

Chapter 9: A Hero Comes Home

The King Returns

“Out of the mist of history

He’ll come again

Sailing on ships across the sea”

—*A Hero Comes Home*, Idina Menzelⁱ

In *Of Arthour and of Merlin*, Arthur is said to have the “*sengreal*”ⁱⁱ—the “blood royal,” a term also associated with Jesus, who was of the “blood royal” (*sang-* or *seng-* meaning “blood” and *real* meaning “royal”) of Israel, specifically the blood of the Davidic line.ⁱⁱⁱ The poem also creates a type of explicit crusading discourse around Arthur’s military career, and transforms the heretofore pagan fertility symbol Excalibur—shining as a figuration of the Cross—into a tool used in the service of God by slaying Saracens (“With Excalibur his sword so good / That day he shed so much blood”^{iv}). These rhetorical choices don’t just firmly establish Arthur in the space of Christian holiness, but position him as a possible inheritor of the same Davidic blood royal—or *sang|real*—as Jesus.

By choosing this very particular version of King Arthur—a humble and pious king, with his loving and loyal wife-to-be, carrying the Cross into battle against Saracens, speaking and writing in English—the compilers of the Auchinleck positioned Arthur as a figure who answers the shortcomings of the text’s preceding examples of kingship by directly resolving the sins which, traditionally, all three had shared—adultery, jealousy, and pride—and which had all served to damage the posterity of each of them, undermining the survival of their royal lines and

thereby poisoning the futures of these kingdoms of antiquity.^v We can see evidence of this rhetorical approach in how the Auchinleck texts treat Sir Lancelot (c'est moi!^{vi}).

First mentioned by Chrétien de Troyes in his 1170 Old French poem *Erec and Enide*, Lancelot du Lac is included right after Gawain and the work's title character in a listing of Arthur's knights, showing his importance. Lancelot would get his own solo adventure in de Troyes's Old French *Lancelot, Knight of the Cart*, ca. 1177-81, but, late as he was to the tradition, by the time that *Of Arthour and of Merlin* was composed, Lance had been around for nearly 200 years and featured in a significant amount of Arthurian literature. And yet, in *Of Arthour and of Merlin*, Lancelot is mentioned just once, while in the Anonymous Short English Metrical Chronicle—an Auchinleck text less than 1/3 the length of *Arthour*—he's mentioned no fewer than four times.

Throughout the vast catalogue of Arthurian romances, Lancelot's adultery with Guinevere is the loose thread that, if pulled, would eventually lead to the unraveling of Arthur's kingdom at the hands of Mordred, so even in the Auchinleck's Anonymous Short English Metrical Chronicle, where Lancelot absconds with Guinevere to Nottingham Castle, nothing is said of Guinevere inviting the abduction or being complicit in it. On the contrary, Lancelot is described as a "queynt" man, a Middle English word which would have been understood at the time to mean "crafty and deceitful,"^{vii} far from the valiant and courageous knight so often depicted as Arthur's right-hand man. Lancelot is also said in the Anonymous Short English Metrical Chronicle to have "held" Guinevere "with strength"^{viii} for three years and 10 months in the castle, and carved caves beneath it to hide her should Arthur come calling.^{ix} That's not exactly the picture of a consensual relationship, and it's certainly a departure from the canonical French addition to the Arthurian tradition wherein both the Guinevere and Lancelot are co-equal

in their betrayal of Arthur. Without Lancelot in the picture, the Arthur of the Auchinleck is evermore the knight in shining armor to a young Guinevere's damsel in distress. Sitting atop a city wall with her ladies-in-waiting, she swoons watching a teenaged Arthur ride into battle:

Quap Arthour 'pou heben cokin,

Wende to þi deuel Apolin.'

Þe paiem fel ded to grounde,

His soule lauȝt helle-hounde.

G[v]eneoure sat on þe cite walle

& þe oper leuedis alle,

Of Arthour seȝþe justing þis,

On him þai laiden al þe priis.^x

Quoth Arthur, 'Thou heathen scoundrel,

[Re]turn to thy devil Apolin.'^{xi}

The pagan fell dead to the ground,

His soul ensnared by a hell hound.

Guinevere sat on the city wall

and the other ladies all

Of Arthur seeing him jousting like this,

On him they laid all the praise.

