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### N.C. Wyeth, Howard Pyle, And The American Imagination: Medieval Myth In 19th- And 20th- Century Children's Literature

Alyssa Kowalick  
ak876172@wcupa.edu

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N.C. Wyeth, Howard Pyle, and the American Imagination: Medieval Myth in 19th- and 20th-  
Century Children's Literature

A Thesis

Presented to the Faculty of the

Department of English

West Chester University

West Chester, Pennsylvania

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the

Degree of

Master of Arts in English

By

Alyssa Kowalick

May 2023

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## Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to the Brandywine River Museum of Art for the opportunities it has afforded me, the way it has shaped me, and the resources made available to scholars and to the public from which I have vastly benefited.

## Acknowledgements

I would like to express my deepest appreciation to my Thesis Director Dr. Gabrielle Halko who extended an unparalleled amount of encouragement, patience, and insight throughout the writing of this paper. I would also like to extend my sincere gratitude to my thesis committee members, Dr. Amy Anderson and Dr. Joseph Navitsky, for their invaluable assistance and unwavering guidance. The first chapter of this project is deeply indebted to Dr. Eleanor Shevlin who first drew out the connection between King Arthur and the Southern aristocracy for me. Finally, I want to express my deepest gratitude to my friend Denise Marie Manley who faithfully prayed for me through every step of the thesis writing process. The completion of my thesis would not have been possible without the steadfast support and prayers of my friends and family.

## Abstract

This thesis attempts to elucidate how the illustrated images and text of the medieval myths of King Arthur and Robin Hood were translated from an English national epic to an American classic and used, I argue, to construct a new American identity. My analysis looks at both the written word and illustrated images in Howard Pyle's *The Story of King Arthur and His Knights* and *The Merry Adventures of Robin Hood*, as well as *The Boy's King Arthur* written by Sidney Lanier and illustrated by N.C. Wyeth, and *Robin Hood* written by Paul Creswick and illustrated by N.C. Wyeth. Work in this field expresses an instinctive bias towards the written text rather than basing interpretation on the premise that language and pictures have equal power to create meaning. For that reason, my interpretations of Robin Hood and King Arthur will be established through intersemiotic translation with added support from gender and Marxist theory. Ultimately, I demonstrate how children's literature and illustration were redeployed as useful and timely instruments in the creation and propagation of American identity in the late 19th and early 20th century. As children's literature was considered a source of moral education at the time, illustrated children's classics were much more than stories. They were tools to shape the future generation and, in doing so, shape the future of a nation.

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# he Lady Guinevere



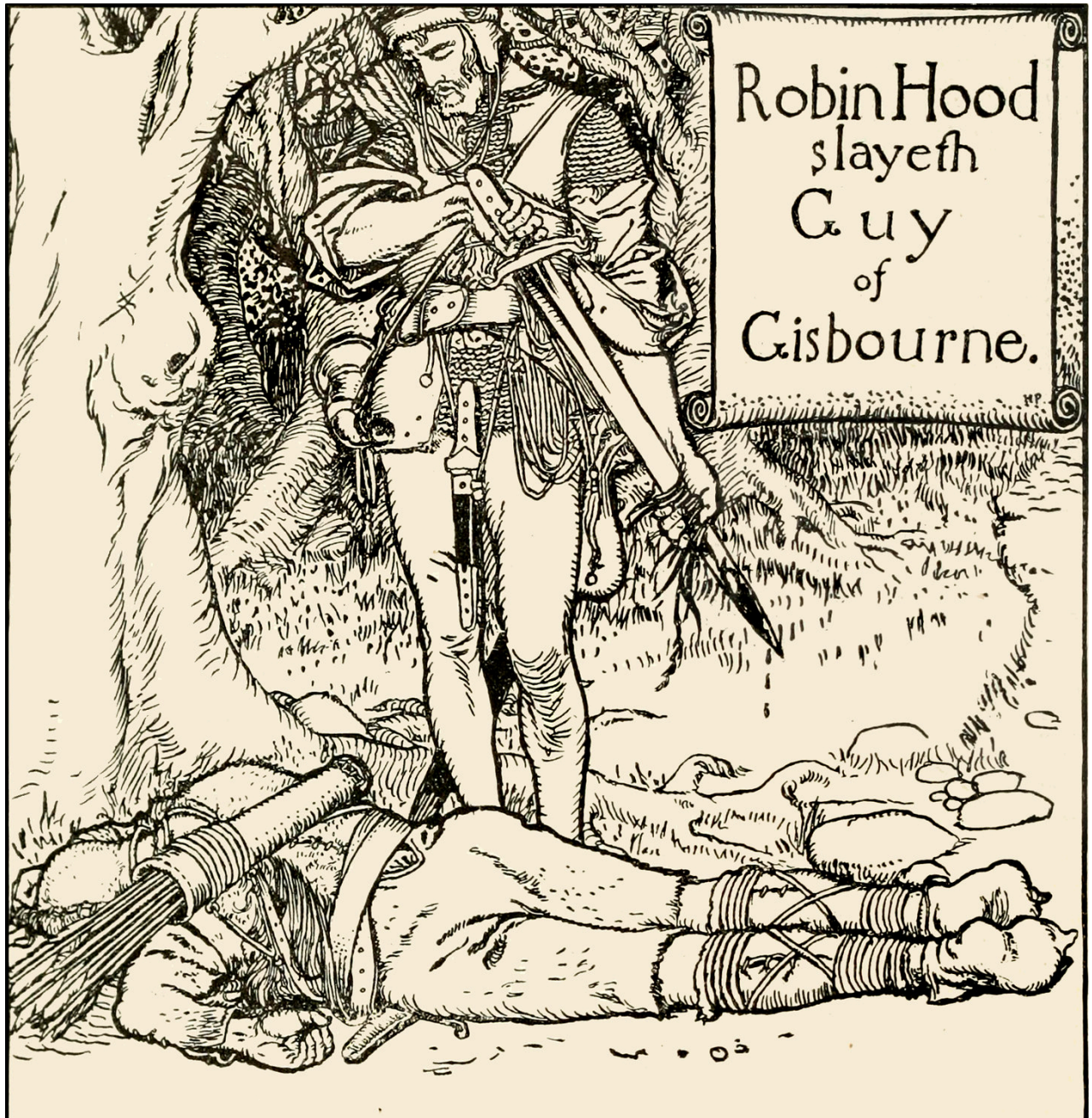
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# Vivien bewitches Merlin.



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## Chapter 1

### The Southern Gentleman: Aristocracy, Race, Religion and Chivalrous Violence in Sidney

#### Lanier's *A Boy's King Arthur*

#### Introduction

The year is 2019 and the Pennsylvania summer is oppressive with the weight of congealed humidity. Climbing the stairs of the cobblestone courtyard, you exhale your relief as you step into the Brandywine River Museum and relish the way the cool air sheds the clinging heat from your skin like shrugging out of a damp coat. You purchase a ticket at the counter. The woman you speak to is polite and informative, but you've already forgotten what her face looks like by the time you climb the spiral stairs to the second floor gallery where *N.C. Wyeth: New Perspectives* is taking place. There are others, like you, milling about the room in haphazard patterns. At first, you don't know where to look. You notice scenes from Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island* as well as James Fenimore Cooper's *Last of the Mohicans*, but you move past them with little interest, instead stopping in front of an illustration from Sidney Lanier's *The Boy's King Arthur*.

*And when they came to the sword that the hand held, King Arthur took it up* (see figure 1) portrays the famous scene of Arthur receiving Excalibur from the Lady of the Lake. The image was inspired by N.C. Wyeth's reading of Lanier's text and it has only been displayed on exhibition one other time, in New York City, 1957. In it, the sky and the glass surface of the lake are so pale that the silhouetted flock of swans taking flight across the horizon appear to float in a bank of fog. The eye is drawn impulsively to Arthur. He stands in the bow of a small canoe, arms

crossed over his chest as he looks over the water at the outstretched sword. The bright blues and reds of Arthur's armor are a stark contrast to the dull landscape, making his figure more imposing. He does not bother to reach for the sword which will define his reign as king; instead he gazes at it as if certain that the sword will come to him as its true possessor.

Wyeth's oil on canvas illustration is part of a larger American discourse on Arthurian tradition and represents a revival of medievalism in the late 19th and early 20th centuries on a national scale. While there is an overabundance of research on the medieval myths of King Arthur and Robin Hood, very little scholarly work has been done on the visual material produced by these stories, excluding a few notable articles on visual Arthuriana, such as "All Dressed Up: Revivalism and the Fashion for Arthur in Victorian Culture" by Inga Bryden; "Modern Arthurian Art" by Jeanne Fox-Friedman; and "The Arthurian Revival in Victorian Art" by Debra Mancoff. The illustrations inspired by these stories have been all but ignored.

In a similar fashion, many books of art history and biography have been penned about N.C. Wyeth, his style of painting, his influence, and his greatest works, but his illustrations have not garnered much attention from researchers. In 1996, Douglas Allen wrote *N.C. Wyeth: The Collected Paintings and Murals*. Rather than examining the illustrations and giving detailed interpretations of their meanings, Allen focused on his childhood recollections of Wyeth's illustrated works and Wyeth's own biography as a context for the paintings. In 2000, John Edward Dell studied N.C. Wyeth and five other illustrators in a book focusing on the artistic style and thematic interests of the Brandywine River School called *Visions of Adventure: N.C. Wyeth and the Brandywine Artists*. More recently, Jeff Menges published *N.C. Wyeth: Great Illustrations* in 2011. Menges wrote an introduction for the collection, however the work is

merely a catalog. The illustrations fill the pages but there is scanty text to name and date the works. All of these books treat Wyeth's illustrations as stand-alone pieces without reference to the literary text from which they came.

A few notable researchers such as Alexander Nemerov and Susan Gannon have begun to investigate Wyeth's illustrations by directly tying them to the literary texts. They position their interpretations of Wyeth based on his identity as a storyteller and an interpreter instead of his more traditional and well researched identities as an artist and as a man. But both Nemerov and Gannon center their discussion of Wyeth's work on his illustrations for Robert Louis Stevenson: *Treasure Island*, *David Balfour*, *The Black Arrow*, and *Kidnapped*. I position myself and the work done in this thesis as part of the movement begun by Nemerov and Gannon to argue for a direct connection between Wyeth's visual interpretation of the story and the interpretation of the story presented in the written text. My work's significance comes from its ability to address gaps in both the research being done on N.C. Wyeth illustrations and the visual oeuvre of Robin Hood and King Arthur. By looking at both of these understudied aspects of Wyeth literature and medieval literature in two fields that already have a wealth of scholarship, my project has uncovered a neglected aspect of traditional Arthuriana and allowed for a broader understanding of N.C. Wyeth and his artistic authority.

In this thesis, I identify how the medieval myths of King Arthur and Robin Hood were translated in both text and illustrated images from English epics to American classics and used to shape American identity. I divide my thesis into three chapters. In chapter one, I focus on how Arthurian legend was regionally Americanized, formed to the ideals of chivalry and aristocracy held by the antebellum South, in *The Boy's King Arthur*. In chapter two, I examine the depiction

of women, specifically through portraiture, in Howard Pyle's *The Story of King Arthur and His Knights*. I argue that Pyle vilifies female characters to demonstrate how femininity posed one of many threats to the "manly American spirit" he hoped to imbue in his writing and illustrations, closely tied to 19th century perceptions of the pioneer (Segal). And finally, in chapter three I study how *The Merry Adventures of Robin Hood* by Howard Pyle and *Robin Hood* by Paul Creswick rely on the iconic American identity of the Revolutionary to craft the assertion that to be an American man requires violent contest.

Since the inception of both myths, the narratives of Robin Hood and King Arthur have been altered, retold, edited, and completely transformed to fit their audience, their time period, and even their political climate. But while Robin Hood is a figure who can be easily transcribed within many cultural contexts, King Arthur is not. Because of his clear links to imperialism, classism, feudalism, and monarchy, King Arthur presents a challenge to translators who want to bring his stories to an American audience as it "should, it seems, be at odds with the democratic ideals that America espouses" (Lupak 292). Therefore, a completely new and reworked Arthurian tradition is necessary to bring King Arthur across the Atlantic. The study of the adaptation of King Arthur to the American public is based on "the belief that the American Arthurian tradition is not the poor stepchild of the British tradition which it is usually considered to be (if it is considered at all) but rather a tradition with its own conventions and motifs" (291). In the American South, the Arthurian legend begins to take on a distinct flavor and style and, for that reason, I start my examination of the myth with Confederate poet Sidney Lanier's *The Boy's King*



*Arthur*. I develop an understanding of how King Arthur was regionally popularized in order to translate it to a larger national audience.

Lanier's description of Arthur's early life and ancestry in *The Boy's King Arthur* presents a narrative that is strikingly similar to 19th depictions of Southern life. I have condensed these similarities down to four fundamental issues which relate to both medieval knighthood and Southern gentility: race, religion, class, and chivalrous violence. By organizing this chapter around two illustrations by N.C. Wyeth, I will demonstrate how the English myth was regionally translated to a Southern audience by appealing to uniquely held Southern values. By surveying both antebellum and postbellum values connected with gentility, I explain how the Arthurian myth began to conform to and reshape American identity.

### **Mardi Gras and the Beginnings of a Visual Arthurian Tradition**

Like the English Arthurian tradition, American Arthurian tradition has its own unique set of conventions, motifs, and symbols. Traditional English Arthurian tradition focuses on the death of Arthur and the dissolution of his kingdom as a result of the pursuit of the Holy Grail and the adultery of Lancelot and Guinevere. In contrast, American Arthuriana, particularly that of the 19th and 20th centuries, fastidiously revises the legend to remove even the slightest hint of infidelity. I understand this meticulous modification of the tradition within the American imagination as tantamount to the desire to rewrite history in order to create a stainless, idyllic past. And I argue that American Arthurian tradition has amended the original myth in this way because of its relationship to the American South. Elly McCausland argues that although Lanier's translation did not do much to alter the content of Malory's original text, the "paratextual aspects - prefaces and illustrations" are what significantly change the story's meaning (19). By

examining the visual tradition of Arthuriana in America alongside Lanier's text, the connection between the South and a desire to rewrite the past becomes clear.

Although the two major symbols of Wyeth's *And when they came to the sword that the hand held, King Arthur took it up* - the sword and the swans - come with an association to the English crown, they have become two of the primary motifs of the American Arthurian myth as well. These primary symbols of American Arthuriana can be traced back to depictions of King Arthur in a postbellum South. The first allusions to Arthurian legend in the celebrations of Mardi Gras were as early as 1857 (Reel 122). The stories of Guinevere and King Arthur, Tristan and Isolde, and even Lancelot and Guinevere hinted at "the notion of the 'right order of the world,' which lay at the heart of the New Orleans' Mardi Gras" (Reel 122). Additionally, Mardi Gras was an opportunity to poke fun at where the world had gone wrong. Comus's 1872 "Darwin's Missing Links" mocked the Union by representing "the occupying army, the state's reconstruction government, and the Federal government" as unevolved and unnatural (124). From its first introduction to popular culture in the regional South, the Arthurian legend was bound up in an aristocratic dream of knights and ladies that was set in direct contrast to the reality of a lost Avalon.

