

Signet Classics

MARK TWAIN

*A Connecticut Yankee
in King Arthur's Court*



WITH A NEW INTRODUCTION BY LELAND KRAUTH
AND AN AFTERWORD BY EDMUND REISS

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In his person and in his pursuits, **Mark Twain** (1835–1910) was a man of extraordinary contrasts. Although he left school at twelve, when his father died, he was eventually awarded honorary degrees from Yale University, the University of Missouri, and Oxford University. His career encompassed such varied occupations as printer, Mississippi riverboat pilot, journalist, travel writer, and publisher. He made fortunes from his writing, but toward the end of his life he had to resort to lecture tours to pay his debts. He was hot-tempered, profane, and sentimental—and also pessimistic, cynical, and tortured by self-doubt. His nostalgia for the past helped produce some of his best books. He lives in American letters as a great artist, the writer whom William Dean Howells called “the Lincoln of our literature.”

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Introduction

Mark Twain once described *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* as “an uncommonly bully book,” and it is “bully” in every sense of the word—excellent, jolly, pugnacious. It is carefully crafted; it is amusing; and it is aggressive. The novel is alive with every twist and turn of Twain's humor, and that humor ranges widely, from gentle whimsy to sharp irony, from farcical silliness to serious satire, from dry wit to hot tongue-lashing. The wild play of Twain's comic fancy makes the book both delightful and provocative. *A Connecticut Yankee* is also alive with Twain's deepest convictions, his unshakable prejudices, his most firmly held ideas. While *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is his greatest book (for all manner of reasons), *A Connecticut Yankee* is not only his most ambitious fiction but his most personal.

Twain called *A Connecticut Yankee* his “swan-song,” that is, his last words of farewell. He thought of the book that way because he expected that his investment in the Paige typesetter, a mechanical typesetting machine designed to replace human compositors, would make him a millionaire who would never again have to write for a living (as he had been doing for more than twenty years). But his hopes for fortune from a mechanical invention were constantly met by failure, and the representation of technology in the novel as both desirable and destructive no doubt reflects his own rising and falling experience. In one sense, however, *A Connecticut Yan-*

kee is a Twainian swan song, for it is a rich, full summation of his principal ideas and attitudes. But the tenor of the song is uncertain: Is it a paean to progress and human striving, or is it a lament over civilization and human failing?

Twain composed *A Connecticut Yankee* in spurts, some short, some long, beginning in late 1885 and ending early in 1889. He entitled a first version "The Autobiography of Sir Robert Smith of Camelot," but he subsequently changed his protagonist's name to Hank Morgan. While it is mildly amusing to think of a common Robert Smith as a Sir (a title originally reserved for a knight or a baronet), the change to Hank Morgan was deeply suggestive. For the historical Henry Morgan was a seventeenth-century buccaneer who, with the sanction of the British crown, pillaged the ships and cities of colonial New Spain. Buccaneers like Morgan typically assaulted a foreign country—or its colonies—ship by ship, port by fortress, town by city to weaken it in the immediate hope of booty and the ultimate possibility of conquest. Twain's Hank Morgan assails sixth-century England in a similar way, undermining it bit by bit through covert acts with his eye on the main chance of dominion.

That Twain would conceive of a character who was both a respectable Sir and a rogue pirate is not surprising, for his pen name itself enjoins us to Mark Twain, that is, to note "twain" or "two," to pay attention to doubleness. The pseudonym, by most accounts derived from the soundings taken by steamboats on the Mississippi, is itself an ambiguous signal. Denoting two fathoms, or twelve feet, of water, it announces danger (if one is coming from deeper water) or safety (if one has been in shallower). Mark Twain, the writer, was both dangerous and safe, and nowhere more so than in *A Connecticut Yankee*. The book oscillates between confirmations of the status quo and turns against it. No other Twain text is so anchored in contraries—oppositions of form, collisions of content. Twain pits realism against romance and shifts from a utopian fiction to a dystopian one. He places the industrial against the agrarian, the scientific against the superstitious, the skeptical against the religious, the commonsensical against

the fantastic, the probable against the imaginative. The shifts and turns he creates out of these conflicts are fascinating to follow, and what is most astounding is that time and again just when one side seems to have the upper hand, the other reasserts itself, until in the end, the reader is left in uncertainty.

