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"For a While He Linger'd There:"

In *The Historic King Arthur,* Frank D. Reno draws a crucial distinction between legend, fantasy, and fiction. Fantasy, he explains, "implies free reign of creative indulgence." Similarly, fiction "denotes an invented or feigned creation of the imagination." Legend, however, is "regarded as historical." It comes down to us from the past with what we hope may be a foundation of legitimacy. It is perhaps this foundation of legitimacy which has helped to ensure that King Arthur and the legends surrounding him continue to be a point of fascination. The tenacity with which the Arthur legend persists is itself suggestive of his suitability to be considered what Joseph Roach calls an "It" person. Like Marylin Monroe or James Dean, Arthur is an abnormally interesting figure, beloved as an icon of all that a king should be but tragically is not. Like Monroe and Dean, his image is enhanced and made all the more enticing by the paradoxical combination of vulnerable "humanness" and otherworldly magic of his birth, life, and death.

Because so little in the way of verifiable fact exists of an actual living Arthur, much of the justification for his "It factor" must be drawn from reconstructed narratives from his afterlife. Though lovers of Arthuriana have a supposed birthplace, a dwelling, and a tomb for Arthur, they have virtually nothing approaching artifacts like human remains, birth or death records, or a marriage certificate. This artifactual lack has, however, not prevented a millennium-spanning wellspring of literary artifice. Because of the sheer volume of Arthuriana, this preliminary report

makes no attempt to verify the existence of a real King Arthur. Nor, as Joseph Roach asserts, is verification a requirement for a person's "It factor": "…there is no difference in the Grave between the Imaginary and the Real Monarch." Rather, Arthur and his iconic entourage inspire what Roach calls "synthetic experience," a "passionate, if wildly skewed sense of history as the majestic chronicle of lost but redeemable glamour, always driven by the mystical force of 'romance.'" It is precisely this "lost but redeemable glamour" that renders Arthur and Camelot such prominent figures of romance and tragedy. One does not need to *know* the real Arthur or Camelot for these figures to have a profound effect on history, literature, and culture.

Part of their draw is that they are always already irrecoverably lost. Like audiences of *Hamlet* and *Titanic* alike, viewers and readers of Arthurian legend are attracted to the dramatic irony of a greatness that is unaware of its own impending doom. It is because of this that Arthur and his Camelot have since become both prototype and metaphor for tragic, ephemeral greatness. Jacqueline Kennedy summoned Arthur and Camelot as icons to serve as metaphor for her husband's presidency, saying *"Don't let it be forgot, that once there was a spot, for one brief shining moment, that was known as Camelot."* She follows this quote from the musical comedy with her own addendum: "there'll be great presidents again…but there'll never be another Camelot." The invocation here of Arthur and Camelot hint at the singular essence of the "It" figure. It evokes a moment in time and space that, because of a unique combination of events and figures, is both irreplicable and irretrievable. It is of this singular nature of Arthur's Camelot that Tennyson's Gareth speaks when he cries "Here is a city of Enchanters, built / by fairy kings." As both Tennyson and Kennedy imply, Arthur is a figure who blessed the earth with his presence for a short time, paradoxically meant to go too quickly and yet remain forever. Arthur and Camelot are, as Tennyson writes, "New things and old co-twisted, as if Time / Were

nothing…"This theme of timeliness and timelessness echoes Roach's assertion that It figures emerge "at precisely the hour of greatest need." Arthur's character constitutes a double dose of that theme; he arose once at Britain's hour of greatest need, and legend says that he will do so again.

The many literary and dramatic representations of Arthur also demonstrate that he possesses what Roach calls a "personality-driven mass attraction." Geoffrey of Monmouth's 1138 chronicle describes an Arthur who exhibited kingly virtues at a very young age. "He was a youth of outstanding virtue and largesse," writes Geoffrey, whose "innate goodliness made him exhibit such grace that he was beloved by almost all the people." He "possessed great courage and generosity," all the while cultivating such refinement at court that people far and wide tried to emulate it. On this last point, Geoffrey adds with some satisfaction that "Every young nobleman was tempted to hang himself unless he could dress or bear arms like the knights of King Arthur's court." This mass attraction is a paradoxical combination of gentility and ferocity. The characterization is echoed nearly 800 years later in a pulp sci-fi/ fantasy novel by Simon R. Green, who has Merlin say "I loved him. He was my father, my son, my light in the endless dark. I knew that Hell was real, but he made me believe that Heaven was, too. I gave him my life….He proved his dream worthy by dying in defense of it." In the 800 years that separate Geoffrey and Green, something of Arthur's essential mass attraction remains. It is an essence that is wholly good and tragically doomed.