To Southerners, Arthur represented a "stainless life" and in many ways a stainless version of American history (126). The legend described the world as it should have been, not how it was:

For the young Southerners, Sidney Lanier's retelling of Malory with the incomparable illustrations of N.C. Wyeth, had a great charm...the Arthur legend fit closely with the mood of white Southerners, for it described the crushing of a lofty civilization by

heathens. For Southerners, this provided a parallel to their understanding of the Southern defeat in the Civil War. (128)

The main symbolic images found in almost all of the 19th and 20th century Arthurian Mardi Gras floats were the sword in the stone, Arthur's throne, and the swan (122). These images, historically tied to England and medieval Arthurianism became, for the South, "its metaphor for its fate" (129). These symbols are closely tied to Southern adaptations of the myth and have since become icons of the American translation on a larger scale. It is no coincidence then that two of these three images, the sword in the stone and the swans, figure predominantly in N.C. Wyeth's illustration. The historic origins of American Arthurian visual culture in the South, particularly the idea of a lost idyllic past, greatly influenced the adaptation of King Arthur in America.

### **Capitalism as the Measure of a Gentlemen**

The myth first became regionally Americanized by connecting King Arthur to the Southern aristocracy, specifically the Old World image of the Southern gentleman. Arthur is born to "the noble Utherpendragon" but he "knew not he was the king's son" (Lanier 3). The narrator assures the reader of Arthur's aristocratic lineage to begin with, but at the same time, makes an appeal to the American audience. Though he should have lived in a palace and ruled by birthright, Arthur had to earn his place among "every lord [who] made him[self] strong, and... thought to have been king" (3). By imagining Arthur as a poor boy who made himself king through contest with other lords, the reader is given the illusion of a meritocracy, something a bit more democratic than the true feudal order of the time, and scholars such as Barbara and Alan

Lupak have played up these small elements of equity as signs that in Arthur's world any man could be king (Lupak 293).

Likewise, the concept of King Arthur having to earn his position through competition appeals to American capitalist values, especially in the South. Southern gentlemen, particularly plantation owners, felt they had merited their positions through hard work and rivalry with other lords of the industry like the Northern textile producers. In a similar fashion, knights of the Round Table also had to earn their seat "based on ability, not just noble birth" (Lupak 293). By convincing the reader that Arthur and his knights were self-made men, the narrative places itself into the regional context of the American South as well as a larger national identity. Arthur assumed the Round Table's symbolic meaning as it became an image of "egalitarianism and [was] used...as a way of Americanizing a very un-American story" (293).

In parallel, the Southern gentleman was viewed as a self-made man whose merit was founded in his success in business. The slogans "King Cotton" and "Cotton is King" of the antebellum secessionists conceived of the South as a cotton powerhouse where a capitalist hierarchy existed. If cotton was king, then the plantation owners acted as feudal lords in service to the sovereignty of their highest economic interests, and ultimately, through an independent Southern economy, the Confederate States. In translating King Arthur to an American audience, 20th century writers like Howard Pyle and Henry Gilbert deemphasized the "martial adventures" of the Arthurian legend in order "to emphasize a series of social and moral qualities linked to the development of idealized manhood" (McCausland 57). Many of these social and moral qualities were connected to the practices of capitalism, which insisted "upon risk-taking as essential to the development of a gentleman" (57). Rather than endangering life and limb in sports like jousting,

true gentility risked capital. A capitalist system allowed for “modern-day chivalry exemplified by common men” (59). By redefining medieval adventure “and the risk-taking it required,” Southern gentlemen were able to step into the role of knights alongside other Americans in the newly capitalist society and identify their production with “the concept of adventure as accruing reward and revenue” (69).

### **Manifest Destiny in the American South as Religious Merit**

However, the identity of a Southern aristocrat was not merely merit based, it was also religious and racial. Arthur must meet similar qualifications to be king. When Utherpendragon dies and the realm is left without an heir apparent, Merlin suggests all the lords of England come together “in the greatest church of London on Christmas morn...to see if God would not show by some miracle who should be king” (Lanier 3). Merlin’s instruction to allow God to pick the next king is mirrored by the American belief in Manifest Destiny. In England, the divine right of kings secured power to the monarchy by investing the king with the authority of God, as it was believed that God chose each ruler. When colonists came to America, they brought with them some of these theological ideas. Rather than God selecting the next king, Americans believed that God had elected a new Israel to be his chosen people and that he would give them dominion over their own Promised Land: the New World (Pratt, 797). But like the English monarchy, American authority came directly from God and was absolute (798).

Although Manifest Destiny has historically been applied to Westward Expansion and not to the regional South, the authority of Southern culture was built on many of the same fundamental beliefs. The South saw itself as the true religious society, in comparison to the godless North. They believed slavery was ordained by God and they slowly appropriated the

Northern language of Manifest Destiny, calling themselves God's chosen people. And just as Americans were predestined to take possession of their Promised Land in the New World, plantation owners took possession of land and slaves like God had told them to do in Genesis 1:28, "fill the earth and subdue it" (NASB). In this way, Southerners took the Creation Mandate as their divine right to govern over their dominion. And so, Manifest Destiny can easily be applied to the South, particularly the Southern aristocracy who owned and operated plantations during the antebellum period. The concept of "achieving mastery over the world and its resources" in Southern gentility combined "a chivalric and a colonialist ethic through an emphasis on human control" which was also theologically founded (McCausland 54).

Owning - literally and metaphorically mastering - slaves was an active part of what it meant to be a gentleman. A contemporary of Sidney Lanier's, William Martin emphasized in his 1865 *Heroism of Boyhood* that "the nineteenth century required a new heroism for its children to emulate. 'In former times, a man, to be a hero, was expected to slay his thousands, to found empires, and to subjugate nations,' Martin noted. 'Now, however, we understand that true heroism may consist in performing our duty in that state of life unto which it may please God to call us'" (McClausland 59). Since Americans were *called* to the management of both their finances and their families, Southern aristocrats could view their domestic duties of running their businesses, governing their slaves, and guiding their families as a heroic, knightly quest in the service of their ultimate king, God. The chivalrous gentlemen that Lanier's text imagines as an emerging American identity required a domestic heroism and a divine appointment, both of which reflect the larger national story of Manifest Destiny.

## The Sword in the Stone as a Textual Representation of Divine Appointment

In a similar way, Arthur's right to be king must be established through his religion. A divine revelation takes place to reveal Arthur's claim to the throne:

[W]hen the first mass was done there was seen in the church-yard, against the high altar, a great stone four-square, like to a marble stone, and in the midst thereof was an anvil of steel, a foot of height, and therein stuck a fair sword naked by the point, and letters of gold were written about the sword that said thus: WHO SO PULLETH OUT THIS SWORD OF THIS STONE AND ANVIL, IS RIGHTWISE KING BORN OF ENGLAND. (Lanier 4)

The sword in the stone, the very symbol of Arthur's divine authority, appears seemingly out of nowhere. No one places the sword in the stone or proposes this test of strength. Instead, the sword is miraculously given to the lords as they go to mass. It is also noteworthy that the stone that holds the sword rests against the high altar, which in the Christian faith symbolizes Christ. From this understanding, Arthur's authority comes directly from God and, literally as well as figuratively, rests upon Christ.

The inscription on the stone also suggests that the person who pulls the sword from the stone has a boundless dominion as it states they are "rightwise king born of England" (4). Arthur is not king of England, he is born of England, but his kingship is limitless. This careful selection of words allows for the possibility of expansion and continued colonization not unlike Westward Expansion in America. The narrator's phrasing entitles Arthur to be king anywhere that kingship exists, "a world conqueror" (*Britannica*). Arthur's miraculous appointment as king through the divine intervention of the sword in the stone mirrors America's claims to predestined sovereignty over the land as both rest on a form of special revelation - that is, the sword and the Bible, which is also called the sword of the spirit. The belief in Arthur's God-given right is echoed by the

archbishop who “trusted that God would make him known that should win the sword” and by Sir Ector who, when presented with the sword by Arthur, says, “Now, I understand that you must be king of this land” (Lanier 5).

By removing the sword, Arthur demonstrates an absolute power that is not only merited by his gentility and his religious ordination, but by his superior race. When Arthur pulls the sword from the stone: “Sir Ector kneeled down to the earth...’Alas,’ said Arthur, ‘mine own dear father and brother, why kneel ye to me?’ ‘Nay, nay, my lord Arthur, it is not so: I was never your father nor of your blood, but I wote [*know*] well ye are of an higher blood than I weened [*thought*] ye were.’” (6). Here Arthur’s authority is attached to the quality and origination of his blood. He is a king’s son, as Sir Ector tells him. His lineage is noble and aristocratic, demonstrating the high birth and social class to which the Southern aristocracy aspired. But the description of Arthur’s blood as being of a higher quality than Sir Ector supposed also designates his racial superiority. As Amy Kaufman points out, nobility in the medieval past believed themselves to have more in common with nobility in other countries than the common people of their own land because they understood themselves to be a different race entirely (100).

Although in Mallory’s original text, the “higher blood” of King Arthur may have been tied to class and nobility rather than whiteness, within an American context Arthur’s authority would have been understood as tied to race as well as class. The idea Kaufman presents of nobility as a kind of higher race further emphasizes the necessity of Arthur’s pure blood. In the Reconstruction South, the lower classes consisted of newly freed slaves and poor whites (Katz-Fishman 573). While African Americans and the disenfranchised poor whites were technically of



the same socioeconomic standing, “the isolation and lack of development of the South created a great divide between the African American and white workers” in the South which placed blacks at the bottom of the class hierarchy (574). In this context, whiteness and wealth gave men the kind of divine authority that Arthur later exercises while pulling the sword from the stone.

From a Marxist perspective, the antebellum South was a perfect example of how race and class combined under capitalism. In Marxist sociology of race relations, class and race are not separate, intersecting entities, but a part of the same capitalist system and mutually dependent upon it (Virdee 7). As Lenin argued, race and class are socially constructed categories created by capitalism to oppress the masses, part of “racism’s genesis and reproduction” in American culture (6). The South, as an emerging capitalist juggernaut, helped to shape American race relations as well as the concept of class through cotton production and the slave trade. The South helped to create a ruling class who had absolute economic and political power. The Southern plantation system enabled the creation of a labor force which was relatively cheap to maintain and both socially and racially inferior. When thinking about the intersectionality of race and class in America, Jean Belkhir stated, “they simultaneously structure the experience of all people in this society...they are overlapping and cumulative in their effect” (158). Using the work of these scholars as a foundation, I argue that it is the combination of race and class which qualifies Arthur for kingship because within this American context race and class are interchangeable.

As evidenced by Sir Ector’s remark about King Athur’s higher blood, Arthur’s lineage is critical because it enables him to remove the sword from the stone, and therefore, grants him God given authority. In the antebellum South, plantation owners made a strangely similar argument about their right to own slaves and govern their plantations as they pleased. They

believed that God had given them the right to own slaves because of the superiority of their race. Many Christian slaveholders argued that in Genesis 9:18-27 Noah cursed his son Ham to be “a servant of servants” and that black Africans were the descendants of Ham preordained to be slaves by God thousands of years prior (NASB). Another Christian pro-slavery argument was that by taking Africans as slaves their white masters were able to civilize and Christianize a heathen people. And so, pro-slavery rhetoric conformed to the ideas of Manifest Destiny by popularizing the belief that, by taking dominion of the land and the people living in it, Americans were bringing democracy, capitalism, and Christianity to the world. Scholars like Paul Caron have seen the Arthurian quest narratives as parallel to the settling of the West by combining “the medieval knight and the western gun-slinger. Both share a common mandate: to stamp out lawlessness and to bring peace to the inhabitants of a given region” (Lupak 292). Similar in role to the gun-slinger, the Southern gentlemen was tasked with taming the land through the management of both slaves and crops as well as establishing order in his own little kingdom by instructing his domestic subjects both free and captive.

### **Reimagining a Feudal Order in a Modern World**

A significant part of both Manifest Destiny and the divine right of kings is landownership and we can see this ideology paralleled in *The Boy's King Arthur* as Arthur's first act as king is to give land. When Arthur is crowned, the feudal order is asserted, and the narrator stresses the acceptance of this hierarchical system by all men present: “therewithal they kneeled down all at once, both rich and poor, and cried Arthur mercy, because they had delayed him so long. And Arthur forgave it them” (8). This is a purposeful revision by Lanier. In the original Mallory text, Arthur crowns himself king and is opposed by several of his subjects, the husbands of Uther's

three daughters. In Lanier's version, Arthur's rule is the preferred governance, not only of his court, but of the peasantry as well. Though many of these same poor would be made serfs by Arthur's reign, they are happy to be servants to their masters and even ask Arthur's forgiveness that he was not made king sooner. Akin to the Southern myth of "the happy slave," the narrator invents a new myth built on the same idea, "the happy serf." In Lanier's version, the argument in favor of Arthur's kingship is that the lower classes were subservient and willing to accept their position due to some innate understanding of their own flawed nature —exactly like the happy slaves of the antebellum South.

With the professed consent of the whole kingdom, Arthur takes control of his domain and begins to hand out lands to the lords; "many complaints were made unto King Arthur...of many lands that were bereaved of lords, knights, ladies, and gentlemen. Wherefore King Arthur made the lands to be given again unto them that owned them" (8). Since Arthur's authority is God-given, when Arthur administers land rights to the gentry, he acts as God granting them these lands. If Arthur's power is merely an extension of God's own governance, then feudal lords participate in a similar form of Manifest Destiny as plantation owners. Both the knights of old and the Southern gentleman were literally and conceptually building the nation and serving God by settling and controlling land.

The role of the plantation owner as a kind of feudal lord can also be understood from Sir Kay's appointment to seneschal of England (8). When Sir Ector discovers who Arthur is, he asks "no more of you [Arthur] but that you will make my son, your fostered brother Sir Kay seneschal of all your lands" to which Arthur gladly assents (7). A seneschal in the Middle Ages was an

official who was in charge of justice and the entire domestic arrangements of the sovereign's household, including the administration of servants and overseeing labor (*OED*). The Anglo-Saxon comes from the French *seneschal*, which also meant steward or bailiff, deriving from the German *vogt* (*OED*). A *vogt* performed the offices of a feudal lord and those responsibilities were closely aligned to those of a plantation owner (*OED*). On a plantation, the owner was responsible for the buying and selling of slaves, the upkeep of his work force, and executing justice upon his own soil by punishing rebels and runaways. A *seneschal* could also be the title of a cathedral official in the ecclesiastical order (*OED*). Additionally, part of the responsibility of any plantation owner was to act as a minister to his slaves, providing them with baptism, marriage, and the opportunity to go to church. Similar to the medieval knight in performing the duties of a feudal lord by governing his property and keeping the faith, the Southern gentleman demonstrated the belief that the position of master was ordained by God and closely tied to land ownership.