As the text ends just after their betrothal, these young lovers are left frozen in a moment ripe with possibility and hope, with an unwritten future that leaves open the possibility that some heretofore unknown viable progeny could issue forth from their marriage. This Arthur and his queen are not just positioned as rising above the sinful shortcomings of the previous examples of kingship, but they are in fact redeemed from their *own* shortcomings and sins committed in the foreign appropriations of their story. They are not just rehabilitated, but renewed, revitalized, and reborn, accessing another theme that had been embedded in the Arthurian Text since its earliest foundations were laid—a prophecy that has been fulfilled by modern superheroes.

Once and Future

In the years following Castus's service in Britannia, the belief in a savior—a so-called *Restitutor Orbis* (World Restorer)—gained popularity across the Roman Empire. The idea was

first embodied by Emperor Aurelian, who, through a series of unprecedented military victories, reunited an Empire that had nearly crumbled under multiple barbarian invasions and internal revolts.^{xii} If that sounds familiar to you, you can bet it sounded familiar to the descendants of the Arthurian Sarmatians and their British family and neighbors, which is why, whether it was thanks to historical comparison, an inherited title, an earned sobriquet, or self-proclaimed pedigree, the warrior chieftain we've called the Badon Hill Artorius was likely seen—either literally or metaphorically—as Castus reborn, and, in the fashion of the day, a *Restitutor Orbis* in his own right. And thus, Arthur became more than a mortal man; he became a savior.

By the time *Of Arthour and of Merlin* was written, Arthur's deathlessness—the belief that he would, in fact, return again some day—had been part of his Text for *centuries*. It was an expression of a motif so common in folklore that it has multiple names. Renowned American folklorist Stith Thompson called it “the King in the Mountain,” but it's also called the “Sleeping Hero,” the “King Asleep in the Mountain,” and the “King Under the Mountain.”^{xiii} These stories traditionally involve legendary heroes sleeping, hibernating, or being placed in some kind of suspended animation in a remote and hidden location, often supernatural in nature. They are frequently historical figures of military consequence in the history of the nation in which their sleeping place is located, and whether you're aware of it or not, you've seen plenty of examples.

In the medieval period, the “King in the Mountain” motif was applied to both Charlemagne and Holy Roman Emperor Frederick II, but we also see it today in the superhero genre. Captain America is frozen in the North Atlantic after disabling a drone bomber headed to North America, and is unfrozen by the Avengers decades later to lead them against the forces of evil; Batman is seemingly killed in the 2008 “Final Crisis” storyline (but was really sent hurtling back in time) only to later make a triumphant return; Superman died and returned in the 1993

“Death of Superman” arc that will be discussed in depth in later chapters, as well as in Zack Snyder’s DCEU films *Batman v. Superman: Dawn of Justice* and *Justice League*; and, in the comic book mini-series *All-Star Superman*, the Man of Steel sacrifices himself to serve as the heart of our sun, keeping the star burning by powering the fusion in its core. In the superhero-styled 1990s cartoon *King Arthur and the Knights of Justice*, Arthur and his knights are frozen in the “Cave of Glass” while an American football team—the New York Knights, led (naturally) by quarterback Arthur King—takes their place.

This motif is, without exaggeration, “one of the most vital components of the Arthurian legend,” wrote Arthurian comic book scholar Michael Torregrossa,^{xiv} and it had become so deeply ingrained in the Arthur Text’s DNA by the 14th century that, by putting David and Alexander’s greatest sins and shortcomings in conversation with those sins’ express absence in *Of Arthour and of Merlin*, Arthur could easily be read as a kind of heroic spirit that had manifested over and over across the centuries, with each incarnation allowing him to correct the sins of his past, enabling him to serve the world that much better each time he returned. *This* Arthur was more than a man, more than just a hero or even a savior. Along with his Knights and their Round Table, this now-complete Figure of Arthur—the sum total of the deeds of the historical Lucius Artorius Castus and those of the Badon Hill Artorius (and any other historical influences in between), the four recognizable archetypal roles he shared with the heroes of old, and the diverse folk traditions that were alloyed in the crucible of sub-Roman Britain to form the prototypes of the MPI conventions—became something entirely new that would be passed down through the ages, across centuries, across genres, across media, across an ocean, and ultimately, to a New World.

The Gray Champion: Who Was That (Un)masked Man?

