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KING ARTHUR AND THE KNIGHTS OF THE ROUND TABLE — A NEVER- ENDING STORY

by SUSAN J. FOULKES

We are heirs to a rich cultural heritage of myth and legend. Do we fully appreciate and explore these in schools? What use is made, for example, of the Mabinogion from Wales, of Beowulf from England or the Matter of Britain, that is, the stories of King Arthur? There are many valid reasons for introducing children to myth and legend. These have been described by numerous authors but most have concentrated on the influential Greek myths. I should like to redress the balance in favour of Britain's myth and discuss its importance.

The stories of Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table have been described by Elizabeth Cook as 'the last mythology that has come to birth in Europe'.¹ The large number of recently published adult novels retelling these tales attest to the continuing fascination that the myth exerts for older readers, but there is no comparable surge of interest in producing books or other materials for children.

Today, as in my own schooling, early British history begins with the Romans and continues through the Saxons, Vikings and Normans without a break, although there are indications in the National Curriculum that 'a truly British history syllabus' will be introduced. It was not until I left school and read Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History of the Kings of Britain* that I began to wonder what had really happened in the Dark Ages. John Morris's excellent series of books on the *Age of Arthur*² had not yet been published so my search was a roundabout one, for I found that I could not resist exploring the byways as well as the highways; following the history of the myth and its manifestations throughout history as well as visiting sites, art galleries, reading poems, plays, novels — anything in fact, connected to the story — and it has proved to be 'a beguilingly beautiful labyrinth' to explore.

THE USE OF ENGLISH

Jane Yolen in an inspiring article, identified four functions of myth in the education of the child: it provides a landscape of allusion, a knowledge of ancestral culture, an adaptable tool of therapy and a model of belief.³ All four functions can be illustrated by reference to the Arthurian Myth, clarifying the reasons why these stories should be introduced to children.

A Landscape of Allusion

At its simplest level, a knowledge of the myth can tune us in to its echoes and resonances in art, literature and music. The stories of King Arthur are a fertile source. This source was given a major impetus by Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History of the Kings of Britain*:

As romanticized history, as an inspiration for poetry, drama and romantic fiction down the centuries, it has had few if any equals in the whole history of European literature.⁴

The romance of Tristan and Isolde has inspired storytellers and artists throughout the ages, most notably Wagner. Tennyson loved Malory's books and he wrote the epic 'Idylls of the King' and other poems in the Arthurian vein. In turn, this restatement of the myth motivated the Pre-Raphaelites, particularly William Morris and Burne-Jones.

If we know the original stories and their characters it helps us to appreciate and identify adaptations and themes when they occur. If we know the original Merlin, then we can more fully appreciate his alter egos in Dr Who and in Tolkien's Gandalf. As Nicolai Tolstoy has indicated:

Like Merlin, Gandalf is a wizard of infinite power and wisdom. Like Merlin, he has a sense of humour by turns impish and sarcastic. Like Merlin, he reappears at intervals seemingly from nowhere to rescue an imperilled cosmos.⁵

The recent Dr Who series has made the links between the characters of Merlin and Dr Who explicit.

A Knowledge of Ancestral Culture

The myths that shape a culture provide a way of looking at that culture through the eyes of the people. Myth also gives a view of the people who formed and told the stories. Interest in the Arthurian myth has often seemed to peak at times of uncertainty, perhaps because people crave security in the form of an ideal on which to fix their future or a golden age on which to look back. *The History of the Kings of Britain* was published during the turbulent reign of King Stephen. Caxton published Malory's version a few weeks before Richard III was killed at Bosworth.

However, the Arthurian Myth has been used for many purposes — for Geoffrey of Monmouth, the inspiration was a patriotic one, to show the British that they should be proud of their past. The myth has often been

appropriated to underpin claims of kingship or of right. The prophecies of Merlin in the fifteenth century were utilised to support both the causes of York and of Lancaster. Henry VIII used the Arthurian legend of the Empire of Arthur as one justification of his break with Rome and Elizabeth I, at the promptings of Dr Dee, used the same argument to support expansionist policies in Ireland.