### **Excalibur as a Visual Representation of Divine Appointment**

Since many of these key characteristics of the Southern gentleman appear repeatedly in Lanier's text, it is no surprise that they are also prevalent in the accompanying illustrations. N.C. Wyeth's *And when they came to the sword that the hand held, King Arthur took it up* parallels Lanier's translation of the myth through the use of two main symbols. The first symbol is the sword. In the painting, Arthur, standing with his head slightly bent, and Merlin, kneeling behind him, sail across a glassy lake towards Excalibur. Three white swans fly behind them. Excalibur is held just above the water and the rippled reflection of the sword enfolded in the white sleeve of

the Lady of the Lake gives the appearance that the sword is stuck in the mirrored surface of the pool as though planted in stone.

This doubled image - the sword bound to a physical entity which represents an insurmountable obstacle - corresponds to the two challenges Arthur must overcome to be king, one to test his virtue and the other, his worth. In order to prove himself, Arthur had to remove the sword from the stone in the beginning of the book. In the painting, he is faced with the test of removing the sword from the lake which will prove his worthiness to be king. In the corresponding written text, Arthur and Merlin “came to the sword that the hand held, [and] King Arthur took it up by the handles, and took it with him” (16). Holding it by the handles, one could almost imagine Arthur being confronted by an impossible task and, nevertheless, lifting the sword from the lake in the same way that he drew the sword from the stone. Since the sword in the stone proved Arthur was chosen by God and that his right to rule was absolute, here Excalibur acts as a symbol of Arthur’s divine kingship by duplicating the sword in the stone iconography.

In Lanier’s text, the narrator conjures the image of a religious figure holding Excalibur “in the midst of the lake King Arthur was ware of an arm clothed in white samite, that held a fair sword in hand” (15). Samite was a kind of silk woven with gold and silver which was forbidden to anyone below the rank of knight by the sumptuary laws of the Middle Ages (*OED*). It was used to designate royal blood, kingship, and nobility but it was also stitched into ecclesiastical robes (*OED*). Wyeth included this important detail in his rendering of the scene, portraying the fabric rising up the arm of the Lady of the Lake and falling down in waves into the water as if part of the lake itself. Samite reminds the viewer of Arthur’s divine authority. He is handed the

sword by someone who is wearing religious garb, further proving the point that God has selected him as king and is bestowing on him the power (sword) of rule. But the samite also affirms Arthur's nobility and social status because the exclusivity of this commodity reinforced the hierarchical values of the time.

### **Swans as a Symbol of Class and Race Status**

The sword as a symbol reaffirms the religious aspect of merited gentility that is prevalent in both England and the South, but it is Wyeth's second symbol which addresses race. The illustration is predominantly white from the sky to the swans to the white hand and the white samite. Even the water reflects some of the whiteness of the other forms. Samite as a symbol of purity gestures toward the purity of the royal bloodline and, as Sir Ector intimates, Arthur's "higher blood" (6). The three swans, the second major symbol of the illustration, also reinforce this reading of the myth. Although neither Mallory or Lanier mentions swans in the text of the Excalibur scene, Wyeth chose to use them as a vehicle to visually reinforce Arthur's royalty, divine ordination, and racial superiority. Swans were emblematic of purity and faithfulness. Since swans mate for life, they were also connected to sexual purity and fidelity in marriage. Working from these symbolic attachments, swans could very easily demonstrate the kind of racial purity and commitment to high born, high blooded families that the Southern aristocracy desired. In this illustration, however, the swans should be read in multiple ways.

Swans were connected in England to the feasts at Christmas time, the very morning the sword in the stone first appeared (Lanier 3). In the Christian faith, Christmas is a celebration of the incarnation of Jesus Christ, the King of kings. The arrival of the sword in the stone on Christmas day as well as the flock of swans flying behind Arthur at his receipt of Excalibur could

very easily be understood as the advent of the anticipated king. Swans were also a symbol of the sun in many cultures, and it could be argued that in this illustration they herald the birth of the s(o)n (Armstrong 58). The number three in Christian symbolism is also very important as it denotes the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The three swans could mark God's presence at Arthur's ascension to king as the white dove embodied his presence at Jesus' baptism in the New Testament. Arthur's divine right to kingship is bolstered by the swan's appearance at his annunciation, but the swans also echo the divine nature of Manifest Destiny that gives Americans the God-given right to rule based on land ownership and racial superiority.

Historically, swans were associated with pedigree and status because of their great cost, their association with the royal family, and their exclusivity (Clever). The swan laws of the 15th century were highly restrictive, prohibiting anyone from owning, breeding, or selling the animals but estate holders of a certain income, and therefore swans were a more desirable commodity to nobility who could demonstrate their rank by ownership (Clever). Nobility of great wealth and circumstance could buy a swan mark, a particular symbol etched into the beak of the bird, but all unmarked animals were property of the crown by default (Clever). For the birds to be flying so closely behind Arthur in the illustration, N.C. Wyeth must have wanted to mark Arthur as royalty. In a way, the swans are also part of the performance of his rank as common people were separated from any association with the birds and forbidden from injuring or hunting them (Clever). Much like samite in the sumptuary laws, swans were leveraged to secure the distinction of rank and social stability (Clever). To own swans, one had to have an estate (Clever). Once again, Manifest Destiny becomes a relevant context as only those who were land owners were allowed to wield this symbol of rule and dominion. A form of Social Darwinism,

the American South's capitalist system ensured that only the *fittest* could own land. Therefore, land ownership became evidence of racial and social superiority.

Though I will not argue a one-to-one comparison of swans and black slaves, for the purpose of this chapter I think it is significant to showcase their similarities as it relates to the ideals of Southern aristocracy and the American adaptation of the Arthurian legend. Slaves were not marked in the same manner as swans to designate ownership, but as a result of their slavery, the bodies of slaves were a canvas for the marks of all kinds of violent ownership including branding. Slaves, like swans, were a commodity and a capitalist venture. Swan keepers were able to breed, sell, and buy birds for their own financial gains. Slave masters were able to breed, sell, and buy slaves for their own financial gains. One had to be a landowner to own swans. Landowners typically owned slaves, further emphasizing the almost feudal nature of slavery in the South. In both cultures, the swan and the slave were status symbols. Swans demonstrated rank for nobility because only they could own them. Southern aristocrats were able to elevate themselves through the possession of black bodies. As such, slaves like swans became emblematic of pure blood, land ownership, and gentility.

### **Chivalrous Violence in King Arthur's Court**

Having discussed the many parallels and significant features of Arthur's early life and kingship which align with the ideals of Southern gentlemen, I will move to a discussion of two of the major themes of *The Boy's King Arthur* that contribute greatly to the conception of Southern gentility as seen in the illustration *I am Sir Lancelot du Lake, King Ban's son of Benwick, and knight of the Round Table* (see figure 2). In both the Arthurian myth and the antebellum South conceptions of chivalry and aristocracy were based on proving oneself by enacting violence on



the bodies of one's enemies and defending the honor of a lady. By identifying Southern gentility with Arthurian chivalrous violence, Southerners could step into the role of the hero and rewrite past cruelties as honorable crusades. In the painting *I am Sir Lancelot du Lake*, the viewer can easily pinpoint both chivalrous violence and the defense of female virtue within the composition. Sir Lancelot, with his back to the viewer, rests upon his sword and faces his enemy with his shield before him. Turquine, his opponent, holds his helmet beneath his arm in order to glare hatefully at his foe. Behind the two dueling figures are the wounded knight Sir Gaheris, Lancelot's felled horse, and a nameless damsel riding on a white palfrey. In the composition, Sir Gaheris and the Damsel both literally and figuratively come between the two knights, inciting the hostilities between them.

Sir Gaheris, seated on the ground with his face in his hands, is the most central figure of the piece. He is also the chief object of Lancelot's rescue. Wyeth strategically places Gaheris between Lancelot and Turquine to communicate to the viewer that the knights' dispute is over Gaheris's defeat. Since Turquine had felled Gaheris, he could rightfully take Gaheris captive and imprison him in his manor along with the other knights of the Round Table. The visual image of Gaheris planted firmly between the two figures functions as a symbol of a chivalrous violence: the proving of one's position and strength through the forcible subjugation of another's body in physical combat. Gaheris has been systematically subjugated under Turquine's authority by the code of chivalry and Lancelot must do the same to Turquine in order to prove himself and free his friend.

Also situated between the two embattled figures is the Damsel on the white horse. In Mallory's text as well as Lanier's, she is present when the battle is happening but her position in relation to the two dueling figures is unclear. On Wyeth's canvas, however, she becomes another central figure who contributes to the enmity between the two men. The Damsel has brought Lancelot to the field of battle where Turquine has taken many prisoners and she has asked Lancelot to fight the oppressive lord. The damsel is seated high upon her horse, drawing the viewer's eye up to the castle in the background and the clouds above it, all being the same shade of white as her steed. The clouds are of a peculiar shape and formation. Though not an exact replica, they mirror the battlements of the castle and give the illusion of a kingdom in the sky. There exists, therefore, an earthly kingdom and a heavenly realm in this image. The conflict between the two knights has both temporal and eternal significance, a fight between good and evil. As a medieval knight, Lancelot would have seen all his actions, including these knightly contests of arms, as sanctioned by God. Furthermore, Lancelot's service was asked of him by a fair damsel. He acts in her defense, authorized by, and in protection of, her virtue. Visually connecting the image of the Damsel with the heavenly kingdom creates a parallel between Lancelot's duty to God and his duty to the maiden. The Damsel as a symbol unifies both the idea of a spiritual conflict at play in the scene and one of the tenants of chivalry - the defense of virtue.

Chivalrous violence and the protection of women, two pervading themes throughout *The Boy's King Arthur*, would have been readily translated to a regional Southern audience. The Southern aristocracy mostly consisted of plantation owners. As I mentioned in my discussion of the swan imagery in the previous illustration, unquestionable proof of a Southern aristocrat's

social status and racial superiority was their possession of slaves and the domination of enslaved bodies. In *The Boy's King Arthur*, Turquine had accrued strength and power from taking captive enemy knights and subjecting them to his will, a permissible action within the system of chivalry. Likewise, Southern slaveholders could be viewed as gaining more influence and authority as their slaveholdings increased. In crafting an upper class Southern culture, the Southern aristocracy attempted to recreate King Arthur's court in a modern world, necessitating the subjugation of black bodies: "Southern slave-holders imagined themselves to be nobles conquering and ruling a 'new land,' and they created their own version of chivalry and courtly society. They whitewashed their murder and enslavement of Africans by imagining it as neomedieval feudalism" (Kaufman 82). As such, slavery itself could be seen as a form of chivalrous violence which stabilized white Southerners' cultural identity.

### **Power and Justice through Worship**

King Arthur's early life was defined by race, class, and religion. Correspondingly, chivalrous violence was also founded on Southern conceptions of these dogmas. Arthur's court was structured upon acts of violence, "anon after that the noble and worthy King Arthur was come from Rome into England, all the knights made many jousts and tournaments, and some there were that were good knights, which increased so in arms and worship that they passed all fellows in prowess and noble deeds" (Lanier 23). Repeatedly throughout the text, the knights of the Round Table seek to win "worship" by their acts of violence. The word "worship" means "the condition of having or deserving honor or high rank" (OED). To medieval knights, worship meant honor gained in battle, the source or ground on which they merited respect. But the word

also had social and spiritual implications. Worship could mean a person of high social status, someone of distinction, high rank, renown, worth, or esteem (OED). Worship denoted authority and even sovereignty. In a spiritual sense, worship could be understood as “veneration similar to that paid to a being or power regarded as supernatural or divine,” but it could also be “the action or practice of displaying” this reverence (OED). For a knight, worship was both what he deserved through his righteous acts and it was the practice of displaying reverence to God by his righteous acts. Chivalrous violence, then, was a way for knights to reinforce their social status, validate their entitlement to land, wealth, and privilege, and display their religious piety.

Through enacting violence against others, medieval knights tended to play God by taking justice into their own hands. These judgements gave the knights an almost spiritual, absolute power. In the story of Gareth of Orkney, for instance, Sir Gareth fights several different colored knights in order to prove his social status and chivalry. In one battle, he fights a man simply named the black knight who challenges Gareth to a joust and commands him to “yield thy lady from thee, for it beseemeth never a kitchen page to ride with such a lady” (Lanier 80). Here the black knight is guilty of two great offenses. By telling Sir Gareth to “yield thy lady from thee”, he represents a sexual or a physical threat to a maiden Gareth has sworn to defend, but probably both. He also questions Gareth’s respectability as a knight, whether he is truly worthy of worship (Kaufman 84). Incensed, Gareth replies “Thou liest, I am a gentleman born, and of more high lineage than thou, and that will I prove on thy body” (Lanier 81). Gareth succeeds in killing the black knight and wins worship through this act. By subordinating the black knight’s body to his

own physical prowess, Gareth proves his social superiority. In doing so, he also demonstrates his God-like sovereignty over life and death, a direct result of his “worship.”

### **The Subjugation of Black Bodies in a Postbellum South**

In the antebellum South, slaveholders much like Sir Gareth – white men with land, wealth, and social status – practiced chivalrous violence through the slave patrol, a form of vigilante justice that allowed them to punish runaway slaves and other fugitives of the law without a formal trial (Smångs 619). But after the Confederacy lost the Civil War, chivalrous violence as a reaction against the loss of white male authority became more widely touted to all white men, including the lower classes, through “their medieval ‘heritage’ – their supposed right to rule by virtue of their race” (Kaufman 83). White men became, not only the defenders, but the authors of justice. Socially and structurally, Southern culture adopted “the ideology and practice of patriarchal republicanism [which] vested economic, political, and social authority, rights, and privileges exclusively in the hands of white men, particularly white male heads of households” (Smångs 618). With the institution of Reconstruction in the American South, white men’s power was suddenly threatened. Newly freed blacks could vote, hold public office, “appropriate public spaces”, own land, and claim access to education (Smångs 620). In this new world, black men represented political and economic competition to white men and Southern whites “believed that their power as men and as whites had come under attack at the same time and by the same forces” (619). In other words, black freedom challenged white male superiority.

Unable to subjugate black bodies to their wills through the violence of slavery, Southern whites turned to a kind of social violence to quell the threat of black freedom. The Jim Crow

Laws created a social structure in which blacks were disenfranchised, oppressed, and daily menaced into submission to their white *betters*, further validating in white people's minds their racial supremacy and power. Though the Jim Crow Laws were not physically violent in themselves, they did often result in physical violence if disobeyed. The Jim Crow Laws could be seen as both a kind of chivalrous violence and as a demand for medieval worship.

But the Jim Crow Laws did not totally assuage the rising threat to white male privilege. In the antebellum South, the economic, social, and political domination that white men commanded was based in part in familial chivalry, the expectation that they would provide for and protect their families, "In other words, black slave men, women, and children, as well as white women and children occupied various positions of subordination vis-a-vis white men. These patriarchal norms and values applied to white male slaveholding and non-slaveholding householders alike, and while the latter may not have enjoyed the privilege of owning slaves, they did have dependents, that is, women and children, securing their racialized and gendered status" (Smångs 619). In a postbellum Southern society, white male identity was slowly slipping away as both blacks and women gained education and rights. Again, white men turned to chivalrous violence as an answer to their problems, this time in the form of lynching.