Twain's contradictory subversions and affirmations are directed at America's present as well as England's past. *A Connecticut Yankee* is his most capacious topical fiction, and even a partial list of the contemporaneous issues he takes up would include: enfranchisement, machine politics, capitalism, free trade, technology, militarism, law, advertising, religion, hygiene, labor organization, sexuality, journalism, inventions, education, taxation, railroads, warfare, social class, finance, tariffs, currency, and communication. As Twain wrote of these, he found himself in two very different moods. Sometimes he wrote, he said, as if his task were nothing more than a "holiday amusement," affording pleasure, and sometimes he wrote as if his work were a revolutionary undertaking, requiring nothing less than "a pen warmed up in hell."

Twain indulges his contrary moods and spins his controversial topics this way and that through the shifting, sometimes dizzying, narrative of his protagonist, Hank Morgan. Hank is as odd and contradictory a character as one can find in nineteenth-century American literature—simultaneously appealing and alarming. The only constant in his mercurial identity seems to be change, but there are two recurrent traits. Hank is sometimes a figure of good-heartedness (a grown-up Huck Finn), a man committed to benevolent reform, a person moved by compassion. And he is sometimes a figure of cold indifference, a man enthralled by his own theatrical performance (a grown-up Tom Sawyer), a person driven by the desire for power. He waxes sentimental one minute—"I knew I should never get his picture out of my mind again, and there it is to this day, to wring my heartstrings whenever I think of it" (p. 148)—only to become aggressively callous the next—"I sent the bomb with a sure aim . . . and during the next fifteen minutes we stood under a steady drizzle of microscopic fragments of knights and hardware and horseflesh" (p. 209).

Readers shackled by notions of realistic fiction, with its emphasis on both credibility and coherence of character, are often bothered by Hank, and Twain himself was of two minds about him. He thought of Hank as a "perfect ignoramus" and as a "natural gentleman." In many ways, Hank can be seen as the prototype (prescient on Twain's part) of the modern self that was beginning to emerge at the very time Twain penned his tale: a protean figure of instability, a kind of antihero, an alien lost, as Twain puts it, in "this pathetic drift between the eternities." His identity is incoherent, discontinuous. Hank is provocative precisely because he embodies the contradictions and confusions about the makeup of the human self that were to become conspicuous in the twentieth century and persist into the twenty-first.

In the imaginative structure of Twain's story Hank exists in two times and two places: his own nineteenth-century America and King Arthur's sixth-century England. Twain reveled in creating the contrast, but he was also uncertain about both periods and both countries. At different times, he loved and hated England, loved and hated America. (The reviews of *A Connecticut Yankee* on both sides of the Atlantic loved and hated the book, though in general the English found more to object to.) Driven by warring feelings of affection and disgust, *A Connecticut Yankee* moves uneasily between affirmation and satire. This swerving energizes the tale, creates surprise, prompts puzzlement, and engenders delight. When he first conceived his fiction, Twain mused over it as outrageous comic farce, on the one hand, and tender romantic adventure, on the other. His divided impulses are realized structurally, as he shapes his fiction around two linked but contrasting journeys. Hank's first trek from Camelot to the Ogre's castle (chapters XI–XX) is largely a lighthearted spoof of medieval romance, of knight-errantry, and of Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur* (a 1485 collection of Arthurian legends); its humor is light and frolicsome. But the tale darkens after Hank's encounter with Morgan le Fay. Hank's second journey, the excursion he takes incognito with King Arthur (chapters XXVII–XXXVIII), becomes

a journey into the heart of darkness—into human suffering, oppression, and death; its humor is black and bitter.

With amazing confidence, Twain undertakes to dramatize and comment on nothing less than the social construction of reality. At its deepest philosophical level, *A Connecticut Yankee* raises the vexed epistemological question of how we know what we know—or think we know. Insinuated into Hank's narrative are two contrary views: that reality is grasped through empirical experience and that it is created by subjective perception. Hank seems to believe in "facts"—that is, in things as they are, as he finds them. But he also creates "facts," thinks them into existence, as what is or must be. Sometimes he locates reality empirically; sometimes he generates it subjectively. Which is the true way, empiricism or idealism? The novel sets this quandary for the reader. At the level of social reality, however, Twain insists with crystalline clarity on the arbitrary construction of civilization. Hank's time travel from the nineteenth to the sixth century enables him to analyze Arthur's England from an alien's point of view. Comically, he runs afoul of irrational habits, customs, and conventions. Didactically, he declares that religion, class status, economic organization, political structure, and even morality are all arbitrary social constructs. He maintains that accepted belief systems are really nothing more than socially ingrained ideas.

