My interest in King Arthur was ignited by an Arthurian legend tutorial I took in the fall of my year abroad. Due to time constraints, my tutor and I focused almost exclusively on texts relating to the Grail legend, but I was fascinated by the ways the story as a whole has appeared and reappeared in different forms through centuries of English literature. In particular, I was interested in the new qualities Arthur and his court began to take on as each author molded the tale to their own sociopolitical moment. Arthur’s reign seems perfect, a ‘golden age’ characterized by the unflagging chivalry of his knights, the equality implied by the round table, and the spiritual merit of the Grail quest; yet its tragic ending, in which Arthur is cuckolded by Lancelot and usurped by his illegitimate nephew/son, Mordred, marks this golden age as incontrovertibly ended, existing exclusively in the past tense. Arthur and Mordred deal each other mortal wounds, but before he dies Arthur is spirited away to the mystic Isle of Avalon, where (so the story goes) he may be sleeping still, waiting for the day when he will be called on to lead the Britons to glory once more. Thus, as T. H. White’s famous children’s book attests, he is the ‘once and future king,’ where ‘once’ captures his status as a nostalgic relic of the distant, mythic past, while ‘future’ reflects the potential for his resurrection somewhere in the hazy mists of some era yet to come. It is perhaps easy to understand why so many authors have been drawn to this tale, repeatedly resurrecting Arthur for captivated audiences of readers.

After a taking tutorial on fairy tales this past spring I became interested in the implications of identifying a body of national mythology and the question of whether in linking a given set of stories to a specific national identity we might in fact construct that national identity. If so, what are the consequences of that construction? This concept becomes particularly poignant for Britain, whose tangled tribal origins and history of colonial enterprises complicate the notion of ‘national identity’ even further (and I should mention here that in my readings on nationalism this summer I have found that the term ‘nation’ is a fraught term in and of itself). Arthur is, I think it fair to say, a wholly British symbol, even if it is unclear what exactly ‘British’ means. This is perhaps fitting, though, for a story whose countless iterations are born from a mess of legend, history, and authorial innovation, in which the lines between fact and fiction range from blurry to utterly indiscernible.

In order to understand the story’s complex allegiances, I read over fifteen primary texts spanning around 1200 years, a sort of ‘greatest hits’ of Arthur’s literary life beginning with Celtic legends that likely date to the seventh century, and ending with Mark Twain’s satirical A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court, published in 1889. My thesis when I began the summer was founded on the idea of King Arthur as a secular god, with the tale of his dramatic rise and fall acting as a secular origin myth for the Angloamerican people (hence the ‘mythologization’ in my project’s title), but as I read my focus shifted toward the issue of kingship. What makes Arthur the rightful king? Where is power centralized in the narrative? How is the symbol of Arthur’s court mobilized to support or subvert structures of sovereignty in the author’s historical moment? The answers are complicated by further questions of race, gender, class, and that difficult concept of national identity. By the end of the summer I will have written a draft of the first chapter of my honors project examining key moments in Arthur’s story that mark him as a ‘true’ leader, namely his conception and, later, the divine (or supernatural) approval represented by Arthur’s ability to remove the famous sword from the stone and the similar but separate moment in which the Lady of the Lake grants him Excalibur.

Key texts for this analysis include the twelfth century Historia Regum Britanniae (c. 1136) by Geoffrey of Monmouth and the Norman and Anglo Saxon ‘translations’ of this text by Robert Wace (c. 1150-55) and the monk Laȝamon (c. 1190), respectively; Thomas Malory’s Le Morte d’Arthur (1485), perhaps the most frequently used source for later versions of the story; excerpts from The Faerie Queene (1590, 1596), an Elizabethan epic romance by Edmund Spenser; and the nineteenth century works Idylls of the King (1859-85) by Alfred Lord Tennyson and The Boys King Arthur (1880), an adaptation of Malory written for children by Sidney Lanier. Later chapters of my honors project will take a close look at twentieth-century adaptations of the legend in a wide range of media, from poetry to children’s literature to film. I am especially interested in Arthur’s American afterlives, as I find it fascinating that a country founded on principles of democracy would embrace so fervently the legend of an ancient British monarch.

The work and readings that I have been able to do this summer will prove invaluable as I continue work on my honor’s project this academic year. Reading so many historical texts has given me an extraordinary amount of background knowledge on the legend, which will enable (and has already enabled) me to pick out patterns that I would otherwise have missed in the story’s various retellings. This work will also help me to understand each individual text in both a historical and literary context. Moving into the fall with a draft of my first chapter already written will give me the flexibility to move out of my comfort zone by analyzing artistic media beyond literature and taking a more cultural-studies-based approach to the legend.

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