### **Lynching as Chivalrous Violence in King Arthur and Beyond**

At first glance, lynching may not appear to be an act of chivalry at all, but when we consider that chivalrous violence was a way of proving one's social standing and strength through overcoming another person's body in physical combat as well as a means of defending female virtue, we can easily see how lynching fit into this knightly code. It was also very public in nature, done before and with other men of the community, just as tournaments were performed

before an audience by medieval knights. In *The Boy's King Arthur*, there is even an instance of lynching in the story of Sir Gareth. After defeating the black knight, Sir Gareth and his lady come to a plain and find a castle:

And when they came near the siege Sir Beaumains espied upon great trees, as he rode, how there hung full goodly armed knights by the neck, and their shields about their necks with their swords, and gilt spurs upon their heels, and so there hung shamefully nigh forty knights with rich arms. (Lanier 90)

The manner in which the red knight has put his enemies to death is certainly shameful. His aim is both the humiliation of his enemies and the display of his power. By keeping all the knights he has slaughtered in their full armor, the red knight is performing his own social position and physical power by demonstrating the high rank of his enemies, their wealth, and their strength. Presumably, by killing them, he has proved himself the better knight and the better man. Notably, the displayed bodies of the red knight's victims are an invention of Lanier's text. As a Southerner himself, Lanier would not have been ignorant to the association between the public display of the red knight's vanquished foes on a tree and the public display of lynched black men hanging from trees in the American South. In the original Mallory, the red knight is within his castle, sees Sir Gareth riding up in the black knight's armor, and goes out to meet him in order to joust. There is no reference to the red knight's murders, a multitude of corpses, or even a tree.

When Gareth asks the meaning behind their deaths, his lady responds in the language of chivalrous violence: "when the red knight of the red lawns had overcome them, he put them to this shameful death, without mercy and without pity" (91). The red knight has "overcome" his enemies both physically and socially. By disposing of the knights in a very public and inflammatory manner, the red knight has affirmatively answered anyone who threatens or doubts

his primacy - he will deal with them in the same manner. The public execution of black men sent a similar message in the South. If anyone threatened white power, that person would be made into an example.

That being said, the red knight's actions are not initially seen as noble. The narrator and Sir Gareth himself seem to hold the red knight in some disdain for the cruel way in which he dispatches the other knights. However, further into the story, the red knight's motives are made clear:

Sir, I loved once a lady, a fair damsel, and she had her brother slain, and she said it was Sir Launcelot du Lake, or else Sir Gawaine, and she prayed me as that I loved her heartily that I would make her a promise by the faith of my knighthood for to labor daily in arms until I met with one of them, and all that I might overcome I should put them unto a villainous death. (97)

Once again, Lanier invents a different motive for the joust than Mallory. In Mallory's version, the two men battle because Sir Gareth has killed his brother, the black knight. However, in Lanier's version, the battle ensues because of the red knight's allegiance to his lady. In essence, Mallory's text centers the conflict around the death of a man, but Lanier centers the conflict around the defense of a woman. After Sir Gareth heard the knight's tale, he immediately acquitted him of all guilt through female absolution, "I will release him, that he shall have his life upon this covenant, that he go within the castle and yield him there to the lady, and if she will forgive and acquit him, I will well" (97). The red knight's actions, though savage and by his own confession "villainous", were in defense of a lady's honor and at her request. An action which in another context would have been unpardonable and resulted in the red knight's hasty death, when taken at the appeal of a "fair damsel", alter in form and motivation from cruel and discourteous to



chivalrous. Everything the red knight has done is seen in this new light, as an act of love and devotion to a grieving woman. Immediately, the red knight himself is transformed from villain to hero, as demonstrated by all his servants and lords begging for his acquittal, “Then came there many earls, and barons, and noble knights, and prayed that knight [Sir Gareth] to save his life, and take him to prisoner: and all they fell upon their knees and prayed him of mercy, and that he would save his life” (97).

Likewise, in Southern culture, the act of lynching was transformed over time from an act of violence to an act of chivalry. On the one hand, lynching met the requirements for chivalrous violence by definitively placing white men in a position over and above black men. First, white men flouted the laws and authorities outside of themselves in order to enact their own form of vigilantism. Second, they physically subjected black bodies to their will. And finally, they used their God-like power to judge whether black men were worthy to live or die. On the other hand, lynching could also be seen as chivalrous because the action was portrayed as the defense of white womanhood.

In order for their acts to be part of a code of chivalry, Southern whites had to fashion black men as the aggressors. And there was no better way to mobilize white rage than through the threat of miscegenation. Southern whites created the near superstitious image of the black rapist to cloak racism in chivalry, “white female sexuality and its perceived endangerment from African American men...the [so-called] ‘rape epidemic’ myth provided forceful bases for the reactive mobilization of southern white men in defense of their racial and gender status” (Smångs 620). With the invention of the black rapist in the Southern imagination, the violent and barbaric actions of white men against black bodies could be neatly packaged as the defense of

female virtue. Organizations like the Ku Klux Klan used the defense of white women as a rallying call to Southern men to join them (Kaufman).

The defense of female virtue was not only a fundamental part of performing masculinity, it was also part of the spiritual battle of good against evil. Looking back on the illustration *I am Sir Lancelot du Lake*, the Damsel's white palfrey is turned towards the castle with the neck of the horse directing the eye up to the battlements. Through the repeating shade of white in her clothing, her charge, and the clouds above her, the Damsel becomes swept up in the celestial imagery of the kingdom in the sky and herself becomes an almost heavenly figure. Imbuing the Damsel with this spiritual significance reflects a contemporary understanding of white womanhood. In the 19th and 20th century, the idea of The Angel in the House became popularized by the poem of the same name by Coventry Patmore. The Victorians believed that men were oriented towards the public sphere, business, and the outside world, while women were created for the domestic sphere: the home, their husbands, and their families (*City University of New York*). As such, women were seen as more naturally spiritual than men, who faced the corruption of the world (*City University of New York*). As black men gained rights and privileges within the public sphere, white Southerners feared that African American men would attempt to move into the private sphere through relationships with white women (Kaufman 85). The threat of miscegenation then became an issue of good versus evil. Through the protection of white women, lynching could be viewed as a righteous crusade against ungodliness and white men as knights in service to the highest authority. In this way, Southern gentlemen were able to rewrite their history and, in doing so, themselves.

## Conclusion

Just as the Southern aristocracy reconceptualized lynching and reenforced the American narratives of Manifest Destiny and capitalism, *The Boy's King Arthur* employed intersemiotic translation as a process to reconfigure the English feudal account of King Arthur to correlate with 19th century American identity. Both Lanier's text and Southern culture accomplished this rewriting of history and myth through a kind of historical purification. In an 1880 review of *The Boy's King Arthur*, the same year the book was published, *The Independent* stated: "In the reading of this book, and others like it, generations past have been trained to be courageous, noble, true, and pure... To pursue such books is like the excitement of a bath in a mountain stream or in the ocean —one comes out of it fresher, as well as cleaner, for all his exertion" (Review 2). By experiencing the Arthurian legend through Lanier's translation, the reader emerged purer and of higher moral character. And not only was the contemporary reader cleansed by the outpouring of courage, nobility, and truth in Lanier, past generations were granted the same moral standard and historical forgetfulness. By rewriting the myth of King Arthur, in essence, Sidney Lanier was able to rewrite American history.

## Chapter 2

### **A Masculine American Spirit: Destructive Femininity, Knighthood, and the Resurrection of History in Howard Pyle's *The Story of King Arthur and His Knights***

#### **Introduction**

In the previous chapter, I demonstrated how the foundation of American Arthuriana was laid in the antebellum South through the rewriting of Southern history into the Arthurian myth. In this chapter, I move from the regional Americanization of King Arthur to its national Americanization through Howard Pyle's *The Story of King Arthur and His Knights*. Written and illustrated by Pyle, the book hoped to address an increasingly concerning issue in contemporary American culture: the crisis of American manhood which was thought to be weakening the nation (Segal 2). As the Industrial Revolution swept through America, men's work began to alter and the promise of evolutionary progress "was marred by a national self-image of manhood weakened by a pervasive softening of mental and physical faculties, especially among middle-class desk workers" (Segal 11). Likewise, in both England and the US, traditional ideas about masculinity "based upon aggressive, bellicose characteristics and physical prowess" were being replaced by "a more domesticated model which demanded that males display formerly 'feminine' qualities such as fidelity, modesty, purity, self-restraint, stability, and tenderness" (Barczewski 169). Within this cultural context, Pyle labored under the belief that "the best work in his field could embody a manly American spirit vital to national culture" (Segal 2).

Pyle's work as an illustrator and writer was diametrically opposed to this shift in masculinity. Nineteenth century American art critics such as Charles Elliot Norton and George Frederic Parsons viewed American art as "too dandified" – a form of art which was characterized

by an almost feminine refinement – in essence, “too European” (Fox-Friedman 81). Howard Pyle’s school of painting held the same opinion, and therefore, Pyle refused to use European art as a model for his American students. Instead, Pyle taught his students and devoted his life’s work to what he saw as a uniquely American form of art: book illustration (81). Illustration, for Pyle, was a gendered art form as well as an American one. In Pyle’s view, American illustration was an inherently masculine and unique style of painting which differentiated itself from the tradition of European painting (Segal, 4). He described the European masters as “big children” but he imagined American artists as men doing men’s work: “We of today are not children, but men, each of us with a man’s work to do, and, though we love these old paintings painted by our ancient brethren with a great and passing love, they do not belong to our adult purposes” (Fox-Friedman 82). In other words, Pyle had no interest in the feminized, childish work of European art, but was fully invested in strengthening the nation through his masculine, illustrated stories. And the legend of King Arthur was the perfect medium for Pyle’s confrontation of the crisis of American masculinity in both art and culture.

In both the Arthurian myth and nineteenth century culture, masculine identity was defined against femininity and, as such, masculinity relied on femininity in order to stabilize male identity. In chapter one, I described how female virtue was used to authorize chivalrous violence. I did not, however, discuss how the entire system of chivalry was based upon the othering of women in order to strengthen the social position of men. In “Gender and the Chivalric Community,” Dorsey Armstrong argues that “while foregrounding masculine activity, chivalry reveals itself as an impossible project without the presence of the feminine, and indeed, *only* possible when the feminine is present in a subjugated position” (36). In essence, there had to

be a female Other, for the masculine self to be constructed. For a knight, the feminine acts as “the object through and against which a knight affirms his masculine identity” (36).

Similarly, nineteenth century thought relied on the concept of the separate spheres to place men over and above women, but also to differentiate between what was perceived as masculine and feminine activity. A woman was consigned to the home, the domestic realm, while a man expected a public life, “supporting his family and performing the duties which citizenship necessitated” (Barczewski 164). Men needed women to stay in the domestic space in order for them to maintain their identities as men. But as women in the nineteenth century increasingly left the home and began to enter public life through education, local government, and employment, male gender identity became destabilized (164). Pyle used King Arthur as a vehicle to discuss American masculinity because through the historical resurrection of the myth he was also able to resurrect a masculine, American history that he hoped would redefine the American present. His ultimate goal was to place men back into the position of men and women into their position of subordination to men.

### **Guinevere as the Ideal of Femininity: Object or Angel**

In order to effectively demonstrate how the chivalric system in King Arthur functioned and how Pyle imagined ideal femininity to complement traditional masculinity within the American nation, it is important to first look at ideal femininity in the nineteenth century as exemplified by Pyle’s illustration, *The Lady Guinevere* (see figure 3). In *The Lady Guinevere*, the future queen of Camelot stands in a field with a castle and two dueling knights in the background to her left. In her right hand, she holds a rose. Her gaze is averted from the viewer, her expression serene as she stands motionless and statuesque. This illustration, though fairly simple

in composition, demonstrates traditional gender norms. Guinevere is stationary, passive. Pyle employs portraiture here as a method to freeze Guinevere in time. She is perpetually immobile while the dueling knights are perpetually in action. Guinevere's depiction in portraiture mirrors chivalrous values in nineteenth century culture which "construct male and female in terms of a binary that opposes active, aggressive masculinity to passive, helpless femininity...the masculine as free, predatory subject and the feminine as a passive, powerless object" (Armstrong 37). By placing her within the system of chivalry, Pyle opposes her subjectivity.

Even as Guinevere is seemingly the subject of her own portrait, she is still objectified by the male gaze. Guinevere looks away from the viewer. By doing so, she subscribes to nineteenth century conceptions of viewing. The act of looking was a masculine action which enlisted women as passive and receptive objects (Barczewski 173). By averting her gaze from the viewer of the illustration, Guinevere rightly positions herself, according to contemporary gender roles, as the "desired object" and positions the viewer as the masculine onlooker - the "desiring subject" (174). In order to assert the passivity of women, Pyle even goes so far as to describe female beauty in terms of statuary. Nimue, the Lady of the Lake, is represented by Arthur as "like to an ivory statue of exceeding beauty" with a face "like wax for clearness" and eyes so dark and glistening "as though they were two jewels set in ivory" (Pyle 69). Her beauty is commodified and material, devoid of human warmth. She is an object to be viewed and enjoyed in the viewing but she lacks any subjectivity. Likewise, Guinevere is depicted as an object to be gazed at, "her beauty outshone the beauty of her damsels as the splendor of the morning star outshines that of all the lesser stars that surround it" (60). Arthur takes her objectification a step further by calling her "some tall straight angel who had descended from one of the Lordly Courts

of Paradise” (61). Like Nimue, Guinevere is praised for her beauty while simultaneously changing from a being with subjectivity, “a mortal lady,” to an object of wonder, a “tall straight angel” (61).

Guinevere as an angel fits nicely within nineteenth century ideals about the angel in the house. The angel in the house was also a symbol of passive femininity but beyond that the angel was self-sacrificing, spiritually pious, and pure. In the illustration, Guinevere holds a rose, a medieval symbol of the Virgin Mary, the martyrdom of the saints, and the blood of Christ (Larkin 4). Through the rose, Guinevere is tied to the ultimate example of Biblical femininity, Mary, “herself the rose without thorns” (4). Her association with the Virgin also purifies Guinevere for a nineteenth century audience. Rather than associating Guinevere with sexual sin, namely adultery, Pyle chooses to hold her up as a paragon of ideal femininity. In the text, Guinevere displays ideal femininity by acting the part of an angel, nursing the wounded Arthur back to health, and sacrificing her most precious possession, a box of healing balsam, to do so.

At this moment, when Guinevere is performing her gender role in the most traditional way, Arthur falls in love with her. After she has saved his life, Arthur devotes himself to her from that point forward, saying, “I will forget that I am a king and I will cherish the thought of this lady and will serve her faithfully as a good knight may serve his chosen dame” (Pyle 62). By acting in her prescribed role as a domestic angel, Guinevere readies Arthur for battle and sends him back out into the world to fight King Pellinore. Essentially what the text communicates is that by exhibiting proper femininity, Guinevere enables and even empowers Arthur to participate in proper masculinity. Both medieval knighthood and nineteenth century American masculinity depended on women to validate them: “feminine acts of facilitation, enabling, and mediation



repeatedly manifest themselves as necessary to the project of the quest, the primary vehicle by which knights construct themselves” (Armstrong 38). By validating traditional male identity, Guinevere typifies Pyle’s ideal femininity which is passive, pure, self-sacrificing, and ultimately strengthens the nation as well as the individual by enabling men to perform their active, public role in the world.