Twain's emphasis on social conditioning poses a timeless philosophical conundrum: Are humans free agents? His novel veers between expressions of free will and assertions of determinism. Paradoxically, Hank acts freely, often as a kind of Nietzschean superman, yet at the same time he insists on inevitable constraint. "Training," he announces, "—training is everything; training is all there is *to* a person" (p. 119). The contrasts between action and avowal leave us wondering: How free are we? How much of our fate can we control? And these questions push one to yet another philosophical riddle. For they incite reflection on the origin and constitution of morality. The moral substratum of Twain's text is ever-present but raspy. As we watch Hank assess the Arthu-

rian world and set out to change it, we are—by Twain's design—forced to question the very foundation of moral behavior. Is Hank a man governed by morality? And is his morality valid, or is it just the ethics of his nineteenth-century world? Twain wraps the philosophical question of free will versus cultural shaping, of choice versus compulsion, firmly into the further puzzle of what true morality is.

As a part of his determined effort to reform Arthur's England, Hank sets up a Man Factory. Though it is never visible, only alluded to, the Factory is designed to reshape men. Hank sends to it every downtrodden commoner who shows any trace of spirit, any spark of independence. Such manufacturing of the human raises troubling issues, of course. The largest is whether or not humans should be deliberately formed by social institutions. On the face of it, the factory retooling seems an admirable effort to form a man of pride, self-reliance, and free thought (all valued American traits), but the process is objectionable since it mass produces one specific type of man. It suggests dehumanization as well as uniformity. Twain's tale thus anticipates such later fictions of enforced social change as George Orwell's *1984* and Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, anti-utopian novels in which the future is simply—and horrifyingly—controlled through social engineering.

The Man Factory also prompts this question, troubling to Twain's time, unresolved in ours: What constitutes true manhood? As with so many things in this vibrant but tricky novel, there are conflicting answers. Twain mocks the warrior knights, clearly dismissing their lust for conflict, their obsessive displays of martial prowess, and their will to master as so much antiquated muddle-headedness. They are men run amuck in the exertion of a false concept of manliness. (They are of course governed by what Hank takes to be an equally bogus chivalric ideal.) As telling counterpoint, Twain makes King Arthur a man of tenderness rather than of violence. To affirm this very different type of manhood, Twain—in one poignant scene—has the king gently carry a young girl dying of smallpox to her expiring mother. Indifferent to his own health, moved only by compassion, he epitomizes

mizes a controversial kind of soft manhood. Hank is knightlike, prone to violence, on the one hand, and Arthurlike, given to gentle care, on the other. The dichotomy is no doubt rooted in Twain himself, but it is also symptomatic of his time, which experienced a crisis in the socially determined ideal of manhood. Was the true man tough and aggressive or tender and sacrificing? Twain was not sure; his era was not sure. And neither is current American culture.

The role of the woman in the novel seems somewhat simpler, but Twain complicates it too. While the *Demoiselle Alisande la Carteloise* (rechristened "Sandy" by Hank) is first an object of satire as an embodiment of medieval feminine fickleness, she eventually becomes a cherished wife and mother, the epitome of one type of womanhood. Her temperamental passivity and conventional domesticity stand in glaring contrast to the only other significant woman in the story, Morgan le Fay. Morgan le Fay is Sandy's antithesis: She is personally aggressive and unconventionally powerful in the civic realm. She is also ruthless and bloody-minded, betraying perhaps Twain's latent fear of unfettered female power. Both figures are close to caricature; both are objects of Twain's humor, affectionately indulgent in the case of Sandy, sharply condemnatory in the case of Morgan le Fay. Just as there are two versions of manliness, the aggressive and the compassionate, there are two kinds of womanhood: compliant and maternal, domineering and lethal. Sandy is a bit of a wraith (and her child, Hello-Central, is never more than an odd name), but Morgan le Fay, despite her relatively brief appearance, is a dark presence whose evil seems to infect Hank and whose power he strives to match. While Sandy is the approved kind of woman, what Twain's age thought of as the true woman, Morgan le Fay is a very different version of womanhood plucked from ancient legend—a woman liberated and empowered, beautiful and savage.

