticut Yankee*. He ultimately rejects imperialism and Hank fails, murdering the entire ruling class, leaving nothing but chaos and destruction. He illustrates "the consequences of an excessive faith in

reason and technology, and of callousness toward the virtues of traditional society” (Johnson 53). Hank’s failure suggests that Twain ultimately believes that democratic reform cannot succeed when superficially handled, it must aim to bear the burden of slow progress for a long time and stick with it. The pitfall of this anti-imperialist interpretation of the ending is that it is influenced by later knowledge scholars have concerning Twain’s beliefs. At first, Twain condones and even praises America’s war against Cuba. Also, Twain’s letters shed a different light on interpretations of *Connecticut Yankee*; Twain states that privilege has many times been achieved by violence, and that violence cannot always be avoided. Evidently, there are many levels in Twain to be discovered, which mirror his changing perspectives on imperialism. Twain is torn about “people's capacity for self-rule on the one hand, and the darkest sort of despair about human nature on the other hand” (Johnson 58).

#### 4 King Arthur and Hollywood

The film *The First Knight* from 1995 directed by Jerry Zucker is heavily influenced by the romanticised version of the Arthurian legend that became popular in the 19th century. It is a good example of cultural imperialism. *King Arthur*, from 2004 directed by Antoine Fuqua explores imperialistic relations in the past to understand the present. American popular culture has generated a simplified, lightweight version of King Arthur to accommodate the modern viewer. Decoding literature from another culture also involves patronizing it (Said) and Hollywood reduces the Arthurian legend to a simple love story with characters stereotyped from a modern perspective. This type of cultural imperialism over-simplifies and makes the legend seem frivolous. This fits in the tradition of romanticising the Arthurian legend that emerges during the 19th century. Alice Chandler discusses the interaction between medievalism and romanticism and the role played by Sir Walter Scott, Carlyle, Ruskin and Morris in romanticising the Middle Ages, but stresses that medievalism is part of a “larger social movement” (Chandler 11), and it was used as an answer to the difficulty of living in a new industrial society and the problems it caused. Medievalism signifies a link to nature and harmony in an artificial, machine-driven age, and a “Romantic search for meaning” (Chandler 8). The Middle Ages sparked association with “boundless energy and aspiration” (Chandler 9) and represented a time wherein people were close and loyal, opposed to greedy and selfish. This idealisation is evident in Hollywood films.

*The First Knight* decodes a legend known to a British audience and to an American audience, or practically global audiences, as Hollywood films have great reach. As mentioned above, decoding literature from another culture many times also involves patronizing it (Said). Guinevere is reduced to a stereotyped damsel in distress, just as Arthur is reduced to a sweet old man “who carries his power so lightly and with kindness in his eyes” (*The First Knight* 1:13). Unlike Queen Gwendolen from Monmouth’s *History of the Kings of Britain*

who led her army into battle, “medieval films provide images of women that clash with the history or literature it draws from” (Driver and Ray 13). Guinevere, played by Julia Ormond, is frolicking around without worry, playing a medieval form of soccer with the locals. Camelot is a candlelit paradise, completely different from Twain’s filthy hellhole. Arthur, played by Sean Connery, is a fatherly figure, loving and righteous and Lancelot is a ravishingly handsome Richard Gere. Arthur main objective is to fight formerly knight Malagant, and to protect justice and his people’s freedom. The director has added the glamour of Hollywood and does not aim to portray the medieval world accurately. It is the further fictionalization of an already fictional legend. “The cinema is not a spectacle, it is a form of writing” – meaning, in effect, a form of expression that is as personal as a signature yet also as objectively material as a block of text” (Driver, Ray 2).