In 1835, celebrated American author Nathaniel Hawthorne—famous for a certain red letter, though not the one on Superman’s chest—penned *The Gray Champion*, a short story which told the fictionalized account of an actual documented incident that occurred during the American colonial period: the day (April 18, 1689) when the people of Boston revolted against King James II’s chosen governor of New England, Sir Edmund Andros.^{xv}

Writing less than 70 years after the Revolutionary War, Hawthorne took some liberties with the historical facts, such as listing offenses committed under Andros’s rule that echoed the grievances that would be found in the Declaration of Independence, written nearly 100 years after the incident in question. These grievances included unfair taxation, the appropriation of private property, restricting the freedom of the press, and imposing martial law—in this case, enforced by mercenary troops hired by Andros to quell uprisings in the city.^{xvi}

Hawthorne’s narrative turns to the meat of the action as the two opposing sides begin to advance upon one another. As a double rank of those mercenary troops began to march toward the colonists, Hawthorne wrote, former governor Simon Bradstreet stepped forward to calm the mob, urging them to obey the authority of the king (by way of Andros), when suddenly, a voice from the crowd rang out: “O Lord of Hosts, provide a Champion for thy people!”^{xvii} It’s not exactly “Save me, Superman!” but it did the trick. In response to this plea, a mysterious figure emerged from the crowd. The figure was (unsurprisingly) not a super-powered strongman in a bright blue bodysuit and red trunks, but rather an “ancient man” wearing “the old Puritan dress, a dark cloak and a steeple-crowned hat, in the fashion of at least fifty years before, with a heavy sword upon his thigh, but a staff in his hand to assist the tremulous gate of age.”^{xviii} Walking

between the two opposing groups, this so-called Gray Champion stopped about 20 yards from the colonists, held his staff high, and cried, “Stand!”^{xxix}

Scholarly consensus is that this figure was based on the Angel of Hadley,^{xx} and as of this writing, there has not been so much as a single academic journal article that has ever argued for a connection between the Champion and King Arthur, and yet, this Champion’s characterization practically begs for further interrogation.

First, let’s address the obvious counterarguments to this Champion being a figuration of King Arthur: His Puritan garb would seem to speak directly *against* him being the crusading Arthur who dispatches his knights on a quest for the Holy Grail. So too would the fact that the most prevalent Arthurian narrative at the time—Malory’s late medieval chivalric romance—would seem to espouse values (a monarchy and an aristocracy based on inheritance) antithetical to those of the United States. Yet, the Round Table’s code certainly speaks to the lofty ideals of the nation’s founding documents—all men being equal under the law—and the deeds of Arthur’s knights errant speak to the American pioneering spirit. The Grail Quest, too, would have appealed to a nation of immigrants looking for a better future and a sense of belonging.^{xxi}

Then, of course, there’s the sword. Few civilians—if any—in Hawthorne’s 19th century America would have carried any type of sword in their daily lives. But, in 1689, the year the story is set, and in 1639 (the year to which Hawthorne dates the Gray Champion’s attire), the rapier was the weapon of choice for your typical aspiring duelist about town. With a dainty average blade width of 2.5 cm, though, this tool of gentlemanly urban combat could never be rightly described as a “heavy” implement.^{xxii} However, there are several possible swords that *would* fit the bill: our old friend the Roman *spatha* (up until the work of Roger Sherman Loomis in the early 20th century,^{xxiii} the standard scholarly opinion was that Arthur was descended from

the Romans, so that could very well have been on Hawthorne's mind), or a medieval arming sword—the weapon used by the medieval interpretation of King Arthur, which would have been the predominant image of Arthur residing in the popular imagination at the time. Both were of much heftier construction in order to withstand the more brutal and powerful blows necessitated by their battlefield applications.

Just a single adjective, of course, isn't enough to say that this Champion and Arthur are one and the same. It's his own words that do that. Hawthorne writes that, as Andros prepared to order the soldiers forward, he issued a warning to the mysterious figure: "Are you mad old man? How dare you stay the march of King James's Governor?" The Champion replied (emphases mine):

"I have stayed the march of a King himself, ere now.^{xxiv} I am here, Sir Governor, because the **cry of an oppressed people hath disturbed me in my *secret place***; and *beseeking this favor earnestly of the Lord, it was vouchsafed me to appear once again on earth*, in the good old cause of his saints."^{xxv}

Not only was King Arthur said to have fought and killed Roman Emperor Lucius Tiberius in Gaul at the Battle of Soissons in Geoffrey's *Historia* (staying the march of a king, indeed), but let's compare this with a passage from Book 21, Chapter 7 of Malory's *Le Morte D'Arthur*, which comes two chapters after a grievously wounded Arthur is taken away to rest and heal in *his* "secret place," the Isle of Avalon:

