A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court

Mark Twain

Edited by Allison R. Ensor

A Norton Critical Edition

A NORTON CRITICAL EDITION

SAMUEL LANGHORNE CLEMENS

A CONNECTICUT YANKEE IN KING ARTHUR'S COURT

AN AUTHORITATIVE TEXT
BACKGROUNDS AND SOURCES
COMPOSITION AND PUBLICATION
CRITICISM

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Preface

Mark Twain's *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* (1889) came somewhat late in the canon of his popular works. Behind him lay *The Innocents Abroad*, *Roughing It*, *Tom Sawyer*, *Life on the Mississippi*, and most recently his best, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. He would write more novels (notably *Pudd'nhead Wilson*) and stories and essays, but they would not capture the public imagination in the same way. And capture that imagination the *Yankee* did: there have been three film versions (two starring beloved American figures—Will Rogers and Bing Crosby), a Broadway musical, several television productions, and even a Bugs Bunny cartoon about a Connecticut *rabbit* who repeats Hank Morgan's journey through time back to the sixth century and the days of King Arthur. In most instances, it should be noted, what the public sees on the movie or television screen is quite different from what Mark Twain wrote: his satirical jabs at the established church are usually missing, and his sad, violent ending has been judged entirely unacceptable.

In writing *A Connecticut Yankee*, Clemens pulled together several strands of plot material. First of all was the Arthurian legend, which had been treated by many writers from Sir Thomas Malory to Alfred, Lord Tennyson, whose *Idylls of the King* had been completed during the previous decade. Second was the "international novel," depicting a confrontation between an American and the older culture of Europe, at which Henry James had established himself as a master in *The American* (1877), *Daisy Miller* (1878), and *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881). Third was the concept of time travel. In 1888 H. G. Wells published "The Chronic Argonauts," apparently an early version of *The Time Machine* (1895). Also in 1888 the American novelist Edward Bellamy brought out *Looking Backward, or 2000–1887*, in which Julian West visits a utopia of the kind which the Yankee sought to establish in King Arthur's realm. Resembling a story of time travel, though not literally one, is Charles Heber Clark's *The Fortunate Island* (1882), in which an American with a considerable scientific knowledge is shipwrecked on an island peopled by Arthurian characters (the island broke off from England during Arthur's time and has not changed over the centuries). Though certain parallels appear strong, Clemens claimed not to have been influenced by the earlier work. To these three elements were added humor and barbed satire against the monarchy and the church, the two centers of power in the world being depicted.

Clemens also introduced into *A Connecticut Yankee* certain

themes that appear frequently in his writings. To begin with, there is the device of the "mysterious stranger"—someone from the outside, someone who does not fit, who comes into a community, often with disruptive consequences. Allied to this is the "unrecognized genius" theme, which was to be used again in Clemens' next significant novel, *Pudd'nhead Wilson* (1894). Here, someone having a great deal of knowledge appears in a community too ignorant to recognize his worth and may or may not eventually win proper recognition from it. The difficulty of distinguishing dream from reality, found in Mark Twain as early as *Tom Sawyer*, appears once again, especially in the ending. While in the sixth century, Morgan dreams that he is back in the nineteenth; when he finally returns to the nineteenth, he believes it is a dream and that his life with Sandy in the sixth century is the only reality. The Hank Morgan we see at the end of the novel is also a good example of the Mark Twain theme of the "lost paradise." Like Adam, Clemens' favorite Biblical character, Morgan is cut off from an existence which he now sees (perhaps inconsistently) as a paradise to which he can never return, from "all that is dear . . . all that could make life worth the living!" It was a situation in which Clemens found himself as he looked back at Hannibal and his summers on Uncle John Quarles' farm and later as he looked back on the life of his own family in their Hartford, Connecticut, home.

Finally, there is the attack on what Clemens came to call "the damned human race"—and it is here that controversy begins to arise. Does the novel say that America is superior to Europe, that the present is better than the past, that science and technology are superior to ignorance and superstition? Does it support democracy or does it suggest, as the Yankee says at one point, that one ought to "hang the whole human race and finish the farce"? Different readers have responded in different ways. What are we, after all, to think of Hank Morgan, the boss of Arthur's kingdom? He has been seen as a kind of new Prometheus, vainly seeking to bring light to a benighted land, and as a prototype of the fascist dictator, thinking only of himself and destroying all that he had built up (as well as 25,000 of the chivalry of England) when things do not go as planned. I have tried to show in my choice of recent critical articles something of the range of opinion which exists concerning the novel and its protagonist.