It has also given us the name of our country. When James I came to power the House of Commons wished to preserve the separate names of England and Scotland. However, James insisted that the united countries should be called Britain, because being King of the whole island, he wished to be King of Britain as Arthur had been.

A knowledge of the myth can also lead, as it did for me, to a consideration of the 'real' history of the Dark Ages, an undeservedly neglected area of study. In the words of John Morris:

There is just enough to show that Arthur existed, and was honoured in the next few generations as the greatest general and ruler of the recent past; just enough to show that in Britain he subdued the Germans who elsewhere mastered Europe, that the prestige of his victory and the force of his character maintained for two decades a strong government against impossible odds among the ruins of Roman Britain. He left a golden legend and rescued a corner of the Roman world from barbarian rule for a short space.

And, William of Malmesbury, a Norman historian, wrote:

This is that Arthur of whom modern Welsh fancy raves. Yet he plainly deserves to be remembered in genuine history rather in the oblivion of silly fairy tales for he long preserved his dying country.

An interesting comment, for the Normans arrived at the Battle of Hastings led by their bard, Tallifer, who sang the Song of Roland (part of the Matter of France) to inspire the men to battle, yet it was the Normans who adopted and then spread the stories of King Arthur around the known world. One surprising legacy of this can be discovered in the Straits of Messina, off the coast of Sicily. Here the beauty of the Calabrian coast is often strangely magnified and distorted in hot weather by the mirage called the Fata Morgana, after the deceiving enchantress Morgan le Fay, Arthur's half-sister.

By the Middle Ages Arthur had become one of the Nine Worthies of the World. His fame was given dramatically tangible expression in a more than life-sized bronze statue, one of 28 which adorn the mausoleum of the Holy Roman Emperor, Maximilian I in Innsbruck.

Interest in the Arthurian Myth has been sustained, not just as the 'consolation of the colonized' a remark with which Fred Inglis⁶ dismissed the stories, but also as an ideal to which groups of people could aspire. If we

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have not encountered the stories, how can we appreciate the reasons why successive generations have tapped into their power?

A Tool of Therapy

Stories help children to reflect on how they feel and to appreciate that they are not alone, that other people have the same sort of feelings. They also help children to reflect on how they behave and how the way they behave affects other people. Myth and legend can serve these purposes as well as fiction.

The psychologist Jung studied myths in depth. In his view, myths are a demonstration of how people experience life and are a fundamental expression of human nature. They give form to unconscious processes and their retelling causes these processes to come alive again. Jung stated that myths need to be clothed anew in every age if they are not to lose their therapeutic effect. When people lose the capacity for myth-making, they lose connection with the creative forces of their being.

At the age of nine, John Steinbeck discovered the magic of Malory and in the introduction to his retelling of the tales, he reflected that

In pain or sorrow, or confusion, I went back to my magic book. Children are violent and cruel — and good — and I was all of these — and all of these were in the secret book. If I could not choose my way at the crossroads of love and loyalty, neither could Lancelot. I could understand the darkness of Mordred because he was in me too; and there was some Galahad in me, but perhaps not enough. The Grail feeling was there, however, deep-planted, and perhaps always will be.⁷

A Model for Belief

In terms of the Arthurian myth, a model of belief is a more difficult concept to illustrate.

Certainly, the Arthurian idea of chivalry came to the fore in the Middle Ages and with it the notion that rank and power carry with them certain obligations. It became, on one level, a myth about human society — about what can be achieved by a unifying idea and as such, it can work powerfully, as Carol Young described:

One twentieth century administration, John F. Kennedy's, freely appropriated the whole of the Camelot rhetoric to explain its vision of the future.⁸

It can also work at an individual level as Steinbeck (1976) explained:

I think my sense of right and wrong, my feeling of noblesse oblige and any thought I may have against the oppressor and for the oppressed, came from that secret book.

The story of the Quest for the Holy Grail gave expression to a religious feeling which involved a personal mystical quest. It was taken to new

heights of dignity with Wagner's Parsifal, which he described as a consequential opera. At another level, the myth was given more popularised expression in the recent film *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*.