YET some men say in many parts of England that **King Arthur is not dead**, but **had by the will of our Lord Jesu into another place**; and men say that *he shall come again*, and he shall **win the holy cross**. I will not say it shall be so, but rather I will say: here in this world he changed his life. But many men say that

there is written upon his tomb this verse: *Hic iacet Arthurus, Rex quondam,
Rexque futurus.*

And, indeed, Hawthorne wrote, the Gray Champion *did* come again even after this appearance in Boston: Before concluding the story, Hawthorne attests that the Champion appeared 80 years later at the Boston Massacre, and five years after that at Lexington (where the first shots of the American Revolution were fired), and then again during the Revolutionary War itself. Hawthorne ended his tale with a promise—a **Mission**, if you will—for this Gray Champion: “Should domestic tyranny oppress us,^{xxvi} or the invader’s step pollute our soil, still may the Gray Champion come, for he is the type of New-England’s hereditary spirit; and his shadowy march, on the eve of danger, must ever be the pledge, that New-England’s sons will vindicate their ancestry.”^{xxvii}

By echoing Malory and using the words “ancestry” and “hereditary spirit,” Hawthorne codes the colonists of *New* England as inheritors of *old* England’s legacy, a legacy which just so happens to include a certain King. Literary theorist Linda Hutcheon would call this “indigenization,” or the process of how the meaning and impact of an adapted text (or, in our case, a Text) shifts radically in trans-cultural adaptation, creating a sort of dialogue between societies.^{xxviii} This indigenized reading is more than just probable: Hawthorne was both familiar with and comfortable accessing and deploying Arthurian themes and characters in his writings about the United States. In the frame tale of Hawthorne’s 1863 short story, *The Antique Ring*, a writer is tasked by his fiancée with creating a legend to accompany his titular romantic gift to her. Instructed not to be “too scrupulous about facts,”^{xxix} he concocts a fantastical lineage for the ring: It was fashioned by the wizard Merlin, who had imprisoned a demon within its stone before presenting the enchanted bauble to the lady he loved as an “unviolated pledge” of love and

fealty. Should faith be broken or love prove false, the demon would turn the ring into a cursed object.^{xxx} From there, the ring was handed down to Queen Elizabeth through her Welsh Tudor ancestors (who, starting with Henry VII, claimed a vague kinship with King Arthur, thereby making them heirs to his kingship^{xxxi}). Over the decades, through betrayal and deceit, it was stolen and lost, eventually finding its way across the Atlantic, where it lands in the collection box of a New England church, whereupon the charity of the ring's donor purifies it, renewing its promise.

Though this fictional tale told by an explicitly unreliable narrator is meant to be a commentary on the tenuous nature of belief and truth with respect to stories claiming origin (and therefore veracity and authority) in the distant past, it contains another, deeper message: That an object or idea's original purity of intent can be polluted and misappropriated, yes, but that doesn't preclude the possibility of its redemption and renewal. That second reading certainly resonates with both the Figure of Arthur and the Gray Champion: There was an original intent and Truth to the Arthurian stories (the original ring), that became muddled, polluted, and misappropriated (again: Tudors), until it was purified and rededicated (not unlike the Jewish Temple after the Hasmonean Revolt drove out the occupying Syrian Greeks) in a new England (i.e. the United States).^{xxxii} As Hawthorne's story was written in the midst of the American Civil War, that reading also resonates quite deeply with the *American* story: Within the nation's high-minded founding documents (the ring) was the accommodation of slavery via the Three-Fifths Compromise^{xxxiii} (the insidious demon), but even after that evil led to a loss of faith and purity via the Civil War, there was still hope for redemption: the nation's reunification.

Though he may not have been battling marauding Caledonians or halting invading Saxons, the Gray Champion fought for liberty and against what Hawthorne glossed as unjust foreign encroachment (projecting 19th century geopolitics on 17th century events, where all belligerents would have been subjects of the English crown)—the very core missions to which

the Figure of Arthur had been dedicated for centuries. Hawthorne, then, participated in the same type of appropriation of Arthur as the composer(s) of *Of Arthour and of Merlin* had, and in doing so, he unwittingly built a bridge from Roman Britain to 20th century America, where Arthur was to make his most dramatic return yet.

ⁱ From the *Beowulf Soundtrack* (2007). End Credits Version, by Glen Ballard & Alan Silvestri, performed by Idina Menzel.

ⁱⁱ Auchinleck MS, *Of Arthour and of Merlin*, ll. 2750.

ⁱⁱⁱ Described in detail in Matthew 1:1-17.