Blending English myth with American stereotypes, or glamourizing British culture, is a way of colonizing literature and a continuation of imperialistic patriarchal tradition into another culture and era. Films are “political and aesthetic acts in which medievalism becomes a way of decoding both the present and the recent past, much as Orientalism was for Edward Said” (Driver, Ray 2). Said has explored the idea of the Self, in this case being America, and the Other. In the case of this research the Other is British culture and especially literature on King Arthur, as this is a great part of British culture and identity. King Arthur is a national icon, the emblem of chivalry and a nostalgic, romantic past. “People tend to have deep, nonnegotiable attachments to their own “civilizations” (El-Haj 538). Instead of othering and imperializing Arab-Muslim East, the area discussed by Said, America views an important part of English culture “as a space demanding intervention” (El-Haj 538), to understand it and make it their own. However, the Arthurian legend does not seem to contrast as much with American values and literary tradition as Arabic culture. To apply Said’s Orientalism to *King Arthur*, the term needs to be viewed in a broader context. “The more universal problem of

Otherness, I want to bring back into stark relief how the specific problems of representation that Said sought to address were intimately entangled with distinct colonial histories and imperial institutions of power” (El-Haj 539). For example, reducing a warrior hero to a king almost in tears because his love cheats on him, he and the legend itself are scaled down to a Hollywood love story. In order to understand the Other, “cultural references, (to romance) amounts to a knowing invitation to the audience to feel included” (Bull 11). However, a positive effect of othering is that it has been the spark for many scholars to investigate this legend, or orientalism, further, and to engage in this history actively (Bull), which caused the myriad of research on King Arthur. Bull calls this the “trickle-down effect which enables scholarly ideas to seep into the popular consciousness” (7).

Medievalism is a way of decoding the past and the present. In the film *King Arthur*, King Arthur is used to illuminate and highlight certain American values, like freedom, and subsequently propagate American ideology: being the land of the free and the home of the brave. This national myth of American Exceptionalism, which takes pride in individual liberty and democratic ideals, has come to life in this adaption of Arthur. Arthur is a courageous and heroic leader, who chooses to fight a whole army on his own, in order to set the Sarmatians free. Freedom is highly valued by him, and he defies the Roman law to set his men free. He also frees prisoners and takes them with him, although it will slow him down and make him a bigger target. Evidently, values that are emphasized in this film that fit and underline the American motto are valour and independence. Besides highlighting American morals and beliefs, the main aim of the film is to explore the Sarmation Theory. The Sarmatians were a nomadic tribe led by a Roman officer named Lucius Artorius Castus, who is the supposed ancestor of King Arthur in this film. These Sarmatians were conscripted into Roman service and were set free after they served most of their lives. Fuqua alludes to recent archeological findings to support these claims. Scholars supporting this theory have found parallels between

the Sarmation warriors and the Arthurian legend. They state that the Sarmation Cavalry had a dragon on their banners. Their legends also mention a magician, magical lake and a sword (Varandas). By exploring this theory, the film gets immediate authority from the historical background, just like Monmouth tried to give King Arthur authority by giving him Trojan ancestors. Also, *King Arthur* sets out to mirror the past of the United States by past by comparing the Sarmatian's experience to American soldiers' experience in the Vietnam War (Varandas). Fuqua saw parallels, like the Picts being the Vietcong, the Woads, the tribe led by Merlin, guerrilla fighters. Ho Chi Minh inspired Merlin the tribe leader and the knights are the American soldiers, fighting for a cause they do not feel passionate about and "killing to stay alive" (Pugh and Weisel89). Producer Jerry Bruckheimer compares the fall of Rome with the fall of Saigon:

If one follows this parallel through, in *King Arthur* what happens metaphorically, is that the surly and disillusioned American GI's (the Samartians), in Vietnam (Britain), free themselves from the imperial government that has turned its back on them (Rome or Washington), make common cause with their former enemies (the Woads, the Vietcong), and defeat their real enemies. (Varandas 52).

Arthur represents a leader, "questioning the ethical authority of his leaders and the morality of the Vietnam War" (Pugh and Weisel 89), or the Roman cause in this film. However, the only allusion to archaeological findings at the beginning and the omission of further explanation on the myth is not enough foundation to support this pseudo-historical plot. Fuqua tried to strengthen his argument by paying close attention to detail and back this new myth up, which is why he employed John Matthews, a prolific writer on the Arthurian legend. They also built a Roman Fort and part of Hadrian's Wall. Matthews added Pictish to the script and gave pointers to the actors to portray the Knights accurately. A completely



different idea explored by the writer of the film is to make Guinevere Merlin's daughter (Matthews 114). Keira Knightley is a warrior princess in leather, with a bow and arrow, and a posh accent, which does not help her believability.

