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FYS: Fairy Tales

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4/29/2024

An Era of Enchantment

The Arthurian Revival as a means of cultural influence in Victorian England

I. Introduction

The Victorian era catalyzed societal transformations in Great Britain under Queen Victoria's monarchical power. This period experienced rapid industrial growth, strict social structures and poised cultural demeanors all while experiencing abrupt political changes. As the crown sought to cultivate popular faith in the power of monarchical rule, the revival of the legends of King Arthur, adapted as children's fairy tales, served as a means of garnering the public's pride and belief in the monarchy. This essay will examine one of the most widely disseminated retellings in children's literature, Strachey's 1897 adaptation of Mallory's *Le Morte D'Arthur* (1485), in order to provide examples of the texts glorification of monarchical elements, particularly via his duality of his perfect warfare capabilities and his empathy as well as the idealization of becoming a knight.

II. Historical Context

Fairy tales seem deceptively simple, but carry significant influence as a storytelling medium. Subtle messages are scripted into the personae, allowing them to be utilized as both methods of moral education, instruments of propaganda, and harsh societal criticisms. During the Victorian Era, fairy tales critiqued and subverted certain political movements while glorifying others, extending the boundaries of fantasy into dynamic societal tools (Smith, 8). In 1789, a

pivotal moment occurred when the French people conducted a violent revolution overthrowing Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette's abusive monarchy and advocating for the strength of the people (Smith, 5). This brutal societal reform caused the elite and noble classes in Great Britain to worry in regards to the safety of their positions. Fearing that a similar hierarchical coup d'etat would occur in Great Britain, they inspired the Arthurian Revival, which strongly advocated for a monarchical system, as the monarch's duty was to "protect the possessions of opulence, the fruits of industry, and the personal safety of all" (Smith, 6). King Arthur was seen as a statute of opulence and exquisiteness that aligned with the Victorian ideals, serving as a form of nationalism and establishing him as an emblematic English hero, epitomizing ideals that resonated with the public, titled the "fabulous king of Britain" (Bryden, 1).

Fairy tales were powerful opuses that educate and diffuse concepts of morality and Victorian expectations to children, in order to serve as a source of patriotic pride during the Victorian Era. The wild stories offered entertainment as well as valuable lessons about virtues and vices. Using vivid narratives and engaging characters, these stories illustrated the consequences of choices, distinguishing between right and wrong in simple ways that anybody can understand and internalize. They are rich in symbolism and feature archetypal characters and scenarios that are instantly recognizable, addressing universal themes of love, betrayal and justice. By presenting moral dilemmas and resolutions, fairy tales instill core values most notably in children, guiding their development into morally conscious individuals (Tatar, xviii). The most monumental aspect of the Victorian Era were the virtues of society that rose in the midst of the cultural clutter. Dominated by a sense of duty, propriety, and a strong moral compass, Victorian virtues were seen as necessary for maintaining the social order. Key virtues included modesty, self-restraint, honor, bravery, diligence, and a commitment to family. The values rooted in

morality were "constituted by features such as personal and social standards of conduct, ethics, honesty and justice" (Turchenko, 355). These virtues, all promoted by Queen Victoria herself, were deemed essential for the stability and prosperity of the nation and upholding of Great Britain's classes (Said socio-economic sectors were divided into royalty, upper class, middle class and the lower class). The ethical framework of the Victorian times deeply set standards for behavior that defined the era's social fabric. As expressed in a notable reflection on the period "The Victorian Age formed the basis of ethics, which became the code of conduct of the 'true' Englishman, a true gentleman" (Turchenko, 355). In order to imprint these values into society and create a feeling of national pride, the artworks revived the series of Arthurian legends. King Arthur himself pervasively appeared in many forms of art such paintings, novels, furniture, poetry and fairy tales. He was seen as a figurative symbol of reformation in order to untwine Great Britain from "the perils of social, political, cultural and economic strains" (Smith, 8).