Critics frequently regard *A Connecticut Yankee* as a flawed novel. It was almost inevitable that it should be so, since Clemens wanted to do so much in it: he wanted to write a humorous book, but he also wanted to produce a sharp satire which would destroy whatever vestiges of the power of the monarchy and of the established church were left in his century. By the time he finished it, he had introduced violence and despair of a kind which contrasts radically with the happier endings of the earlier Mark Twain novels. The section on the background of the novel will show that these elements were present at

a very early stage in his thinking about the novel, though he certainly suppressed them in public readings from the manuscript of the kind he gave at Governor's Island, New York, in the fall of 1886.

Finally, the impact of the novel was made the greater by the illustrations provided by Daniel Carter Beard, later to be known as the founder of the Boy Scouts of America. Beard enlivened his pictures by using as models such well-known personages as Alfred, Lord Tennyson, the Emperor of Germany, the Prince of Wales, Sarah Bernhardt, Anna Russell and the financier Jay Gould. Even Beard himself appears in one or two of the illustrations. While considerations of space made it impractical to include each of the more than two hundred illustrations in this edition, I have used a few representative ones. It will readily be seen that Beard did not content himself with merely illustrating the text but instead drew a number of cartoons illustrating ideas suggested by the text. Indeed, it has been said that at times Beard goes beyond anything Clemens intended.

A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court was first published in England with the title *A Yankee at the Court of King Arthur*. The first American edition appeared a few days later, on December 10, 1889. The present text is that of the first American edition, published by the Charles L. Webster Company of New York, Clemens' own publishing house. A very few obvious typographical errors have been corrected. Minor differences exist between the American and English editions, and between them and the text of certain chapters published in the *Century* magazine for November 1889 (pp. 74–83). I have tried to note the most significant of these variants in my footnotes. The printed texts also differ at times from the original manuscript, which is now in the Berg Collection of the New York Public Library.

I should like to acknowledge the assistance of the staffs of the Mark Twain Papers at the University of California, Berkeley, and of the Berg Collection in the New York Public Library. Both were very helpful during my visits there. The Better English Fund of the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, established by John C. Hodges, provided me with a grant so that I might be freed from one quarter's teaching in order to work on this edition. The secretarial staff of the Department of English has also been helpful in typing and copying whatever I needed. Among my colleagues I should particularly like to thank Nathalia Wright for reading my manuscript and making suggestions and my former colleague Barry Gaines for giving me his copy of the Globe Edition of *Morte d'Arthur*. Special thanks also to Mark Twain scholars in other institutions: Louis J. Budd, Alan Gribben, and Thomas A. Tenney.

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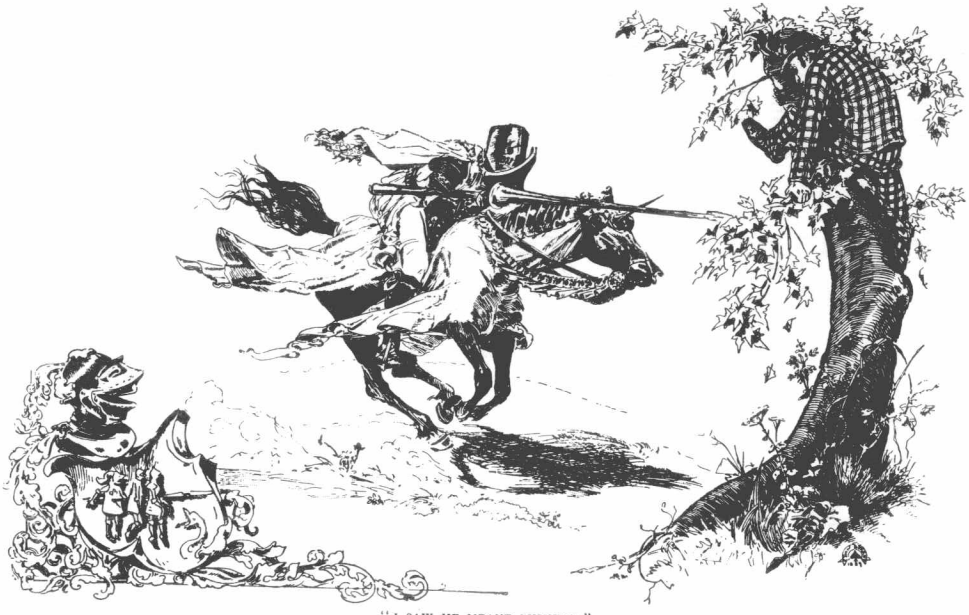

"I SAW HE MEANT BUSINESS."