### **Femininity and the Threat to the Nation**

Pyle, like many of his contemporaries, imagined destructive femininity as a burgeoning threat to the nation in the nineteenth century. The slow feminization of men in the nineteenth century as well as the increasing presence of women in public life were not only a threat to male identity but also a threat to the nation itself by limiting or impinging upon men’s public lives. While women stayed home to care for the children and do household work, men were free and mobile. They could venture out into the world of business or public office, both important to maintaining the nation. They could also fight for their country, effectively building the nation. However, if women rebelled against traditional gender norms, they left the home unattended and men were forced to become more feminized by taking care of the house and children, leaving the nation without defense. This concern about gender identity was not only part of Pyle’s America but King Arthur’s Camelot.

Arthurian literature of the nineteenth century continually “reflects concerns that a domesticated man was ultimately an emasculated one” (Barczewski 169). Women in the Arthurian tradition represent this threat to masculinity in two major ways. First, women entice men, through sex or romantic love, to abandon their public lives in favor of a domestic one which is both enchanting and imprisoning (167). Second, women subvert gender norms by

flipping the script, acting in characteristically masculine ways that manipulate men into acting in characteristically feminine roles (172). The first threat, an ensnaring domesticity, is represented in the text through the quests of King Arthur. After Arthur is crowned king, he seeks adventure abroad as befits a knight-errant. On his journey, he enters the Valley of Delight and meets three beautiful damsels.

Although the damsels do not present any immediate threat to Arthur's physical safety, their offers of hospitality are perilous in their implications. The chief of these damsels extends an invitation to Arthur which is subtle in its subterfuge, "I prithee be in no such haste to undertake a dangerous adventure, but rather tarry with us for a day or two or three, for to feast and make merry with us" (Pyle 48). After some discussion, Arthur agrees to stay with them and "descend[s] from his war-horse with great gladness" (49). In order to join the domestic sphere which the damsels are offering, Arthur must in effect abandon war by descending from his horse, which Pyle consciously reminds us is a "war-horse" intended for battle.

The picture the damsels present of their beautiful valley and the entertainment their feast can provide is a welcome one to the tired king but it comes with a hidden agenda. Even as the damsels ask him to stay, their demands upon him and his time ever increase: "tarry with us for a day or two or three" (48). In *King Arthur's Enchantresses: Morgan and Her Sisters in Arthurian Tradition*, Carolyne Larrington argues that "the lady" in Arthurian tradition "represents an impossible double bind. On the one hand she is the mirror in which a knight sees his deeds reflected, the surface which reassures him of his own identity. On the other hand she makes demands that cannot easily be met: emotional intimacy, a private sphere which is not easily integrated with the public masculine world of action" (57). Arthur is challenged by this double

bind in the Valley of Delight, an ensnaring domesticity which threatens his quest. However, Arthur is saved from any harm by the kind nature of the damsels who hope to impose upon him. Ultimately, they let him go without a fuss. But on a later adventure with Sir Accalon, Arthur is not so lucky.

After a relational rift over her son's appointment to knighthood forces her out of the kingdom, Morgana le Fay returns to King Arthur's court with a gift to show her loyalty, a beautiful black horse for Arthur's diversion. Quite impressed, Arthur immediately calls for a hunt and ends up lost in the forest with Sir Accalon while chasing a gigantic stag. Having lost all sense of direction, Arthur and Sir Accalon seemingly stumble upon a glorious ship occupied by twelve alluring damsels. The damsels, like those in the Valley of Delight, offer Arthur aid and entertainment:

So they immediately sat themselves down at that table and they ate and drank with great heartiness, and while they did so some of those damsels served them with food, and others held them in pleasant discourse, and others made music upon lutes and citterns for their entertainment. So they feasted and made very merry. (Pyle 185)

After this feast, Arthur and Sir Accalon find themselves excessively drowsy and so they must spend the night on the ship. The damsels conduct Arthur to a sleeping chamber—an act which causes him to marvel—for “he had never beheld a more excellently bedight bed-chamber than the one into which he now entered” (185). But the enchanting paradise which Arthur enters is no more than an illusion, a trick played on him by Morgana to keep him distracted while he becomes her unwitting prisoner.

When Arthur awakes from his sleep, he finds the entire room was nothing but a fantasy invented for his entrapment. Instead of a beautiful room with an enticing bed, he finds himself

“upon a pallet in a very dark and dismal chamber all of stone. And he perceive[s] this chamber was a dungeon” (185). The revelation of the chamber’s true form enables Arthur to see past the enchantment of his hostesses to their true intentions: they have used the domestic sphere to tempt Arthur from his adventure and make him a prisoner. In this way, Pyle’s text warns of the dangers of domesticity to one who would be a true knight. By offering Arthur amusement in the form of music and female company as well as material comforts like food and shelter, these damsels demonstrate to the reader how “excessive male enjoyment of feminine domesticity leads to weakness, loss of masculinity, and impotence, on both an individual and national level” (Barczewski 167). Because Arthur is entrapped by the domestic world of female pleasure, he is imprisoned and later forced to fight a disguised Sir Accalon because of a promise he made to reclaim his freedom. King Arthur kills Sir Accalon unknowingly, resulting in the ultimate form of impotence: death. And so, Pyle displays the treachery of domesticity to his young, male readers and the threat against masculine enterprise through the loss of Sir Accalon, a loss which takes place when the nation, embodied by King Arthur, fights against itself.

### **Vivien and the Fall of the New Adam**

Moving from a discussion of dangerous domesticity, I will now focus on the second threat to masculinity, the subversion of gender norms as seen in Pyle’s depiction of Vivien, starting with a comparison of *The Lady Guinevere* and *Vivien bewitches Merlin*. If Guinevere is symbolically connected to the Madonna, Vivien is surely a medieval Eve. Pyle’s introduction to *The Story of King Arthur and His Knights* orders Pyle’s literary universe. First, there are men, “in ancient days, there lived a very noble King” (1). Uther-Pendragon, Merlin, and Sir Ulfius create an ordered world and reign in peace, not unlike a masculine medieval Eden. Next, women are

introduced through Igraine, Uther's wife, "these daughters (Morgana le Fay and Margaise) the Queen brought with her to the Court of Uther-Pendragon after she had married that puissant King" (1). Immediately after these women are introduced to the all male world of King Uther's court, danger enters the realm in the form of a prophecy of death, once again paralleling Biblical text. Just as Eve brought about the Fall in the Garden of Eden and God spoke a prophecy of death and toil over the sons of men in Genesis 3, women are introduced into the system of chivalry and Merlin prophecies Uther's death and a "very great danger" to Arthur should he remain at court, in the domestic sphere. Arthur is cast out of the medieval Eden until such a time as he is old enough to defend himself.

By setting up his literary world similarly to the Biblical narrative of the Fall, Pyle encourages an interpretation of proper femininity and masculinity in his text and images as being connected to Biblical archetypes. As I mentioned before, Guinevere's illustrated portrait connects her to the chaste and pious Virgin. She demurely glances away from the viewer, allowing for the full potential of the male gaze to be placed upon her objectified body. In comparison, *Vivien bewitches Merlin* (see figure 4) portrays the gender role reversal of Vivien and Merlin caused by Vivien's subversive and dangerous femininity. In the illustration, Vivien kneels before Merlin, holding out a cup of wine mixed with a powerful sleeping potion which she will use to cast an immobilizing spell on him. Merlin is seated at the table laid with goblets and cutlery, waiting to receive the wine from Vivien's hands. On her head, Vivien wears a circlet of gold in the shape of a serpent poised to strike.

While Guinevere passively receives the male gaze in her portrait, Vivien switches gender roles with Merlin by acting as the aggressive pursuer. She reaches forward to give the goblet to

Merlin, putting herself into motion while simultaneously ensuring that Merlin remains seated and inert. Vivien does not avert her eyes from Merlin's glance, but rather, they both fix their gaze on the goblet in her hands. While this may not seem like a significant detail, when considering gender theory and the implications of the male gaze, Vivien is allowed greater subjectivity in this illustration than Guinevere because she acts as a desiring subject instead of a desired object. The wine is the desired object for both Vivien and Merlin. Therefore, they are both granted subjectivity. Vivien may even be seen as having more subjectivity than Merlin since she is the one directing their gaze by placing the object before them and offering it to him. Vivien's pose in the illustration, reaching out to Merlin and pressing the wine firmly into his hands, mirrors her pursuit in her seduction of the sage. Merlin is feminized, receiving her attentions and admiration just as he passively receives the wine. Although Vivien is in the subordinate position, kneeling before Merlin, she is granted male subjectivity while Merlin becomes the object.

While I am not arguing a one-to-one comparison, Vivien as a type of Eve enables Merlin to take on some of the qualities of the New Adam. In some Judeo-Christian traditions, Adam is seen as the first prophet and much like Merlin he is granted special understanding: "Peter claims that when God breathed into Adam, he imbued the first man with the 'Holy Spirit of foreknowledge (*Pseudo-Clementine Homilies* 3.17). As a result, Adam became a true prophet" (Montgomery 702). In this way, Merlin mirrors Adam, not only in his eventual fall, but in his special knowledge. The text tells us Merlin possessed "foreknowledge of things to happen and [a] gift of prophecy" (Pyle 163). This knowledge of things to come is a particularly masculine trait in both Pyle's text and the Biblical creation stories. Certain creation narratives in the Jewish apocrypha and early Christian tradition such as *the Book of Sirach*, *the Words of the Luminaries*,

and *the Pseudo-Phocylides* imply that “God granted knowledge to Adam...[but] since Eve is not mentioned in the extant text [the Sirach], it appears that God gave the knowledge of good and evil to Adam before he created her” (Montgomery 685). So Adam’s knowledge is reserved for him alone and Eve has no part in it. Likewise, Morgana admits to Vivien that Merlin has knowledge that she does not:

Thou must know that Merlin, whom thou hast several times seen at the Court of King Arthur, is the master of all the wisdom that it is possible for anyone to possess in this world. All that I know of magic Merlin hath taught me, and he knoweth many things that he did not teach me, but which he withheld from me. (164)

Merlin is called the master of all wisdom and it is important to note that this is a gendered term. The word master suggests that Merlin’s masculinity is what grants him access to all wisdom, as it is in the creation story with Adam. In both traditions, men possess knowledge which is forbidden to women and the desire for that illicit knowledge results in a fall.

Vivien first approaches Merlin because of her great desire for knowledge as she says to Morgana, “all that thou tellest me [about sorcery] is very wonderful, and I find myself possessed with a vehement desire to attain such knowledge” (165). Significantly, Vivien’s desire for knowledge is linked to a subversive female sexuality. She expresses a “vehement desire” to learn the knowledge only Merlin possesses, and in doing so, she subverts her gender role. It is not for Vivien as a woman to desire but to be desired. She is supposed to be the object while Merlin is meant to be the subject in traditional gender norms. But by expressing her desire for knowledge in sexual terms, Vivien places herself in the position of the male pursuer, “Vivien lusted for the knowledge of necromancy” (175).

Necromancy allowed the practitioner to hold power over the dead and to communicate with them as a way of predicting the future. In the Biblical text, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil gave Adam and Eve the knowledge of death and ultimately resulted in the death of mankind. So here, Vivien's desire to understand necromancy is almost an exact parallel to Eve's desire for the knowledge of good and evil. But in the illustration, Vivien is also linked to the Serpent by the crown she wears. When Merlin teaches Vivien his magic, they take refuge in a forest where the tree branches and roots "appeared like serpents twisted together" (173). The text's allusion to "the archetypal disposition of man, woman, snake and tree...figures [Vivien as] the serpent as well as Eve; rising from the ground, she glides up Merlin's body, locking him in her embrace" (Larrington 152). This image is doubled in the illustration. Just as the snake is poised and ready to strike, Vivien is crouched before Merlin on her knees, creating the same movement of her body as the snake on her head. And her sexual temptation of Merlin results in his fall.

Vivien's subversion of gender roles by expressing and acting on her desire results in Merlin's immobilization. After Merlin drinks the sleeping potion, Vivien places a powerful enchantment on him, "and when she had ended, Merlin could move neither hand nor foot nor even so much as a finger-tip, but was altogether like some great insect that a cunning and beautiful spider had enmeshed in a net-work of fine, strong web" (Pyle 177). Vivien's actions are predatory and masculine. It was the role of the man to hunt or chase the woman of his desire as a predator might stalk its prey. Instead, Vivien holds all the power of movement. She is free while Merlin is imprisoned. Merlin's immobility shows how the reversal of gender roles robs a man of the ability to act, making him weak and impotent. The impotence of Merlin is given final form in



his entombment. He is buried yet alive, trapped and useless to the world outside including Arthur. In King Arthur's court and in the nineteenth century, men were disempowered by the subversive desires of women and their gender identities were destabilized by the rebellion of women against gender roles.

### **The Resurrection of a Feminine or Masculine History**

Fundamentally, the King Arthur myth demonstrates a culture's desire to resurrect history. Megan Morris, in her article "'Recalled to Life': King Arthur's Return and the Body of the Past in Nineteenth-Century England" states that "Arthur's body became a material avatar of Victorian historiographical tradition, which relied upon the revival of the historical body to transmit its moral values to the weakened modern body" (6). Vivien's desire to learn necromancy is linked through Pyle's Biblical allusions to her desire to resurrect a destructive feminine history related to Eve and the Garden of Eden. The Garden was the original perfect kingdom where a patriarchal system created order out of chaos. Camelot was a new Eden, the medieval perfect kingdom, that Vivien hoped to destroy through the entombment and eventual death of the male body. Similarly, Pyle desired to resurrect a redemptive, masculine history through the story of King Arthur in order to recreate the medieval masculinity which Arthur represented into a uniquely American masculinity that would strengthen the nation as a whole.

In the nineteenth century, the necromantic revival of King Arthur focused on folk tradition and "furthermore, these stories' emphasis on popular culture signals an attempt to re-channel history through the lens of local tradition" (Morris 7). This was also true of King Arthur's characterization taking place in the United States. As the Arthurian legend was popularized in the South, boys' organizations based in the Arthurian legend and regionalized to

American traditions began to pop up across the country. One of the most important and influential of these organizations was William Byron Forbush's *Order of Knights* which focused on promoting success in athleticism and character-building (Couch 39). Forbush's *Order of Knights* acted as a precursor to *The Boy Scouts of America* which "elaborated and applied masculine versions of duty" in order to teach young boys how to be good American men. In order to further Americanize the Arthurian revival, Arthur's fellowship and the values he espoused had to be connected more explicitly to a uniquely American figure (39). The Arthurian legend was then tied to the American Pioneer through these boys organizations, namely *The Boy Pioneers of America* (39).