With this mass attraction, Arthur also is written as possessing what Roach calls an "unbiddable nature" and "the strange magnetism which attracts both sexes." Everyone wants to be near him, but few can really know him. While every young man in Britain wanted to be part of Arthur's court, Arthur is also the most eligible bachelor in Britain. Despite this, he remains a

figure who is sexually unavailable. In Morris's "The Defence of Guenevere," Guinevere describes herself as "bought / by Arthur's great name and his little love." This combination of mass attraction and unattainability is echoed a century later in Marion Zimmer Bradley's *The Mists of Avalon,* which has Igraine, Morgaine, Lancelot, and Cai discussing Arthur's marital prospects:

> Lancelet said gaily, "Why then, we must find you the most beautiful woman in the kingdom, and the highest born."
>
> "No," Cai said slowly, "Since Arthur says very sensibly that that all women are alike to him, find him one with the best dowry."

Both William Morris and Marion Zimmer Bradley characterize Arthur as generally aloof from sexual pleasure. In much of the writing surrounding Arthur, he is characterized far more often by his homosociality than his heterosexuality. Interestingly, it is Arthur's limited sexuality that constitutes his negative attributes.

Universally desired by men and women alike, Arthur is characterized by both chastity as well as transgressive sexuality. It is in this duality that we find evidence of Roach's concepts of *charismata* and *stigmata;* he is simultaneously a peerless king and conqueror while at the same time both cuckolded and heirless. Specters of illegitimacy haunt Arthur from his birth to his death. In the first place, Arthur is the product of a transgressive sexual act: Monmouth has Uther Pendragon, disguised as the Duke of Cornwall, infiltrate Tintagel and sleep with Igerna, Arthur's mother. Though they later marry, this episode situates Arthur's claim to the throne as the subject of doubt; as the petty kings in Tennyson's *Idylls* grumble: "Who is he / that he should rule us? Who hath proven him / King Uther's son?" Disputes of lineage continue to characterize Arthur's reign in interesting ways, providing the *stigmata* element that characterize the "It" figure and

provide a complement rather than a foil for his charisma. Arthur produces no heir, and his marriage to Guinevere is characterized by her indiscretions and cuckolding. It is this curious combination of sexual indiscretions that brings about the end of Camelot: his own incestuous relationship with his estranged half-sister Morgause begets Mordred who, as Geoffrey states "seized the throne of Britain and now took his wicked pleasure with Guinevere, who had broken her marriage vows." With interesting symmetry, the reign of Arthur and the kingdom of Camelot are brought to an end that leaves Britain paradoxically both changed forever and yet with the same power vacuum that enabled Arthur to unite it.

Arthur's final departure to the Isle of Avalon signals his apotheosis as "Once and Future King." This appellation encapsulates the singular and contradictory concepts that characterize him as a legendary It figure. Simultaneously virile and cuckold, attractive and inviolate, legitimate and bastard, once and future, Arthur is a prototype for kingship and leadership. As an iconic image of the Middle Ages, the myths surrounding Arthur invoke readers' synthetic experience; when we read about Arthur, we find what we have known all along. His humble upbringing and gentle demeanor provide a model for the unselfconscious and humble Christian warrior king. His birth and the promise of his return situate him as appearing precisely when he is needed the most, both the product of history and context yet paradoxically removed from it. His magnetic character drew loyal knights to fight at his side, and his singular combination of greatness and humility radiated outward. Camelot, then, is the geographical space colonized and characterized by the outward radiance of Arthur's qualities.

Historians who prefer forensic data may argue that Arthur is unsuitable as an It figure because it is only from his literary afterlife that he emerges as a character. This concern, however, is removed from the importance of the synthetic experience from which It derives its

lasting power. Arthur continues to exist in books, movies, and comic books to name only a few media, and his "It-Effect" is drawn forth from mere mentions of his entourage and accessories (Lancelot, Excalibur, the Holy Grail); these serve a metonymic function to draw forth the whole body of writing surrounding Arthur and his Camelot. Literary and cinematic representations of Arthurian legends suggest a continued craving from audiences for, in Roach's terms, "greater intimacy with the ultimately unavailable icon."

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