Of course producers and screenwriters have to choose a perspective on a subject, and cannot encompass the whole myth in only one film. However, a film cannot claim to be inspired by an alternate theory on the origins of King Arthur, the Sarmation myth, and then disregard the academic consensus that King Arthur was not a historical figure. By hoping to establish a historical figure, Fuqua disregarded the shaky historical evidence behind the Sarmation Theory. "The paradox of building a realist film from chimerical history, one only fleetingly recorded in historical documents, subverts its foundations, as Fuqua holds his work to historical standards only to be undone by the emptiness of its anachronistic play" (Pugh and Weisel 89). *King Arthur*, and many other films allow an indifference to anachronism, which "destroys the consistency of the illusion. The perceptual complexity has been compromised; the sense of historical depth disappears, and we are left looking at a movie set" (Driver and Ray 47). It indoctrinates a large audience with a one-sided and superficial view of King Arthur and associations to the Middle Ages of "dark and ominous times" (Bull 12), only highlighting the triumph of male. This does not seem a crime, but it adds to a tradition of establishing stereotypical Others in other films; Asian, Arabic or African. Hollywood propagates stereotyping of foreign cultures or gender-roles and instills prejudice in their audience's minds. This is a broader problem not only evident in Arthur films. For example, Hollywood shows Asians mainly in Kung Fu movies, Latinos mostly as maids and gardeners, and women as just a love interest. This is harmful othering, stereotyping, and disrespectful of these minorities. *King Arthur's* characters seem mock-heroic and exaggerated, and the overdose of fighting scenes in the film is an easy way to attract and please a large audience. The extreme violence works as "a code" (Bull 13) that triggers a mental connection. They

make a caricature of the past, to make a point. This romanticized construct appeals to a vast audience, because it propagates a comfortable view on the Middle Ages. Sadly, the film industry feeds a tradition that results in a stereotyped image of other eras.

## 5 Conclusions

The present study has explored how the theme of imperialism found in Monmouth's influential version of the Arthurian legend has continued to influence American literary and cinematographic adaptations of the legend. Twain's protagonist Hank's "dream of cultural transformation", his "desire to modernize" Camelot "by generating a cultural revolution" (Ninkovich 88-89) has made him blind. In a way, his imperialism caused the final battle in the story just like America's imperialism caused World War I, according to Walter Lippmann and Walter Weyl (Ninkovich 90). Hank has entered Camelot as a product of the Enlightenment. Sadly these enlightened views have made him shortsighted and ignorant, a statement that can be applied to American foreign policies at times. Said comments upon the responsibility America has because of their dominant position in Western literature and culture in general. Imperialism has established them as "a constitutive of metropolitan society, culture, and consciousness" (Pratt 2). Popular, low-brow culture as well as "high culture, Said argues, has particularly escaped scrutiny for its role in shaping the imperial dynamic and has been mysteriously exempted from analysis whenever the causes, benefits, and evils of imperialism were discussed" (Pratt 2). Skepticism towards sweeping generalizations and simplifications sparks interest to find out the nuances present in *King Arthur*. Jonathan Arac quotes Said: "In a word, "the power to narrate, or to block other narratives from forming and emerging, is very important to culture and imperialism" (10). However, besides annihilating narratives, imperialism has inspired various narratives worth investigating as well. Eventually, "American enthusiasm for the medieval has helped to 'universalize' the Middle Ages, turning them into part of our global historical narrative and giving them a significance which transcends the story of what happened in one fairly small extremity of the Eurasian landmass a long time ago, before the world turned modern" (Bull 33). However, the universalization of

the Middle Ages and the further fictionalization of an already fictional legend in many cases further propagates the stereotyping and othering of the period.

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