Hank bests Morgan le Fay even as he is touched by her dark force. Hank strives to master everyone in Arthur's England from magician to knight, from peasant to king. From the first Hank is driven by a need for power. "I made up my mind," he tells us, "to two things: if it

was still the nineteenth century and I was among lunatics and couldn't get away, I would presently boss that asylum or know the reason why; and if on the other hand it was really the sixth century, all right, I didn't want any softer thing: I would boss the whole country inside of three months" (p. 18). Hank counts on his nineteenth-century knowledge, on his superior reason, and on his skill at contrivance (especially theatrical performance) to enable him to gain control of Arthur's kingdom. Paradoxically, he criticizes despotic rule yet he celebrates "unlimited power." He extols it as serving the needs of the people, as a means of advancing society, but power also serves Hank's own psychic need, his longing to be "THE BOSS" (p. 57) in absolute, uncontested control of the whole country. He imagines initially that he can most effectively assert his force peacefully through education. Before long, however, he reflects that the kind of radical change he seeks, nothing short of a revolution, "must *begin in blood*" (p. 135). Twain's novel displays, probes, and critiques the origins and uses of power. His tale of long ago and far away is hauntingly up-to-date and close to home. It confronts us with the abiding question of how to effect social change.

One answer to that conundrum, one easy to overlook, is that change can come through language. For comic purposes, Twain creates a cacophony of speech, a veritable Babel of tongues. With stunning effects, he juxtaposes archaic English, normal colloquial speech, and spicy slang. Long before Hank incites any revolution, Twain stages a war of conflicting discursive modes. Each way of talking in the novel embodies a class, a system of values, and ultimately a means of control. Ironically, as Hank imposes his plain speech on archaic utterance in the hope of eradicating it and replacing it with his preferred mode, he himself succumbs increasingly to the old style, showing not just a growing tolerance for it but even an inclination to adopt it himself. What this war of words illuminates is the power of language to shape—or deform—reality.

Power is an ever-present issue in *A Connecticut Yankee*. Twain himself often reveled in power and often ridiculed it; he imagined its beneficent use and witnessed its

malevolent abuse. What he knew for certain was that it was a force to reckon with in Arthur's time, in Hank's time, in any time. He was profoundly suspicious of it, announcing dogmatically in one speech, "Power, when lodged in the hands of man, means oppression—*insures* oppression." The oppression generated by power seems to extend unendingly. In his narrative, Hank compares himself to Robinson Crusoe, Christopher Columbus, and Hernando Cortés, figures engaged in a struggle for survival, discovery, and conquest, respectively. Whether by accident or design, however, they all arrive at a position of domination and control. Obliquely reflecting these famous men—a shipwreck, a voyager, and a conquistador—Hank Morgan may represent another kind of power: the colonizer. Twain's novel seems to transcend its historical and geographical bounds to become a fable of imperialism.

The end of the novel (not to be given away here) is multilayered. Carefully crafted, it merits close reading. Against obvious cataclysm, Twain subtly suggests sources of endurance, but one must be alert to catch the slight in the face of the evident. There are, in any case, two figures who loom in the end as especially significant: Merlin and Clarence. Merlin emerges at the close as a cautionary emblem of one fate of humor. Against that, however, Twain posits Clarence, something of a humorist himself (he suggests at one point that monarchs be replaced by cats), who embodies a very different fate. Returning to the machinery of its opening, *A Connecticut Yankee* self-reflexively. Constructed from the first as Hank's "tale of the lost land," it ends with "A Postscript by Clarence" and a "Final P.S. by M. T." The narrative thus survives its own ending and bears testimony to the power of storytelling.

Its deepest energy throughout, however, is its multifaceted humor. *A Connecticut Yankee* is a ventriloquistic tour de force. The voice of Twain's own humor, Hank is variously wiseass, laughing critic, raucous joker, serious satirist, zany observer, silly fantasist, and from time to time, caustic self-accuser. Which is to say, he makes fun of everyone and everything, including himself. His comic performance not only testifies to Twain's comic genius

but also challenges the reader's tolerance. For in shifting tones Hank assails so much that his humor is likely to offend one, here or there, sooner or later. And this puts to the test the reader's own sense of humor. No one has trouble enjoying a whimsical turn of no consequence, or a warranted blast of social criticism, or a linguistic joke that only plays harmlessly with words. But Twain's humor is so scattergunned in this novel that it is eventually liable to hit home, to upset us by making fun of something we cherish. When we suddenly encounter something we do not find funny, we find ourselves caught on the border between enjoyment and distress. Although such moments may leave us in uncertainty, they clarify Twain's own humor. For his humor is a liberating force, sometimes pushing along conventional lines, sometimes contesting them, a force that dares to promote pleasure in defiance of all seriousness, all morality, all sanctity, all necessity, all frailty—in short, in defiance of everything. In doing so, Twain's humor compels us to discover what we will not joke about—to realize, that is, what we hold sacred. As much as anything, this is the power of *A Connecticut Yankee*.

—LELAND KRAUTH

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