Just as King Arthur was tied to a regional culture focused on local tradition, the Pioneer as a figure of public commemoration in the later half of the nineteenth century was connected to "common people" and frontier community (Bodnar 26). Although the pioneer was not lauded for building the nation in the same way as the Revolutionary, pioneers built the nation by establishing families in their regional communities. And, as such, pioneers were "recognized for the role they had played in preserving traditional values...they were also strongly loyal to vernacular structures such as towns and ethnic communities" (33). As pioneers settled the West, they created towns and communities, and in doing so, they acted in a similar role as medieval knights who established domestic spheres and then went out from them seeking adventure and new territory. Alan Lupak, in conversation with Paul Caron about why Americans are so fascinated by the Arthurian myth, even makes the direct parallel between "the quests of Arthurian romance 'which are often fantastic in nature but which generally pit good versus evil' and 'the setting of the U.S.' with 'pioneers going into the unknown, hoping to overcome some

seemingly insurmountable odds in order to tame the land”(292). Knights also relied on prescribed femininity to safeguard the home while they went out adventuring, mirroring the life of a homesteader who routinely left the security of the domestic in order to find food, trade, or gain land. It is no surprise then that boys’ groups that espoused Arthurian knightly virtues also connected themselves with the figure of the pioneer as with *The Boy Pioneers of America* (Encyclopedia Britannica).

While I will not make the claim that these boys’ organizations were directly influenced by Pyle, I will argue that they functioned in the same way and brought about the same aim: the strengthening of the nation through masculinity founded in Arthurian tradition. Contemporary American psychologist and educator G. Stanley Hall viewed the development of the child as a parallel to “that of the human race” such that the strengthening of morality in the American child was seen as strengthening the weakened nation (Fox-Friedman 83). Pyle’s story, like these boys’ organizations, assumed the historical reality of Arthur in order to function. The authorized, living body of Arthur also empowered those who prescribed to his way of living, “they [King Arthur and Robin Hood] were real men, and this possibility humanizes their mythic masculinities: if they once lived in the past, their achievements can be realized again in the present, inspiring many aficionados of their legends with visions of morally triumphant masculinity” (Pugh 65). Fundamentally, the resurrection of King Arthur in stories and boys’ youth organizations lead to the substantive resurrection of American masculinity in the nation; “Arthur represents the epitome of knightly virtue due to his innate ability to ennoble all mankind” (68).

## Conclusion

Pyle's concern for the American nation was the same as his concern for American art: he feared its eventual impotence. He describes this fear of impotence as directly associated with his social status as a man and his ability to create in his recollections of his childhood attempts at writing:

It was not until I had wet my pencil point in my mouth, and was ready to begin my composition, that I realized that I was not able to read or write. I shall never forget how helpless and impotent I felt. I must have been a very, very little boy at that time, for in those days a boy was sent to school almost as soon as he was old enough to wear trousers. (Segal 3)

Reflecting on his youth and pursuit of masculine virtue, Pyle illustrates that it was not until he had achieved male social status - wearing boys clothes, leaving the domestic sphere for the public space - that he felt himself capable of creative expression (4). Masculinity empowered him to create life, but more importantly to Pyle, it allowed him to create art. For Pyle, illustration was that art form, something new, something completely American. And if he could continue to train students in the school of illustration, American art would not be impotent. A distinct American art form ensured an American culture of vitality, and for Pyle, masculinity was the antidote to the slow feminization of both.

## Chapter 3

### **An American Hero: The Outlaw and the Revolutionary in Paul Creswick's *Robin Hood* and Howard Pyle's *The Merry Adventures of Robin Hood***

#### **Introduction**

In the larger corpus of American adaptations of medieval myths, masculinity operates as the connective tissue. Violence as a necessary function of male identity was a repeated theme in late nineteenth and early twentieth century American Arthuriana. The entire system of chivalry was based on a code of conduct regarding honorable combat as demonstrated by the chivalrous violence in Sidney Lanier's *The Boy's King Arthur* and mirrored in the chivalrous violence of the American South. Proper masculinity, as seen in *The Story of King Arthur and His Knights* by Howard Pyle, was active, public, persistent, and combative. And while Pyle's insistence on a resurrected medieval masculinity was instrumental in nationally Americanizing the Arthurian myth, a different medieval myth and its own form of violent masculinity was at the forefront of the American literary imagination in 1883. *The Merry Adventures of Robin Hood* written by Howard Pyle and published that same year came on the heels of a sudden interest in American banditry brought on by the national celebrity of the famous outlaws Sam Bass, Billy the Kid, and Jesse James and the James gang.

To Americans in the late nineteenth century, Robin Hood was not very far removed from their contemporary culture as evidenced by Theodore Roosevelt's remark that, "there is something very curious in the reproduction here on this continent of essentially the conditions of ballad growth which obtained in medieval England, including, by the way, sympathy for the

outlaw, Jesse James taking the place of Robin Hood” (Steckmesser, 348). In Roosevelt’s words, nineteenth century America was fertile soil on to which the medieval legend could be easily transplanted. Not only did the outlaws of the Old West look like modern day Robin Hoods, but their sheer number across the United States, their cultural influence, and their connection to the medieval past helped to translate the legend from the setting of Merry Old England to the newly industrializing nation.

By reconfiguring the medieval myth to fit contemporary American identity, the characters in the tale began to take new shapes and create new analogies to modern life. Robin Hood was transfigured into a gunslinger, a pioneer, and later, into something of a gangster through his association with Pretty Boy Floyd. The oppressive elites of Robin’s England, like the terrible Sheriff of Nottingham, were given new identities related to industrial changes. Laborers and farmers were configured to the medieval peasantry while knights, lords, and barons were replaced by robber barons and symbols of their despotic power like banks, railroads, and factories.

If the Robin Hood legend began to popularize in America due to a fascination with bandits in the nineteenth century, it surely would have lapsed into obscurity as banditry took a backseat in the American conception of national identity. However, Paul Creswick’s *Robin Hood*, published almost twenty years later (1902), suggests the myth’s staying power in American folklore. To begin with, the unsurpassing celebrity of these American bandits begs the question, why do outlaws have such staying power in the American imagination? I posit that Robin Hood became Americanized over time through his embodiment of the outlaw folk figure in American culture which, in turn, tied him to both the Lawless West and also to the Revolutionary origins of

the nation. In America, the social bandit, a criminal whose actions were considered as social resistance in support of an oppressed group and therefore morally justified, took the form of famous outlaws like Jesse James, Billy the Kid, Sam Bass, Pretty Boy Floyd, and the original American outlaw: the Revolutionary. Robin Hood and these American outlaw iterations were necessary social disruptors of their time, but ultimately fated to die in order that the nation might live because they symbolized both necessary social change and dangerous social disorder. In other words, I believe that Robin Hood and the outlaws of the Old West relied on the archetypal figure of the American imagination—the American Revolutionary—to endure in folklore and legend. In doing so, these figures epitomize the dangerous dance of attraction and repulsion that exists when a country founded on the precepts of violent revolution attempts to create a new government based on law and order.

### **The American Outlaw as Folk Figure**

Outlaws have a long history in America. Even before the nation was founded, outlaws started to shape American identity. In 1676, Nathaniel Bacon led a rebellion against Virginia's royal governor Sir William Berkely over a disagreement about how to handle a land dispute between Indians and colonists in the Potomac Valley (Rice, 728). While modern historians argue the validity of this interpretation, during the nineteenth century Bacon's rebellion was thought of as a precursor to the American Revolution and "one of the most significant events in American history" (726). After the Revolution, outlaws and rebels continued to create political change and gain cultural influence. In 1787, a Revolutionary War veteran named Daniel Shays led a rebellion of thousands of Massachusetts farmers after the government repossessed their lands when the farmers could not repay their debts (Peet, 21). Shays' Rebellion ultimately failed, but the

Whiskey Rebellion and Fries' Rebellion followed swiftly after, forcing issues of economic injustice and unfair taxation to the forefront of political conversations in the fledgling nation (Peet, 32).

In the nineteenth century, John Brown became one of the most famous rebels of the era and is still considered a predominant figure in America race politics today (Parten, 14). Brown led a raid on Harper's Ferry, Virginia on October 16, 1859 in an effort to capture its federal arsenal, distribute the weapons to the enslaved peoples, and stage the largest slave rebellion in American history (Parten, 13). Although Brown's raid ended in disaster and John Brown himself was later executed for his crimes, he became emblematic of the political movement against slavery. Spanning two centuries, these rebels and bandits helped change American politics and craft American identity for years to come.

All this being said, I am aware that none of these men have been characterized as an outlaws in the same vein as Jesse James or Robin Hood. They do not have the association to the Wild West or to the outlaw figure in folk tradition. But in the strictest sense of the word, they were outlaws: individuals who worked outside of established order in order to advocate for oppressed groups or whose actions were viewed by the public as morally justified because they rebelled against those in power. They worked outside the law and were fugitives from the law. Most importantly, they evaded justice in order to fight injustice. In this way, they were as much a part of the outlaw tradition as any gunslinger, Depression era mobster, or Robin Hood ever was.

But it wasn't until the 1870's and 1880's that the concept of the American outlaw came to prominence and a distinctive folk tradition was born out of the Lawless West. In order to contextualize how the American outlaw differed from other folk traditions, I will first address the



concept of the social bandit. The bandit and outlaw hero figures gained prominence in scholarly study due to the work of Eric Hobsbawm who argued that, “the social bandit is a reality that motivates certain forms of political resistance to oppressive regimes within peasant societies” (Seal, 67). Using Hobsbawm’s theories as a foundation, Graham Seal has taken the concept of the social bandit and applied it to what he calls the Robin Hood principle. According to Seal, in folk tradition, a social bandit usually arises during a time of oppression and meets particular categories or qualifications as, “the construction of outlaw heroes involves a number of elements that operate together to provide a recurring framework that effectively sustains and reinforces itself” (69).

Seal’s six qualifications of an outlaw hero are as follows: outlaws evolve out of a specific incident which galvanizes them into action; they are charismatic; they meet a specific narrative framework in folk tradition; they have a moral code; they follow a cultural script; and they have some kind of afterlife in their culture (69). Not only do folk figures like Robin Hood conform to all of these principles, but both literary and historical outlaws around the world correspond to this tradition. In effect, what Hobsbawm and Seal aim to prove in studying the outlaw of folklore is how outlaws develop and why they have such staying power. The answer to these questions seems to be one and the same.

The outlaw figure can arise from “an apparently trivial or unremarkable incident” but “frequently such tensions revolve around ethnicity, nationality, religion, class, caste, or a volatile combination of these factors” (Seal, 71). Likewise, the outlaw hero’s cultural legacy is also tied to the perception of oppression:

From these considerations of the history and mythology of the outlaw hero and the cultural processes involved, it is possible to distill a simple but widely applicable cultural principle: Wherever and whenever significant numbers of people believe they are the victims of inequity, injustice, and oppression, historical and/or fictional outlaw heroes will appear and continue to be celebrated after their deaths. (83)

Early American outlaw figures such as Nathaniel Bacon, Daniel Shays, and John Brown sprang into action after a specific incident which involved oppressed communities facing inequity and have long since become important historical figures because of their representation of and association with these oppressed communities.

As such, the American outlaw meets Seal's criteria for social banditry but adds its own unique cultural influence to the folklore. Richard Meyer configures the American outlaw of folk tradition in relation to Jesse James, Billy the Kid, Sam Bass, and Pretty Boy Floyd. Meyer puts forward twelve elements which characterize the American outlaw hero, many of which correspond to Seal's criteria for social banditry. With that in mind, I will only be presenting the seven unique elements that do not show up in Seal's criteria. In Meyer's definition, the American outlaw hero always meets this formula: he is a man of the people; the "incident" which launches his career is brought about by provocation or persecution; he is seen as righting wrongs even if he is not in actuality performing acts of justice or charity; he is characterized by risk-taking behavior; he is a trickster; he is sustained by the people; and he is brought down by the betrayal of a friend (96). Robin Hood has served as a cultural touchstones in many other studies, including the work of Kent Steckmesser who credits Jesse James, Billy the Kid, and Sam Bass with helping to invent the folk tradition in the United States: "The most familiar characterization of our American outlaws is that they are 'Robin Hoods'...Not only does the Robin Hood legend

have the authority of age, but it is still regarded as the classic formulation of the outlaw tradition” (Steckmesser, 348).

All three of these outlaws were identified with the common people. During Reconstruction, white Southerners thought of themselves as an oppressed group “rankling under both the ignominy of defeat and the forced accommodation to northern economic and social institutions” (Meyer, 97). Sam Bass and Jesse James sided with the Confederates and were seen as fighting against the Yankee invaders every time they flouted the law (97). In folk tradition, Jesse James was even said to have given ex-Confederates back their belongings during robberies because he claimed the James gang “do not rob Confederates” (Meyer, 99). Billy the Kid was credited with standing up for poor farmers in the Lincoln County War and as a protector of Mexicans (98). As men of the people, they did not choose a life of crime but were forced into it by a broken system and their allegiance to the oppressed group they represented. In ballads, Jesse James was provoked into a life of crime when his father was attacked, his mother was jailed, and he himself was beaten, all by Yankee oppressors (Steckmesser, 349). Bass was also persecuted by Northerners and Billy the Kid was believed to have attacked another man in defense of his mother (Meyer, 100).

All three men were said to steal from the rich and give to the poor. These stories often centered around symbols of oppression: they robbed bankers and gave the money to widows, they held up trains and shared their bounty with small farmers, they broke into safes and burned mortgages (Steckmesser, 350). By attacking the institutions which oppressed the people, these outlaws were seen as righting wrongs in society:

They robbed banks and trains, symbols of the forces which kept the common man in economic and social bondage. Homer Croy notes that ‘...times were hard. Banks were unregulated. They ground the people down, and the people hated them, and blamed them for the times.’ (Meyer, 97)

These outlaws were also risk-takers and tricksters. Jesse James famously struck up a conversation with a Pinkerton detective hot on his trail and bought him a drink at a bar before quietly exiting and sending him a postcard a few days later signed, “your friend, Jesse James” (106). Billy the Kid reportedly made a daring escape from law enforcement while completely surrounded by firing two Winchesters and two six shooters in both hands (106). Sam Bass apparently met with a posse that was looking for him, had a few drinks with them in a saloon while chatting about his latest robbery, and then pulled his six shooter, started firing, and escaped without a scratch (107).

In folk tradition, the people supported these outlaws in any way they could. The James gang was said to be a welcome and frequent visitor at many farms across the country (108). Billy the Kid was harbored by Mexicans and remembered as a “laughing, likable boy” (Steckmesser, 351). And all three were believed to be betrayed by their friends: Robert Ford, a member of the James gang, shot Jesse James in the back; Jim Murphy turned on Sam Bass to secure his own release; and Billy the Kid was killed by his childhood friend, Pat Garrett (Meyer, 110).

By conforming to these principles of the American outlaw hero, some of the most famous bandits helped to Americanize the Robin Hood myth by promoting the narrative themselves that they were modern day Robin Hoods, as Jesse James and Pretty Boy Floyd did, or by acting as models of the social bandit figure such that their contemporaries compared them to Robin Hood like Billy the Kid and Sam Bass. Jesse James consciously took up the mantle of the outlaw hero.

His gang was known to encourage the comparison between themselves and the Lincoln green outlaw: “After the robbery of the Kansas City fairgrounds in 1872, a letter from one of the James gang appeared in the Kansas City Times. Signed by Jack Shepherd, Dick Turpin, and Claude Duval, it proclaimed that ‘we rob the rich and give it to the poor.’” (Steckmesser, 350). It was particularly Jesse James’s association with Robin Hood which increased interest in the myth in young audiences:

“The boy deprived of his dime novel must be given something just as daring, just as redolent with sensationalism; but we will transfer his den of thieves from the area way to the broad green forest, and the profession of robbery shall grow into outlawry; his Jesse James become Robin Hood” (MacLeod, 46).

