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Now is the Time for *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*

Sandy Feinstein, Penn State Berks

The very idea of a favorite anything has been mutating in me from the time the so-called novel coronavirus appeared in the United States. For years, I would not have had to think, automatically identifying *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* as "my" book, which, according to its bookplate in Penn State University's main library, it is: after receiving tenure, faculty select books for this honor, and that's the one I chose. And when given the opportunity to choose another book after my promotion, I didn't—my book was already chosen. Still, I did not reread or assign *Alice* over a strange year that began as usual but ended quite other than expected, with all courses required to go remote after spring break—that is, at exactly the time we are expected to order our books for the following semester, a task I kept deferring.

It being unclear what modes of teaching would be allowed in the fall, I anxiously returned to my tentative list of required reading for my courses. In particular, I struggled with my honors Arthurian course that typically begins with readings from the early Middle Ages, introducing historical contexts, traditions, characters, tropes. The conventions, I felt, would not be enough in light of the circumstances, so I found myself scouring early and late Arthurian works for what had become newly urgent: disease, plague, masking. Were school to allow in-person teaching, and it did for those who, like myself, chose that mode, masks and social distancing would be required. Among the works I retained from past iterations of the course was the late nineteenth-century American novel *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, partly because of the poignant chapter "The Small-Pox Hut."

As usual, I reread Twain's *Connecticut Yankee* at the same time the students did, and, in the immediate context, I found myself seeing it in a new light. In one way, the light was literal: I taught the course outside every day (except one, when flooding made the venue inaccessible); even when the temperature plummeted into the 40's, the students chose to bundle up and stay outside. After standard time returned and darkness fell on our late afternoon class, we moved from an open air amphitheater

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to a rooved pavilion with lights until all courses reverted to Zoom after Thanksgiving break.

In Twain's novel, the eponymous Connecticut Yankee, Hank Morgan, contentiously states:

> Training—training is everything; training is all there is *to* a person. We speak of nature; it is folly; there is no such thing as nature; what we call by that misleading name is merely heredity and training. We have no thoughts of our own, no opinions of our own; they are transmitted to us, trained into us. All that is original in us, and therefore fairly creditable or discreditable to us, can be covered up and hidden by the point of a cambric needle, all the rest being atoms contributed by, and inherited from, a procession of ancestors that stretches back a billion years to the Adam-clam or grasshopper or monkey from whom our race has been so tediously and ostentatiously and unprofitably developed.[1]

Education still "trains" students by setting up certain expectations: to be passive receptacles, "told" or "shown" what they should know and become, wherever it takes place, inside classrooms or out. Twain had thrown the gauntlet. The students picked it up when they opted to test the boundaries, not just of the educational space, but of the now conventional wisdom from our latest "trainers": that literature has no relevance or place in this age of engineering, science, business interests, and technology. The guerdon would be in discovering that familiar issues of our own time, both personal and professional, would figure in the literature: a female author's medieval French poem featuring a "lady" who seduces a male knight without being judged or punished for acting on her desires juxtaposed to Arthur's queen who later questions the sexuality of that same knight when he refuses her offer of an assignation.. Though Twain's nineteenth-century American novel would not offer such seemingly contemporary dating scenarios, it would address business interests, political economy, currency valuation, taxes, and labor issues.

I wasn't surprised when three of the students—like myself—chose Twain's novel as their favorite when writing up their thoughts about the assigned readings at the end of the semester. I didn't, however, expect that nearly half the class would choose early Welsh, English, and French texts, medieval and early modern in particular—those about which I've written, including Chrétien's *Lancelot*, Chaucer's *Wife of Bath's Tale*, Malory's *Morte Darthur, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*; and those I haven't, such as Marie de France's *Lanval*, Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History of the Kings of Britain,* and the "The Spoils of Annwn." My own

deepening affection for Twain's achievement would only be reinforced by the students' explanations for choosing medieval texts, works they had anticipated being "hard" or "boring." Students' openness to these works, followed by their enthusiastically embracing them, belied the Yankee's claims about training. The students' small kindnesses to one another also offered hope: whether speaking up for an absent classmate or responding warmly to one another's presentations. As we sat in the waning light, too soon to become Zoom rooms, they listened raptly to one another talk about why the works resonated for them, whatever their own religious training and cultural backgrounds.

Though Twain addresses issues still relevant today—disease, its treatment (or lack), labor abuses, race, education, sexism, the dangers of technology, and many, many others—he is funny in the process. He satirizes not only those with narrow, culturally determined ideas and prejudices but also those who judge them, only to substitute other narrow, culturally determined ideas and prejudices. Humor was an unlooked-for refuge with our voices muffled by masks and our interactions increasingly limited by decree and need.