Dan Beard's frontispiece for the first American edition. When included with excerpts published in the *Century* magazine prior to the publication of the novel, this illustration was captioned "The Yankee's Reception in Arthurdom." Clemens told Beard that the helmet in the left-hand corner was "a source of constant joy" to him.

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A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court

Contents of *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*

Author's Preface [1]

The ungentle laws and customs touched upon in this tale are historical, and the episodes which are used to illustrate them are also historical. It is not pretended that these laws and customs existed in England in the sixth century; no, it is only pretended that inasmuch as they existed in the English and other cilizations of far later times, it is safe to consider that it is no libel upon the sixth century to suppose them to have been in practice in that day also. One is quite justified in inferring that wherever one of these laws or customs was lacking in that remote time, its place was competently filled by a worse one.

The question as to whether there is such a thing as divine right of kings is not settled in this book. It was found too difficult. That the executive head of a nation should be a person of lofty character and extraordinary ability, was manifest and indisputable; that none but the Deity could select that head unerringly, was also manifest and indisputable; that the Deity ought to make that selection, then, was likewise manifest and indisputable; consequently, that He does make it, as claimed, was an unavoidable deduction. I mean, until the author of this book encountered the Pompadour, and Lady Castlemaine[2] and some other executive heads of that kind; these were found so difficult to work into the scheme, that it was judged better to take the other tack in this book, (which must be issued this fall,) and then go into training and settle the question in another book. It is of course a thing which ought to be settled, and I am not going to have anything particular to do next winter anyway.

MARK TWAIN

HARTFORD, July 21, 1889

1. The English edition of the novel omitted the second paragraph of this preface.

2. The mistresses of Louis XV of France and Charles II of England.

A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court

A Word of Explanation

It was in Warwick Castle[3] that I came across the curious stranger whom I am going to talk about. He attracted me by three things: his candid simplicity, his marvelous familiarity with ancient armor, and the restfulness of his company—for he did all the talking. We fell together, as modest people will, in the tail of the herd that was being shown through, and he at once began to say things which interested me. As he talked along, softly, pleasantly, flowingly, he seemed to drift away imperceptibly out of this world and time, and into some remote era and old forgotten country; and so he gradually wove such a spell about me that I seemed to move among the spectres and shadows and dust and mold of a gray antiquity, holding speech with a relic of it! Exactly as I would speak of my nearest personal friends or enemies, or my most familiar neighbors, he spoke of Sir Bedivere, Sir Bors de Ganis, Sir Launcelot of the Lake, Sir Galahad, and all the other great names of the Table Round—and how old, old, unspeakably old and faded and dry and musty and ancient he came to look as he went on! Presently he turned to me and said, just as one might speak of the weather, or any other common matter—

"You know about transmigration of souls; do you know about transposition of epochs—and bodies?"

I said I had not heard of it. He was so little interested—just as when people speak of the weather—that he did not notice whether I made him any answer or not. There was half a moment of silence, immediately interrupted by the droning voice of the salaried cicerone:

"Ancient hauberk,[4] date of the sixth century, time of King Arthur and the Round Table; said to have belonged to the knight Sir Sagramore le Desirous; observe the round hole through the chain-mail in the left breast; can't be accounted for; supposed to have been done with

3. A fourteenth-century castle above the Avon River, northeast of Stratford-on-Avon. The castle houses a notable collection of armor, though none of it dates from the sixth century. Clemens visited Warwick Castle on Sept. 10, 1872, during his first trip to England.

4. A tunic of chain mail worn as defensive armor from the twelfth to the fourteenth century. No armor presently displayed in Warwick Castle has been pierced by a bullet, though there is one piece at which a gun has been fired.

a bullet since invention of firearms—perhaps maliciously by Cromwell's[5] soldiers."

My acquaintance smiled—not a modern smile, but one that must have gone out of general use many, many centuries ago—and muttered apparently to himself:

"Wit ye well, *I saw it done.*" Then, after a pause, added: "I did it myself."

By the time I had recovered from the electric surprise of this remark, he was gone.