To conclude: A Never-Ending Story

A recent article about Wagner by Peter Conrad started thus: 'A myth is, by definition, a never-ending story: a story which can't be told too often because every time it is repeated, it seems to mean something new.'⁹

David Hargreaves argued recently that for myths to be abandoned as part of the education of children is dehumanising and that although younger children are introduced to myths they are not treated seriously with older pupils.¹⁰ It may be valuable to review the resources available for teachers, both in terms of the retellings of the original tales for children and the main early sources which would be worthwhile for background information for teachers and for use with older pupils.

Arthurian stories written for a child audience originated in Victorian times and although inspired by and based on Malory's version, they were bowdlerized and usually placed a great emphasis on moral values. Howard Pyle's books published at the beginning of this century — *The Story of King Arthur and His Knights* and the *Story of the Champions of the Round Table* are still available in reprint and show Arthur and his Knights as perfect examples of courage and humility. Alfred Pollard abridged Malory in *The Romance of King Arthur and His Knights of the Round Table*, first published in 1917, and richly illustrated by Arthur Rackham. Roger Lancelyn Green's retelling has been a favourite for nearly forty years, justly so, both for the quality of the writing and the lovely woodcut illustrations. Rosemary Sutcliffe has turned her considerable talent to the Arthurian tales with her admirable series of books. A useful stepping-stone for children over 12 from these modern retellings to Malory's original version is *King Arthur of Britain* by Brian Kennedy Cook.

There are many source books readily available to the interested reader. Here I have tried to list them in the approximate order in which they were first redacted or composed. The *Marbinogion*, a collection of medieval Welsh prose tales contains stories of Arthur which cast him in a less than heroic mould — remains of an oral tradition separate from that of England and France.

Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History of the Kings of Britain* written about 1135, covers about two thousand years of 'history' but only about half the material is related directly to Arthur.

However, Wace, from Jersey wrote an enlarged version of the Arthurian part of Geoffrey's History in French verse around 1155 and was the first

author to mention the Round Table. Wace influenced Chretien de Troyes whose *Arthurian Romances* (compiled circa 1170) dealt with the romantic adventures of the knights of King Arthur rather than with stories of Arthur himself. Beroul's *Romance of Tristan* was also composed at this time and is perhaps the earliest version of this legend in existence.

In 1190, Layamon, from Worcestershire, expanded Wace's version into English verse, utilising a wide range of sources so that his account is highly individual. The development of the stories and the main characters from Geoffrey to Wace and then Layamon is particularly interesting.

Lancelot of the Lake, a French prose story written in the early thirteenth century, develops the story of Lancelot and Guinevere. Wolfram von Eschenbach wrote *Parzival* circa 1200, the story of Parzival's Grail quest. It was this version on which Richard Wagner based his opera. Gottfried von Strassbourg's *Tristan*, written about 1210, recounts the tale of the tragic love story of Tristan and Isolde. The *Quest for the Holy Grail* appeared in about 1255, a spiritual fable rather than a romance. In Chaucer's time, the alliterative poem *Sir Gawaine and the Green Knight* was composed by an unknown author.

In the fifteenth century, two poems dealing with *King Arthur's death* were composed in Britain. The first was written by Robert Thornton of Yorkshire, an epic poem which ends in tragedy and the second, from the north-west Midlands, is an extended tragic ballad.

Finally a major source of much of the later re-tellings of the myth is Thomas Malory's *Morte de Arthur*. W. Barron notes that

Malory acknowledges in a form approaching the self-consciousness of the modern novel, the power of idealism to make men aspire beyond their human limitations and the social reality of an age whose nostalgia was mingled with a sense of tragic loss.¹¹

Arthur has been around for fifteen hundred years and still the story goes on being told. Each generation seems to have devised a version, or an interpretation, relevant for their own time. Children need access to this important part of their cultural heritage and it is we, as teachers, parents, authors, who can open the door to this landscape of myth which has so many points of reference to our own time.

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