^{iv} “With Esclabor his swerd so gode, / That day he schad so michel blode”; Auchinleck MS, *Of Arthour and of Merlin*, ll. 6257-8.

^v This also perhaps allows Arthur to avoid the fate of the impotent Fisher King (originating in Chrétien de Troyes’s 1180 *Perceval*), the scion of a long royal line tasked with guarding the Holy Grail, whose lower-body injury is implied to be the source of his kingdom’s barren fields and ill fortune. Recall that in the Irish conception of sovereignty, the king would “mate” with the Goddess of the Land over which he ruled. Boorman’s *Excalibur* collapses the story of the Fisher King into Arthur’s story, turning Arthur into a figuration of the Fisher King, as once he is betrayed by Lancelot and Guinevere, he falls ill and the land falls fallow, the implication being that the king and the land are one in their infertility and impotence.

^{vi} The title of Sir Lancelot’s boastful introductory song in the play *Camelot*, and the film musical it inspired. Composed by Frederick Lowe, lyrics by Alan Jay Lerner.

^{vii} *Middle English Dictionary*, https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/middle-english-dictionary/dictionary?utf8=%E2%9C%93&search_field=hnf&q=querynt

^{viii} Middle English: “Wiþ strengþe”

^{ix} Auchinleck MS, *The Anonymous Short English Metrical Chronicle*, ll. 1077-1098.

^x Auchinleck MS, *Of Arthour and of Merlin*, ll. 6371-6378.

^{xi} One of several named heathen gods attributed to Muslims in Christian texts.

^{xii} Ashe, 1985: 20.

^{xiii} D 1960.2 in Thompson’s *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature* (composed 1932–1936, revised and expanded 1955–1958).

^{xiv} Torregrossa 2004: 253.

^{xv} Hawthorne 1837: 11-22.

^{xvi} Coogan 2024: 148.

^{xvii} Hawthorne 1837: 17.

^{xviii} Ibid.

^{xix} Ibid, 19.

^{xx} The historical figure on which Hawthorne is thought to have based his Champion was reputedly General William Goffe, who in 1675 is reported to have suddenly appeared, rallied the inhabitants of Hadley, Massachusetts, and led them against a Native American attack (Coogan 2024: 150).

^{xxi} See also: Lupack & Lupack, 1-5.

^{xxii} Evangelista, 493.

^{xxiii} See Chapter 3.

^{xxiv} Arthur’s war against the Emperor of Rome is detailed in Book V of Malory’s *Le Morte D’Arthur*, and before that, the *Welsh Triads* tell of Arthur standing up to the messengers of Rome demanding tribute from Britain.

^{xxv} Hawthorne 1837: 20.

^{xxvi} Not unlike Batman’s letter to Commissioner Gordon (Pat Hingle) and DA Harvey Dent (Billy Dee Williams), introducing the Bat Signal at the end of *Batman* (1989): “If the forces of evil should rise again, to cast a shadow on the heart of the city, call me.” (Burton 1989: 2:00:25).

^{xxvii} Hawthorne 1837: 22.

^{xxviii} Hutcheon 2013: xviii, 148-9.

^{xxix} See: Hawthorne 1876: 107-124.

^{xxx} This may be drawn from the 13th century *Prophecies of Merlin*, which includes, as John Matthews says, “many rings and ladies receiving them” (via personal communication).

^{xxxi} Contrary to post-Galfridian Arthurian tradition, early Welsh Arthurian tradition held that Arthur sired three legitimate heirs (in these same early Welsh legends, Mordred was only Arthur’s nephew), though all of them predeceased him. In the Lancelot-

Grail Cycle, one named Llacheu or Loholt is murdered by none other than Sir Kay, Arthur's foster brother. Henry Tudor, facing questions from nobles about his royal lineage and claim to the throne, employed genealogists who traced his family back to Cadwaladr ap Cadwallon, a seventh-century King of Gwynedd in northwest Wales, who was purportedly a direct descendant of one of these sons of Arthur, or one of Arthur's numerous other cousins. Incidentally, in more recent times, Queen Elizabeth II also claimed descent from Arthur, which would explain why both her son King Charles and her grandson Prince William bear the same middle name: Arthur.

^{xxxii} Lupack & Lupack 1999: 1-3.

^{xxxiii} Hawthorne, though not an abolitionist, considered slavery an evil and a sin so engrained in the national fabric that the only solution would be "tearing to pieces the Constitu-tion." See: Jordan.

Part 2