There was nothing funny for the students, however, when all their field trips were cancelled, including those the course regularly takes to the Cloisters and the Morgan Library where, in past years, we have examined an extraordinary illuminated manuscript of the Old French prose *Lancelot du Lac* and a first edition of Malory's *Morte Darthur*, among other medieval works. A semester earlier, the threat of Covid-19 had resulted in overseas courses being cancelled, including mine to Paris, just two days before the departure date with 18 students, three of whom would be in the Arthur course. Armchair travel would become our only available escape, one that Twain dramatizes in the novel's "Word of Explanation," where his persona "M.T." travels back in time, feasting, as he says, on Malory's *Morte Darthur*:

> All that evening I sat by my fire at the Warwick Arms, steeped in a dream of the olden time, while the rain beat upon the windows, and the wind roared about the eaves and corners. From time to time I dipped into old Sir Thomas Malory's enchanting book, and fed at its rich feast of prodigies and adventures, breathed in the fragrance of its obsolete names, and dreamed again. Midnight being come at length, I read another tale, for a nightcap— (2)

M.T. tours England's past and present both through Malory and by visiting an actual castle: as a reader, he goes back in time, entering the putative

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chivalric world of King Arthur; in the novel's present, he has just returned from touring historic Warwick Castle. While there, he overhears a fellow tourist counter, *sotto voce*, the official guide's explanation of a gunshot hole in a suit of armor. That tourist, Hank Morgan, ultimately, becomes the readers' inside guide to Camelot, providing a tour that parodies the increasingly popular pastime of nineteenth-century travel while offering a running commentary on heritage management in Britain about which Twain, as seen through this character, seems conflicted. As an inveterate traveler himself, including to Warwick Castle, Twain, if not his narrator, is attracted to the old artifacts, but is aware of how they are used and their political ramifications, specifically how heritage management contributes to and thus perpetuates prejudice, rigid class structures, and systemic oppression;[2] and, of course, "heritage management" and its darkest sides represented by monuments, whether of statues or street and building names, have been as much a part of our long year as Covid-19.

Though it is said that laughter is the best medicine, it is only one kind and, perhaps, not even the best. Twain offers deeper palliatives through the heart. For even characters whose conditions are the most hopeless—and helpless—are represented with the great equalizing essential that seems to extenuate the gravest sin: that is, they are comforted or exalted, if not saved, by love. In Twain, it is not God's love that redeems them; rather, it is the love they express and demonstrate for others, despite their own trespasses, betrayals, and inexcusable behaviors. Love doesn't actually save any character in the novel from death or pain or injustice, but it elevates each one in the narrator's eyes, in what may be Twain's eyes. Love makes heroes of these characters who suffer for it: a mother who would protect her children dying of disease and starvation; a husband who would save his wife from a slave master's lash; the king who tolerates adultery for love of his knightly champion; the adulterer knight who shows his tenderness in his interactions with the narrator's child; one of the novel's rare righteous priests who offers to support the infant whose mother faces hanging for trying to find food to keep them both from starving; and the narrator who uses his nineteenth-century knowledge of weapons to kill 30,000 knights, an intended genocide, set in juxtaposition to what he loses, his wife and child that he deliriously calls to after Merlin returns him to his own century, where he will die.

In a recent review of a new Kazuo Ishiguro novel, *Klara and the Sun*, James Wood begins with a reminder of "the technique of estrangement or defamiliarization—what the Russian formalist critics called *ostranenie*." He introduces this technique in the context of what he refers to as the 1980's craze called "Martian poetry" and extends his discussion to

works by the twentieth-century novelist Vladimir Nabokov as well as to those by later writers, including Martin Amis and, as he argues, most tellingly of Ishiguro.[3] As I read this review, I thought of Lewis Carroll and Mark Twain: more than a century before our own, these pseudonymous authors placed their characters into unfamiliar worlds that each adjusts to in distinct ways. After suffering a severe conk on the head by a co-worker, Twain's character Hank Morgan enters into the fantastic past that is really his own time, if not place. Like Hank, we have all suffered a head wound and many more of the heart, suddenly dispossessed of our familiar worlds. Like Alice, we long for a return to normalcy, to the world above the dark and incomprehensible one where we have somehow found ourselves. Some may call their experience a bad dream. But we have not been living a fiction, however much we may wish it were.

NOTES

1. Mark Twain, *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, ed. Bernard L. Stein (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 162. All quotations are from this edition and will subsequently be cited in text by page number.

2. I presented a paper on heritage management in Mark Twain's novel at the International Arthurian Conference in Romania.

3. James Wood, "The Unknown Known," *The New Yorker*, 8 March 2021, 56, 58, after introducing this technique, identifies Ishigura's earlier novel, *The Unburied Giant*, as different, and "probably the weaker for it"; he does not mention its form of "estrangement" and "destabilization," namely its Arthurian setting.