All that evening I sat by my fire at the Warwick Arms,[6] steeped in a dream of the olden time, while the rain beat upon the windows, and the wind roared about the eaves and corners. From time to time I dipped into old Sir Thomas Malory's enchanting book, and fed at its rich feast of prodigies and adventures, breathed-in the fragrance of its obsolete names, and dreamed again. Midnight being come at length, I read another tale, for a night-cap—this which here follows, to-wit:

HOW SIR LAUNCELOT SLEW TWO GIANTS,
AND MADE A CASTLE FREE[7]

Anon withal came there upon him two great giants, well armed, all save the heads, with two horrible clubs in their hands. Sir Launcelot put his shield afore him, and put the stroke away of the one giant, and with his sword he clave his head asunder. When his fellow saw that, he ran away as he were wood,[8] for fear of the horrible strokes, and Sir Launcelot after him with all his might, and smote him on the shoulder, and clave him to the middle. Then Sir Launcelot went into the hall, and there came afore him three score ladies and damsels, and all kneeled unto him, and thanked God and him of their deliverance. For, sir, said they, the most part of us have been here this seven year their prisoners, and we have worked all manner of silk works for our meat, and we are all great gentlewomen born, and blessed be the time, knight, that ever thou wert born; for thou hast done the most worship that ever did knight in the world, that will we bear record, and we all pray you to tell us your name,

5. Oliver Cromwell (1599–1658) led the Puritan revolt which deposed Charles I. Warwick Castle served as a Parliamentary fortress during the English civil war.

6. A hotel in the town of Warwick, not far from the castle.

7. Quoted from Sir Thomas Malory's *Morte d'Arthur*, VI.xi. Clemens used the Globe edition, edited by Sir Edward Strachey and first published in 1868. Its pagination matches that in the manuscript, where Clemens indicates on what pages the quotations may be found. Quotations in the novel are generally accurate, although there are occasional omissions and alterations.

Originally Clemens intended to insert here two additional chapters from Malory, describing Sir Launcelot's adventures while wearing Sir Kay's armor. The exchange of armor between the two knights seems to have had an unusual fascination for Clemens. He refers to it in a letter of 1883, two years before he first encountered *Morte d'Arthur*, and again in *Pudd'nhead Wilson* (1894), Chapter IV. Having characters switch roles is a major plot element in *The Prince and the Pauper* and in *Pudd'nhead Wilson*.

8. Demented. [*Clemens' note.*]

that we may tell our friends who delivered us out of prison. Fair damsels, he said, my name is Sir Launcelot du Lake. And so he departed from them and betaught them unto God. And then he mounted upon his horse, and rode into many strange and wild countries, and through many waters and valleys, and evil was he lodged. And at the last by fortune him happened against a night to come to a fair courtelage, and therein he found an old gentlewoman that lodged him with a good will, and there he had good cheer for him and his horse. And when time was, his host brought him into a fair garret over the gate to his bed. There Sir Launcelot unarmed him, and set his harness by him, and went to bed, and anon he fell on sleep. So, soon after there came one on horseback, and knocked at the gate in great haste. And when Sir Launcelot heard this he arose up, and looked out at the window, and saw by the moon-light three knights come riding after that one man, and all three lashed on him at once with swords, and that one knight turned on them knightly again and defended him. Truly, said Sir Launcelot, yonder one knight shall I help, for it were shame for me to see three knights on one, and if he be slain I am partner of his death. And therewith he took his harness and went out at a window by a sheet down to the four knights, and then Sir Launcelot said on high, Turn you knights unto me, and leave your fighting with that knight. And then they all three left Sir Kay, and turned unto Sir Launcelot, and there began great battle, for they alight all three, and strake many strokes at Sir Launcelot, and assailed him on every side. Then Sir Kay dressed him for to have holpen Sir Launcelot. Nay, sir, said he, I will none of your help, therefore as ye will have my help let me alone with them. Sir Kay for the pleasure of the knight suffered him for to do his will, and so stood aside. And then anon within six strokes Sir Launcelot had stricken them to the earth.

And then they all three cried, Sir knight, we yield us unto you as man of might matchless. As to that, said Sir Launcelot, I will not take your yielding unto me, but so that ye yield you unto Sir Kay the seneschal, on that covenant I will save your lives and else not. Fair knight, said they, that were we loth to do; for as for Sir Kay we chased him hither, and had overcome him had ye not been; therefore, to yield us unto him it were no reason. Well, as to that, said Sir Launcelot, advise you well, for ye may choose whether ye will die or live, for an ye be yielden, it shall be unto Sir Kay. Fair knight, then they said, in saving our lives we will do as thou commandest us. Then shall ye, said Sir Launcelot, on Whitsunday next coming go unto the court of King Arthur, and there shall ye yield you unto Queen Guenever, and put you all three in her grace and mercy, and say that Sir Kay sent you thither to be her prisoners. On the morn Sir Launcelot arose early, and left Sir Kay sleeping: and Sir Launcelot took Sir Kay's armour and his shield and armed him, and so he went to the stable and took his horse, and took his leave of his host, and so he departed. Then soon after arose Sir Kay and missed Sir Launcelot: and then he espied that he had his