In the 20th century, Pretty Boy Floyd, another famous American outlaw, continued the promotion of the myth in his own criminal career. Pretty Boy Floyd was “keenly aware of the Robin Hood status he was attaining among the home folks and appears to have done his best to actively promote it” (Meyer, 104).

But not all outlaws who were called “Robin Hood” came up with the analogy themselves. In the historical past as well as the scholarship of today, Billy the Kidd, Sam Bass, and Jesse James were and are explicitly linked to the Lincoln green clad bandit. Sam Bass was considered a type of Robin Hood figure by his contemporaries in Texas as many called him “the Texas Robin Hood” or “Robin Hood on a Fast Horse” (“The Story of Sam Bass”). Likewise, Billy the Kid was compared to Robin Hood by his childhood friend, Sophie Poe. While Poe did not believe anyone could “make a hero out of him,” she did proclaim that Billy’s conduct towards the Mexican community had earned him a kind of outlaw hero status among them: “He was good to

Mexicans. He was like Robin Hood; he'd steal from the white people and give to Mexicans” (Meyer, 102). All of these outlaws, from Nathaniel Bacon onward, helped to contribute to the growing social bandit identity in American folklore, and in doing so, carved a place into American culture that the myth of Robin Hood could easily occupy.

### **Robin Hood and the American Outlaw**

In *Robin Hood Slayeth Guy of Gisbourne* (see figure 5), Pyle presents us with an image of the American outlaw which conforms to folk tradition. In the illustration, Robin Hood looks down at the prostrate figure of Guy of Gisbourne while wiping blood from the tip of his blade. A dagger hangs from his waist, pointing down at the body before him, and his empty scabbard is visible behind his legs. Guy of Gisbourne is stretched out on his stomach in front of a tree. The arrows on his back seem to teeter precariously from their quiver and his hand appears to reach for the hilt of his sword which lies underneath his body. Pyle’s rendering of Robin Hood in this scene seems to suggest the righteousness of the act, which is partially supported by a close reading of Pyle’s text. I will address later in this chapter how the text also complicates and questions the justice of Gisbourne’s death, but for now, I will address what the illustration communicates to the viewer.

Like the American outlaw, Robin Hood is a man of the people. He does not wear finery or exhibit outward signs of power and influence, but instead he is dressed in the clothes of a commoner. This is mirrored in the text as well:

Pyle associated Robin with the qualities that he would celebrate more specifically in his later, patriotic works concerning American history and historical personages. For Robin is the hero of the common man, the champion of the down-trodden, the hope of the dispirited. (Cech, 12)

Although Gisbourne's prone body would seem to be rendered passive, the position of Gisbourne's hand—still reaching for the sword—fingers curled to grip the hilt, indicates that even in death Gisbourne is the aggressor. He symbolically clutches at the tool of violence while Robin Hood cleans his weapon, readying to sheath his sword. Likewise, Robin is only able to commit this act of violence by setting aside his scabbard, a symbol of peace. But even as Robin takes up the sword, the scabbard can still clearly be seen behind him, insinuating to the viewer that Robin Hood only uses the sword in order to reestablish order. He looks down at Guy of Gisbourne with a puckered brow, still wrathful over the injustice of Gisbourne's repeated bloodshed. These visual cues hint that Robin's crime was brought on by provocation, an important mark of the American outlaw.

In order to conform to the American social bandit tradition, it is also vital that Robin Hood is seen as righting wrongs by killing Gisbourne. The justice of the act is suggested in many ways. First, the scene is set in the forest. The forest as a symbol of natural order has the power to condone the actions of an outlaw. Jill May suggests that "Pyle's continual use of 'merry' when describing the woods and the outlaws implies more than laughter. It implies a natural system kept in check by a code of honor" (199). The outlaw, both in May's view and in the image of the scene presented by Pyle, is an extension of nature. His actions are founded on natural law rather than a legal system and his moral justification is nature itself. Second, the very position of Gisbourne's body, prone before Robin Hood, suggests the natural relationship of hunter and prey:

The stunning illustration that shows the aftermath of Robin's fight with Guy of Gisbourne supports the claim that this is a morally justified killing. Wiping the bloody blade of his sword on a handful of long grass, Robin does look like he has just relieved

the world of a dangerous animal, the body of which is sprawled before us in the foreground (Cech, 13).

Third, the view of Gisbourne as a dangerous animal is supported in the text. When Guy of Gisbourne first appears before him, Robin describes him in animalistic terms, “he [Gisbourne] pushed the cowl back from his head and showed a knit brow, a hooked nose, and a pair of fierce, restless, black eyes, which altogether made Robin think of a hawk” (Pyle, 285). Even during their battle, Gisbourne is described as “a wounded hawk,” further emphasizing that Robin is not killing a man, but a beast.

Fourth and finally, the text assures the reader that Guy of Gisbourne has committed so many atrocities that his death is justifiable, even necessary. Gisbourne himself confesses that “only two days ago I skewered a man over back of Nottingham Town” and that “I would shed the blood of my own brother for half of two hundred pounds” (286). A self-proclaimed murderer with a passion for money so strong he would kill his own family, Gisbourne has a reputation which follows him wherever he goes. After finding out his name, Robin declares he “knew of this Guy of Gisbourne, and of all the bloody and murderous deeds that he had done in Herefordshire” (286). Later, when Robin Hood decides to kill Gisbourne, his reasoning is based upon the safety of others, “And now look thy last upon the daylight, for the good earth hath been befouled long enough by thee, thou vile beast!” (288). Here again is the repetition of Gisbourne’s beastliness and inhumanity, but rather than simply figuring him as a vicious animal, Pyle actually insinuates that his life “befouled” the rest of mankind. Ultimately, it is Gisbourne’s crimes against the world which legitimize his death.



Though the viewer would not know it from the illustration, Robin Hood also conforms to Meyer's criteria for the American outlaw throughout Pyle's text. Robin is a risk-taker and a trickster, often disguising himself in order to take his enemies unaware at great personal risk as he does by dressing as a butcher to enter the Sheriff of Nottingham's house, and here, by withholding his name from Guy of Gisbourne and entering into an archery contest with him. Throughout the narrative, Robin Hood and his Merry Men are sustained by the love and allegiance of the common people. The prologue states that Robin and his band were "beloved by the country people round about, for no one ever came to jolly Robin for help in time of need and went away again with an empty fist" (6). At the end of both Paul Creswick's and Howard Pyle's stories, Robin Hood is betrayed by a friend and meets an unnatural death as with the outlaws of the Old West. In Pyle's story, Robin is killed by his cousin, the Prioress of Kirklees. In Creswick's version, Robin is bled to death by Marie Monceux, the Sheriff of Nottingham's daughter, who has become Prioress of Kirklees in order to disguise herself and trick Robin into asking for her help. Thus, in both word and image, Robin Hood conforms to the American folk tradition of the outlaw figure and connects to nineteenth century culture as well.

### **Robin Hood and the Revolutionary**

While scholars like Richard Meyer, Graham Seal, and Kent Steckmesser often link Robin Hood and the American outlaws of the Wild West and Great Depression, these scholars neglect to note that the social bandit archetype presents a direct parallel to the American Revolutionary. I would even take it one step further by arguing that the Revolutionary fulfills all of Meyer's criteria for the American outlaw in folk tradition. Such a connection between the outlaw and the

Revolutionary further Americanizes the medieval myth of Robin Hood by explaining why outlaws have had such a substantial impact on the American imagination to begin with and why Robin Hood's prominence in the US did not diminish with the end of the Wild West, but has continued on for decades.

The American Revolution was "a seminal event that created new identities, new borders, and new realities for the British, French, African, and Indigenous inhabitants of North America... the war was foundational in the formation of what became modern American identity" (Morin, 8). Although nineteenth century American identity, especially American outlaw hero identity, may not appear to be tied to the figures of the Revolutionary War, historians suggest that the American Revolutionary identity was not fully formed at the time of the war. Instead, the Revolutionary developed after the conflict as a means of creating the nation's history and identity at a time when it had neither (16). Therefore, the Revolutionary as a retrospective construction of American identity may have actually invented American identity. By demonstrating how the American Revolutionary corresponds to Meyer's outlaw hero, I theorize that the American outlaw is merely an extension of the original American archetype and that Robin Hood can also take on this Revolutionary identity as an outlaw.

The Revolutionary was not merely a man of the people but was actually one of the people. It was the colonists themselves who fought in the war and rebelled against their government, not a representative figure who did their dirty work for them (17). The crime which launched the Revolutionary's outlaw career and started the war was brought about by the provocation of the British government through unjust tax laws (12). This incident, what we now

call the Boston Tea Party, was also deceptive in nature. The colonists famously tried to *trick* the British by disguising themselves as Indians while throwing crates of tea into the Boston harbor, a recurring motif in outlaw folklore: “The bandit hero of the Robin Hood tradition outwits his opponents in a variety of trickster tales, many of which feature the disguise theme” (Steckmesser, 352). Though the Revolutionary was effective as an individual, he was made all the more powerful in a collective. By claiming the American colonies from the British crown, the Revolutionary was seen as righting the wrongs of the British nation towards the colonists (Morin, 12). The Revolutionary took great risks as the colonists were greatly outnumbered, outgunned, and outmatched. But the American people sustained the revolutionary effort by enlisting others to their cause, joining the armed resistance against the British, and writing pamphlets and histories which “shaped national understanding of the war” (17). Like the outlaw, the Revolutionary was also betrayed by a trusted ally and former leader, Benedict Arnold.

So even though the American Revolutionary may not be called an outlaw with the same connotation of the Wild West outlaw, the Revolutionary meets all criteria of the American folk tradition and may even be said to be the origination point of that folk tradition. As a kind of social bandit, the Revolutionary connects Robin Hood to the American tradition of outlawry that shaped American identity through an adherence to the principle of violent resistance against injustice and oppressive systems. This development can be more concretely glimpsed in American adaptations of Robin Hood.

In Pyle’s story, Robin Hood and his band are consigned to Sherwood forest “to escape wrong and oppression” (Pyle, 9). They come to the woods for various reasons, but all have suffered wrongs either systematic or personal:

Some had shot deer in hungry winter time, when they could get no other food...some had been turned out of their inheritance, that their farms might be added to the King's lands in Sherwood Forest; some had been despoiled by a great baron or a rich abbot or a powerful esquire (9).

These reasons for outlawry display the injustice suffered by the common people under the rule of a tyrant - they are dispossessed and despoiled and starved. In this way, Pyle sets the stage for a revolutionary figure, someone to right the wrongs of the abusive system of governance and fight for the people. In his discussion of Robin Hood as a contemporary hero in American film, Richard Stapleford states that "Robin Hood was idealistic, courtly toward his aristocratic Marian, and strived to do nothing less than revolutionize the government" (183). Likewise, in Pyle's adaptation, it is not enough for Robin Hood to simply steal from the rich and give to the poor. Robin Hood must be an agent of change in his society, something that the original English myth did not demand of him.

In revolutionary spirit, Robin Hood and his Merry Men swear an oath after they have banded together in Sherwood Forest:

Then they vowed that even as they themselves had been despoiled they would despoil their oppressors, whether baron, abbot, knight, or squire, and that from each they would take that which had been wrung from the poor by unjust taxes, or land rents, or in wrongful fines; but to the poor folk they would give a helping hand in need and trouble, and would return to them that which had been unjustly taken from them. (Pyle, 9)

It is significant to note that many of the offenses suffered by the poor that Pyle states were also reasons for the American revolt against the British empire. They were taxed unjustly and without representation. New tax laws could also be viewed as "wrongful fines" since the colonists did not agree to the terms of British taxation. The British crown took their lands and allowed soldiers to occupy their homes. Paul Creswick's *Robin Hood* makes the relationship between the

Revolutionary and the outlaw even more clear by contextualizing the medieval myth in the struggle between the Saxons and the Normans.

Creating parallels between the Saxons and the American colonists was not anything new. In his 1774 pamphlet, *A Summary View of the Rights of British North America*, Thomas Jefferson begins the comparison between the struggle between the Saxons and the Normans and the British and the American colonists. Jefferson states that, "America was not conquered by William the Norman...[thus feudal law was never established] Possessions there are undoubtedly of the allodial nature. Our ancestors ... who migrated hither, were farmers, not lawyers" (Brown). Jefferson situates the American Revolution in a longer history of oppression and rebellion in order to establish its credibility and, in a way, its universality. The American colonists take on an association "with the free Saxons, and the British, with the oppressive Normans, who, in Jefferson's view, had profoundly corrupted the purity of Anglo-Saxon law" (Brown). Robin comes from both Norman and Saxon blood. Much like the American colonists, he is torn between two nations. His mother is a Montfichet, Norman and aristocratic. His father is a Fitzooth, Saxon and common.

Interestingly, the connection that both Jefferson and Creswick make to Anglo-Saxon law is what supports Robin Hood's development into an outlaw and revolutionary figure. Kent Steckmesser writes,

In Anglo-Saxon tradition 'law' and 'justice' are assumed to be one and the same. On occasion, however, the two are divorced. The law becomes the tool of a 'gang' which must be overthrown, or it comes to represent a social system in which injustice is the rule. In such situations the outlaw, though technically a criminal, may become a folk hero by serving the higher cause of justice. (348)

In Steckmesser and Jefferson's view, Anglo-Saxon law authorizes revolutionary and outlaw behavior as they are one and the same. The outlaw works outside the law in order to secure justice and the revolutionary works outside established governance to change the law, thereby securing justice. Likewise, Creswick immediately sets up the tension between the Normans and the Saxons as a cause for revolutionary action. While discussing Mistress Fitzooth's brother, the Squire of Sherwood, Mistress Fitzooth says to her husband, "That Montfichet is of Norman blood is sufficient to turn your thoughts of him as sour as old milk" (Creswick, 10). Master Fitzooth, Robin's father, replies, "I am as good as all the Montfichets and De Veres hereabout, dame, for all I am but plain Saxon...and the day may come when they shall know it" (10).

Master Fitzooth's reply to his wife is extremely telling and sets the stage for the action of Robin Hood's life of outlawry. The Normans are invaders who possess land and represent an aristocratic, feudal system. George Montfichet is part of the landed gentry, he owns a hall at Gamewell, and he possesses more wealth, power, and influence than his son-in-law even though Master Fitzooth was born in the country and Montfichet has only taken possession of it (12). Fitzooth represents an egalitarian, democratized version of the Saxons. Even though he is of a lower social position and ignoble bloodline, Fitzooth believes himself to be "as good as" any Norman. Furthermore, he suggests that the Saxons will one day rise up against their Norman overlords and "they shall know" that Saxons are just as good as Normans.

When Robin Hood rebels against the law, he is part of this revolutionary effort. By defying the very symbol of Norman rule, Robin Hood becomes "a defender of Saxons against cruel, usurping Normans" (Barnhouse, 25). Connecting Robin Hood's criminal status to a desire for revolutionary change in the world around him makes him both sympathetic and distinctly

American. Thus, Robin Hood and "his American descendants" —the outlaws of Wild West and the Great Depression—are transformed into "actors in a classic drama, the major theme of which is man's struggle against corruption and injustice" (Steckmesser, 353).