III.   The Arthurian Revival

The Victorian Era revived the Arthurian legends in order to garner appreciation and support for a monarchical system. King Arthur the brave christian represented moral order. In 1485, Sir Thomas Malory would write *Le Morte d'Arthur*, a work that portrayed King Arthur as a just and majestic leader surrounded by his loyal and chivalrous knights. It catalyzed Arthur's nineteenth century revival by layering him with an unprecedented coherence and majesty (Bryden, 13). This opus greatly contributed to the revival of King Arthur in literature, indicating that he would return to Great Britain when he is most in need, in this case during a time of delirium and political uprising. Sir Thomas Malory characterized the knights to serve as pillars of masculinity full of strength and purity. This influential piece of writing was first printed by William Caxton at Westminster. Only two copies exist and are folio, black lettered, and carry

wide margins. This work of art was fully written in medieval english. Edward Strachey would then republish Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur* in modern English during the year 1897. Strachey interpretation recounted all events of King Arthur's journeys, as well as Sir Thomas Malory's style and characteristic writing choices (Parins, Chapter 28[1]).

In Chapter 3, Book 3 of Edward Strachey's translation of Sir Thomas Malory's original text, a poor man comes into King Arthur's court along with a young man to where he salutes the king and states "O king Arthur, the flower of all knights and kings, I beseech Jesu save thee" (Strachey, 65). King Arthur is represented as an absolute power of everything around him with capabilities of strength and compassion for others. He is illustrated as "the flower of all knights and kings," a rich metaphor that glorifies monarchy by elevating Arthur above other monarchs and knights, both in virtue and in authority. The use of "flower" depicts a sense of perfection and beauty, portraying Arthur as the epitome of kingly ideals. Flowers are often associated with the idea of blooming, implying that Arthur's abilities to rise above challenges. The poor man, named Aries the cowherd, then begs King Arthur to make his son Tor a knight, and that it would be his most significant inquiry. Arthur decides to knight Tor and solemnly holds him to code. This scene demonstrates how the honorous act of becoming a knight is a favorable action to make. Arthur supplies protection and care for his new knight, a servant of the single ruled kingdom. This act of knighting is an extension of his right to rule as it reinforces the social hierarchy placed under monarchy. Said ritual is also a cultural moment that reaffirms the values and ideals of the society during the Victorian Era regarding courage and justice. Arthur not only elevates an individual's status within the society but also underscores the hierarchical structure that is central to maintaining order and governance in a feudal system. The king is the pinnacle of this hierarchy, and his ability to adorn titles is a key aspect of monarchical power.

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[1] Parins' digital text does not include page numbers.

This glorification of monarchy continues in *Le Morte D'Arthur* by accentuating King Arthur's ability to handle war and devise military strategies. In Chapter VIII of Book V, King Arthur and his noble knights had won the field and brought their prisoners to Paris. Arthur speaks to his enemy, Lucius, stating "I advise thee to withdraw thee: what doest thou here? Thou shall win nothing in these marches but great strokes" (Strachey, 105). Arthur demonstrates a wise attitude, reflecting a deeper understanding of the costs of war. His ability to foresee the futile losses that would result from further conflict demonstrates a leadership style that values human life and seeks to avoid unnecessary bloodshed. This trait is celebrated in a monarch, indicating a ruler who governs with foresight and compassion. Giving an opponent the advice to flee rather than risk defeat is an example of the kindness and generosity that characterize a monarchy that has been exalted. Such deeds promote the idea of the monarch as a merciful hierarchical figure, portraying him as more than just a fighter but as a protector of his people and even his enemies. King Arthur is a symbol used to glorify monarchy during the Victorian Era in order to embody the idea of leadership and liberty as well as symbolize foundation (Smith, 12).

Having explored the nuanced portrayals of King Arthur's wise and benevolent rulership in *Le Morte d'Arthur*, the themes of glorified monarchy are sharply encapsulated in the painting *The Last Sleep of Arthur*, further enriching Arthurian symbolism and its impact on the perception of kingship during the Victorian Era. The painting is an oil on canvas from Edward Burne-Jones painted between the years of 1881 to 1898, and is notable for its grand scale (approximately 2.79 by 6.6 meters), which allowed Edward Burne-Jones to employ a detailed and expressive use of color and composition. The central figure of Arthur is depicted with a serene expression, lying down with his head resting on the lap of his sister, Queen Morgan le Fay, symbolizing his purity. The use of soft, ethereal light imbues the scene with a sense of peace and serenity, while the