### **Robin Hood as Social Threat**

While the Revolutionary and the outlaw fought against external corruption, the corruption without was a constant threat to stability within. The outlaw folk figure personified the internal struggle against corruption, and at the same time, exhibited the chaos that the living outlaw could wreak on society. Just as King Arthur's death was necessary to allow the king to live again in each new era and resurrect his idyllic past, the outlaw's death was also necessary to the continuance of the nation and the survival of the social system. In the outlaw hero tradition, the two most important elements are the Robin Hood and the Judas principles, for both their "universal application" and "because of what they promise in terms of a sociological and psychological understanding of the forces which inspire and sustain the folklore of outlawry" (Meyer, 115). Richard Meyer identifies them as "subtly and intimately connected" as "the same sociological and psychological ethos which produces the need for a deliverer-hero also of necessity requires his ultimate betrayal and destruction" (115). Robin Hood, as an outlaw, represents both the best of human nature and the possible corruption of that nature, the innocence and youth of the Middle Ages which nineteenth century Americans adored and the chaos and social decay that they feared. Because of his embodiment of the nation's hopes and fears, Robin Hood was perfectly situated to be reborn in nineteenth century America in order to revitalize the nation and then put to death in order to stabilize the nation.

In one of the most famous ballad forms of Robin Hood, the idea of Robin as a social threat and danger to established order is evident. In Martin Parker's *A True Tale of Robin Hood*, Robin is painted as a rebel against government and a countercultural insurrectionist. Parker writes:

We that live in these latter dayes / Of civil government, / If neede be, have a hundred wayes / Such outlawes to prevent. / ...Let us be thankfull for these times / of plenty, truth and peace, / And leave our great and horrid crimes / Least these cause this to cease.  
(Stapleford, 185)

In the ballad, Robin Hood's outlaw identity is a direct contrast to "civil government." In some of his earliest appearances in English literature, Robin Hood is not the lovable, liberator of the poor he later became known as, but a vindictive, devious ruffian who was "unrepentantly arrogant before the law" and a thief who gave nothing of his spoils to anyone (184). I acknowledge that these ballads are English in origination, but as the American Robin Hood came from English roots, I believe these societal fears carried into his adaptation overseas, as evidenced by the work of Howard Pyle.

While Pyle's *Robin Hood* brings about renewed youth in the nation, it also witnesses the corruption of its hero and illustrates his needful death. At the turn of the century, the United States was once again a unified nation. The industrial revolution which brought wealth and prosperity to some also caused the awakening of new national fears regarding immigration, poverty, inequality, labor unrest, and "deepening social misery and class division" due to the boom and bust economy (MacLeod, 44). With these immense changes, there was a growing feeling in the nation that "something had been lost – that an essential vitality had drained away from American life in the course of a century" and that the American character was "sterile and



desiccated” (44). Against this historical backdrop, Pyle penned his *Robin Hood*. His story answered the call for “something youthful and, above all, masculine to halt the decline and restore the American spirit” (44). Correspondingly, Pyle’s Robin Hood was violent and boyish. The qualities of childhood were “just those an industrialized society felt it had lost...They were also the qualities that many artists and writers of the time found in the medieval past” (45). By entering into Robin’s merry band, the reader was vicariously returned to youth and innocence.

But however much Robin Hood revitalized the contemporary reader, his criminality still threatened society. Robin Hood’s shadow appears both in the story of Guy of Gisbourne and in N.C.Wyeth’s illustration, *The Passing of Robin Hood* (see figure 6). As I already mentioned, Pyle seems to initially validate the slaying of Guy of Gisbourne and the accompanying illustration seems to do so as well. But a more careful reading of the text suggests that, in this scene, Robin Hood is best exemplifying the social benefit and social ill of the outlaw figure. In order to kill Guy of Gisbourne and rid the world of his animal cruelty, Robin Hood must transgress the bounds of the American outlaw hero.

To begin with, Robin Hood attacks before Gisbourne provokes him. While it could be argued that Gisbourne’s reputation for brutal bloodshed justified Robin’s attack, American outlaws were clearly bound by a code of self defense (Seal, 74). The text clearly states that “without giving the other [Gisbourne] a chance for speech, he [Robin] flung his bow upon the ground...[and] flashed forth his bright sword in the sunlight” (Pyle, 288). Furthermore, when Robin kills him, Gisbourne is actually unarmed:

Robin leaped forward, and, quick as a flash, struck a back-handed blow beneath the sword arm. Down fell the sword from Guy of Gisbourne’s grasp, and back he staggered

at the stroke, and, ere he could regain himself, Robin's sword passed through and through his body (289)

Robin's actions are both literally and figuratively "back-handed," devious and unchivalrous. Killing an unarmed man, even a monstrous one, is the height of dishonor. This act results in Robin's death and the corruption of his band. Having crossed the line from outlaw hero to confirmed criminal, Robin's violent confrontations only escalate hereafter, and as leader of his merry band, Robin ultimately contaminates his own men by submitting to his shadow self.

In the epilogue, Robin leads his men into a bloody fight with the Sheriff of Nottingham where, instead of being "peaceful as of old," Robin attacks the Sheriff's men (322). Robin's corruption is then transferred to his followers as they share in his guilt. After the battle, Robin grows sick. John Cech actually argues that the murder of Guy of Gisbourne and the attack on the Sheriff's men "leads Robin to his fateful and fatal appointment at the nunnery. One leaves Pyle's version with the feeling that Robin, rather than the Prioress, is the actual agent of his own undoing" (13). Likewise in Creswick's version of Robin's death, Little John and Will Stutely are so panicked by Robin's illness that when they find the man they believe is responsible for Robin's declining health, they "killed him instantly, in their blind rage, only to discover then that he was but yeomen, and not him whom they sought" (Creswick, 360). Yeomen were the common people that Robin and his band fought to help. By killing this unnamed yeomen, Pyle emphasizes how the corruption of the outlaw can lead them to go against the very reason for their existence in society: the oppressed community they represent.

Robin Hood's shadow, his dual nature, demands that he be killed in order to save the nation from anarchy and the oppressed community from corruption. In *The Passing of Robin*

*Hood* by N.C. Wyeth, the illustration seems to subliminally communicate the nature of the Jungian shadow and the threat that the living outlaw represents to society. In the image, Robin lies in bed, close to death. The illustration depicts harsh darkness and pure light in the figures of Robin Hood and his men. Robin is all clad in white and covered in a bright white blanket. He sits at the axis of shadow and light holding his bow. A perpendicular line cuts through Robin's body, half in the sunlight from the open window and half in shade. Little John sits behind Robin, holding him up. His face and figure are cast in so much darkness that he is difficult to discern from the shadow. Behind Little John and Robin Hood is Will Stutely, creating a parallel to their composition. Stutely looks down in the same attitude as Little John even as Stutely's own shadow seems to be gazing forward much like Robin Hood does. The composition of the figures imitates the lines of Robin's strung bow. The horizontal line of the arrow mimics Robin's bedridden body while the vertical line of the bow is echoed in the two figures of the outlaws behind Robin.

The image seems to deal with the dichotomy of light and dark, perhaps even good and evil. Clothed in white, Robin still seems to have the moral high ground and an association with the light, but he is teetering on the edge. He, like the outlaw and revolutionary figures, walks the line between light and dark as symbolized by the line between sunlight and shadow which divides his torso. This line may even suggest that if Robin Hood were to live on, he might one day cross that line into the darkness. I argue that this reading of the image is reinforced by the presence of Little John and Will Stutely. These two figures still wear the garb of outlaws and while Robin remains in the light, they are quite literally forced into the shadows. They represent the literal and moral darkness in the image, the darkness that Robin could at any moment fall

back into. In the story, as N.C. Wyeth would have known while painting this image, Little John and Will Stutely have just committed the murder of the yeomen. While Will Stutely has a shadow which can be easily glimpsed in the illustration, neither Robin Hood or Little John are shown to have a shadow. In a sense, Little John functions in this image as Robin's shadow.

Compositionally, Little John sits behind Robin and his figure is cast in such darkness that Will Stutely's shadow on the wall seems to be attached to Little John or even originating from Little John. Likewise, the doubling of the two figures within the composition, Robin and Little John, Will Stutely and the shadow, subconsciously crafts the comparison between Little John and the shadow on the wall. The dark deeds which Little John and Stutely have just committed symbolically and actually represent the shadow in this painting. As the composition of Robin Hood, Will Stutely, and Little John reflect the lines of Robin's bow, so too is the outlaw figure a loaded weapon ready to fire. Though I do not think Wyeth intended for this image to be consciously threatening, I do believe he may have been subconsciously influenced by late nineteenth century and early twentieth century thought about the dangers of the outlaw into creating a piece which holds the potential for the outlaw's social good and social evil taut as a bowstring. Robin Hood's death ensures that his dangerous criminality does not destroy the innocence of the medieval world through anarchy and violent revolution. The demise of this threat is mirrored in America in the death of the social bandit, whose ending ultimately gives the nation a sense of order and stability. Likewise, the encroaching darkness in the Wyeth's composition is eternally held at bay by Robin's imminent passing.

### **Conclusion: Robin Hood, King Arthur, and The Reassertion of White Supremacy**

Although seemingly different, the outlaw and the knight were very similar in what they represented to nineteenth and early twentieth century culture. The Medieval Revival was a reaction against the nineteenth century's "fearfulness of radical change" (Chandler, 3). As industrialization and Reconstruction altered the boundaries of class, race, and even gender roles, those in power felt that power being attacked from all sides. The nineteenth century fascination with violence "reflected the fear that native-born, white, middle- and upper-class Americans had gone soft: that they had lost their mettle and so might lose their place to immigrants from southern and eastern Europe, Japan, and China" (MacLeod, 47). Not unlike some extremist groups today, white American men felt themselves to be an oppressed group.

White southerners felt persecuted by the burgeoning rights of Black Americans, especially Black American men. Later in the century, white American men felt threatened by femininity and the expanding role of women in the public sphere. All of these changes resulted in fear of the loss of identity for white American men: "The oppressed group often has a fear - not necessarily made explicit - that its sense of identity, as coded into its traditions, customs, and worldview, is being outraged, ignored or otherwise threatened" (Seal, 70). And when white American men felt themselves oppressed and in danger of losing their privilege, they turned to the heroes of old to act as their champions. The outlaw and the knight represented different, but often overlapping methods of establishing law and order, one primarily worked outside of established societal systems and one primarily brought about change from within established societal systems. The rebirth of King Arthur and Robin Hood in American culture reflects the idea that "when no real-life character exists a mythical outlaw hero may suffice" (74). Although King Arthur is not himself an outlaw and he and Robin Hood appear to be at opposite ends of the

spectrum, they both embody outlaw hero characteristics which make them prime symbolic heroes for white American men.

In the formation of both the knight and the outlaw, there is already a close parallel. Similar to the chivalrous violence of medieval knighthood, the American outlaw was brought to life by an incident which usually involved the dishonor of a female relative or friend which resulted in a violent confrontation. As Meyer states, the provocation for the outlaw's initial crime is "most often...manifested in the physical abuse of a close member of the hero's family, usually a female such as a wife, sister or mother" (99). The outlaw in folk tradition, like Robin Hood, usually came from noble birth, wealth, and class distinction, but left it all behind to become a bandit and a friend of his people. This trope is inverted in the Arthurian tradition, as Arthur was raised outside of the castle, had no knowledge of his own nobility, but through the quality of his character rose to aristocratic authority. Arthur's humble beginnings qualify him to be considered a friend to his people in the same way as the outlaw hero as he takes his formative experiences as an ordinary man into the court with him to advocate for the common people.

And although it may not be initially apparent, King Arthur fulfills many of the criteria for the American outlaw. Because Arthur is king, it is unavoidable that he is associated with the law, but despite this many writers envisioned him as a man of the people despite his aristocracy. As a knight, he never took up arms against a foe unless he was provoked or asked to so do by a lady as a favor. Arthur's primary function as both king and knight was to right the wrongs done in his kingdom and act with charity. He was a great risk-taker, as were all knights who relied on chance to find adventure and willingly gambled their bodies in physical contest. Arthur was also a trickster. In Pyle's *The Story of King Arthur and His Knights*, Arthur spends much of the tale

disguised as a garden boy in order to prove himself to Guinevere and confront a treacherous king. Additionally, in Lanier's text, he is proven to be sustained by the people when he is actually crowned by the entreaty of the peasantry. And in all versions of the myth, King Arthur is betrayed or killed by someone close to him. Lancelot betrays him with Guinevere. Mordred, his own son, kills him. In these ways, Arthur conforms to Richard Meyer's criteria for the American outlaw hero. As king, however, Arthur can never completely conform to the outlaw tradition, but it is still important that scholars do not ignore the ways in which his narrative fits within the conception of the American outlaw hero.

As evidenced by the preoccupation with race in Lanier's *The Boy's King Arthur*, American society was ruminating on the threat of racial corruption. As an outlaw, Robin Hood was also connected to the idea of the half-blood and represented America's preoccupation with and intense concern over race at the time. The half-blood in nineteenth century literature symbolized both white American identity and Native American threat, civilization and wilderness (Scheik, 82). Over time, the half-blood came to represent, not only a concern about the Indian race but the black race in America as well (84). As the half-blood trope continued to evolve in the nineteenth century, authors like James Fenimore Cooper substituted "a half-blood in spirit for the half-blood in fact by creating a white character of untainted blood who achieved his identity from a half-blood-like existence and who spiritually or figuratively joined the virtues of the two races in his manner of life" (83). Over time, the half-blood character became "a Frontier Robin Hood," embodying both the virtues of the white race and the corruption of the *lesser* races (88). Robin Hood himself is a half-blood character as he clearly has untainted,

aristocratic blood, but he decides to live a half-blood existence in Sherwood Forest and in doing so symbolizes both social health and social ill (88).

The death of the outlaw could also be seen as the subtle reassertion of white supremacy that figured predominantly in Lanier's text. In nineteenth century fiction, the half-blood almost always died, either symbolically or actually, reaffirming in the minds of white Americans that "an ailing [or disappearing] minority" was no longer a threat to the race and the nation (87). By combining both Native Americans and African Americans in the symbol of the half-blood, nineteenth century fiction demonstrates both a growing racial terror as well as a desire to eliminate the troubling minority in order to reify a white American legacy in the past and present, and ensure its future (87). Just as Robin Hood revitalized the sterile nineteenth century, the half-blood enabled the "primal energies of nature" to become "available to civilization," keeping white society alive "both physically on the frontier and spiritually or vicariously in fiction" (89). The half-blood reinvigorated "American society's sense of self" (89) But ultimately, the half-blood like the outlaw needed to be killed in order to save the nation from his corruption. The half-blood was a social evil related to an "unnatural species engendered by abhorrent miscegenation and threaten[ed] the purity and the preservation of white civilization" (82). At the most essential level, the outlaw as exemplified by Robin Hood and the chivalrous knight as exemplified by King Arthur are both attempts to restore a social order that was increasingly threatened by resurrecting a medieval past which continued to oppress the weak and marginalized while handing power back to the elites.



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