surrounding characters, dressed in richly detailed garments, enhance the calming nature of the scene. The soft pastels and detailed garden reflect the Victorian love for medieval aesthetics. Arthur is in the absolute center of the piece, accentuating his importance and the alignment of Victorian ideals due to his hierarchy and order. *The Last Sleep of Arthur* glorifies monarchy through the portrayal of Arthur's eternal kingship. Arthur is shown not as dead but sleeping, implying that his rule is not truly ended. This represents the monarchy with a sense of timelessness and resilience, implying that the king, and by extension his sovereignty, is immortal and enduring. The idea of the king awaiting a time of need to return and restore order elevates the concept of monarchy beyond mere mortal leadership to one that lives after death. The painting thus becomes a powerful allegory for the timeless and cyclical nature of just leadership, which reassures the audience of a perpetual guardian watching over the realm.
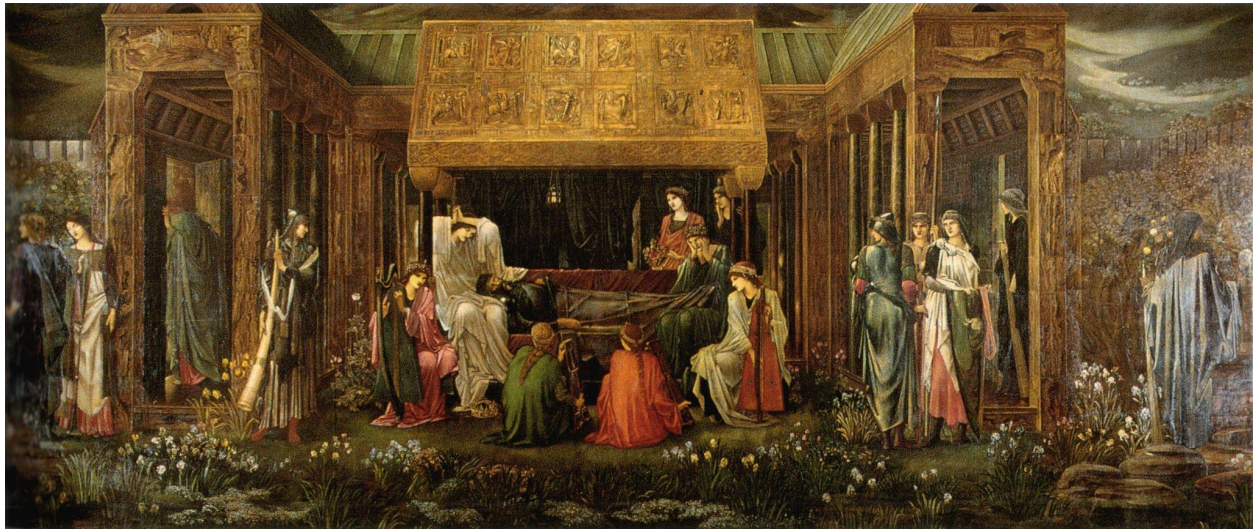
The Last Sleep of Arthur, Edward Burne-Jones (1898), oil on canvas.

IV.   Conclusion

The Victorian Era, marked by profound cultural, social and political shifts, used fairy tales as a strategic tool to reinforce public support for the British monarchy. This period utilized the revival of legendary figures such as King Arthur, embedding them in the cultural consciousness as

emblematic heroes that mirrored the virtues of the monarchy, presenting it as a pillar of societal

prosperity. These narratives, while seemingly harmless, are powerful vehicles for social control.

They encapsulate complex ideologies in simple stories that are easily absorbed by children, who

are the most impressionable members of society. Furthermore, these tales depicted distinctions

between order and chaos, which could only be kept apart with the help of a monarch, a notion

represented as the force of stability versus unnecessary evil within Strachey's *Le Morte Darthur*

(1897). The Arthurian legends served as moral allegories for the Victorians and threaded the

glorification of monarchy into the fabric of Great Britain, imprinting its values onto society in

the midst of a rapidly changing world.

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