

Mark twain's a  
connecticut yankee in  
king arthur's court:  
arthurian legend,  
armou...



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

Written in 1889, Mark Twain's *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* is regarded by many scholars as the most important of American Arthuriana. Twain strips Arthurian legend of much of its glory and grandeur, thereby making it possible for his contemporaries to identify with his main character; Hank Morgan. However, in doing so Twain also diverted from history quite a bit. Most, if not all, of the social structure of King Arthur's court is based on Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur*, which is the first real account of the King Arthur legend. Twain also mentions the Grail quest that is central to Malory's work. But Twain also talks about knights clad in iron and the British nation being enslaved by a tyrannical absolute monarch. Furthermore, he blames much of the people's suffering in the Catholic church. Although the Arthurian court and the Grail quest are *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* is in line with Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur*, Twain diverted from history with regard to armor, slavery, and Catholicism. It was not until the 15th century that the legend as we know it appeared in Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur*. In *Le Morte d'Arthur*, Arthur is a fearless leader who has a trusty advisor in the form of Merlin and extremely loyal and virtuous knights at his side. However, towards the end of the twelfth century Chrétien de Troyes described a different Arthur in *Perceval, The Story of the Grail*, as did Wolfram von Eschenbach in the early thirteenth century in an adaptation of *Perceval's* story: *Parzival*. Especially the Grail legend is a recurring theme in all these works. The Grail quest is the search for a cup that Jesus supposedly drank from at the last supper. Only the most virtuous can find it, which is why Arthur sends his best knights on the quest. However, in the end only Galahad is worthy enough to enter the room that houses the Grail and Lancelot has to wait outside. In *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* <https://assignbuster.com/mark-twains-a-connecticut-yankee-in-king-arthurs-court-arthurian-legend-armor-slavery-and-catholicism/>

the knights also go on the Grail quest but Hank Morgan does not see the virtue and importance of it, as this excerpt clearly shows: The boys all took a flier at the Holy Grail now and then. It was a several years' cruise. They always put in the long absence snooping around, in the most conscientious way, though none of them had any idea where the Holy Grail really was, and " I don't think any of them actually expected to find it, or would have known what to do with it if he had run across it" (Twain 50). This is the complete opposite of how Malory describes the Grail legend. In Malory, knights have an almost saint-like quality and they tirelessly search for the Holy Grail. The kind of thinking that Hank Morgan does in this excerpt would just be unthinkable. Furthermore, Hank questions why knights would go in the first place: " Every year expeditions went out Holy Grailing, and next year relief expeditions went out to hunt for them. There were worlds of reputation in it, but no money" (50). Clearly Hank does not feel that reputation is anything worth fighting for, he would only consider joining the quest if there were financial benefits. Alan Lupack argues in his book *King Arthur in America* that this is what makes Arthurian legend so appealing to Twain's readership: " If purity of heart - rather than the wealth necessary to buy horses or arms, or the strength and skill necessary to use those tools effectively - was the primary requirement of knighthood, then anyone could be a knight" (Lupack xii). By making fun of Arthuriana like this, Twain makes it possible for his nineteenth century American audience to identify with Hank Morgan. Of the many questionable aspects of Arthurian life that Hank Morgan describes, knights in shining armour seem to be an important and recurring theme. He describes Sir Sagramor as his opponent in a joust: " Out from his tent rode great Sir Sagramor, an imposing tower of iron, stately and rigid, his huge

<https://assignbuster.com/mark-twains-a-connecticut-yankee-in-king-arthurs-court-arthurian-legend-armour-slavery-and-catholicism/>

spear standing upright in its socket and grasped in his strong hand, his grand horse's face and breast cased in steel, his body clothed in rich trappings that almost dragged the ground—oh, a most noble picture. A great shout went up, of welcome and admiration (247).” Although this passage paints a wonderful picture of an impressive knight, it would be more appropriate if the story of *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* was set in fifteenth or sixteenth century England. By then armor was made of steel and very heavy, but still it was only used in tournaments because knights were very restricted by it on the battlefield. King Arthur's knights would have worn armor made of cuir bouilli (boiled leather), which was significantly lighter than steel but also much less effective. Horses were also clad in cuir bouilli on the battlefield but during tournaments they would wear the knight's colours on their embellished rugs. The Old English generic term for armor is “gearwe” (pronounced ye-ar-wee'), but “gúðréaf” ('yuth-rea-af'), “gúðsceorp” ('yuth-skay-orp') and “gúðscrúd” ('yuth-skrud') are also used for armor or harness. This could suggest that there were several types of armor that each had their own purpose and therefore a slightly different term was used to describe it. None of these terms suggest, however, that the armor was made out of steel, or more specifically iron, since the term for ironclad is “ísengráeg” ('ee-sen-grag'). There are many words that start with “gúð” which means war, battle or combat. This makes sense because knights had a very violent lifestyle, both on the battlefield and jousting for their honour. This lifestyle is also evident in *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, but unlike in the book knights in sixth century England did not wear iron armor. Then there is the question of slavery in *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*. Hank Morgan is clearly against slavery and <https://assignbuster.com/mark-twains-a-connecticut-yankee-in-king-arthurs-court-arthurian-legend-armour-slavery-and-catholicism/>

there are some interesting passages where he talks about it: " It is enough to make a body ashamed of his race to think of the sort of froth that has always occupied its thrones without shadow of right or reason, and the seventh-rate people that have always figured as its aristocracies—a company of monarchs and nobles who, as a rule, would have achieved only poverty and obscurity if left, like their betters, to their own exertions" (42). Hank feels " ashamed of his race", but it is unclear if he means race literally or symbolically. If he means it literally it does not make any sense because there were no vast amounts of slaves from another racial background than Morgan's in sixth century England. Perhaps there were a few Moorish slaves who accompanied their Roman masters but they were far and few between. Assuming Hank is talking about black slaves, which would be logical because of his origin in post-Civil War America, the fact that he calls sixth century Britons " seventh-rate people" is significant. In early nineteenth century America a person with at least 1/8 African heritage (meaning one great-grandparent) would be classified as black and therefore " abrogated their citizens' rights, prohibiting them from voting, owning property, testifying against whites in court, or intermarrying with whites" (Barr 2). They were classified as separate from the rest of society and effectively seen as substandard citizens. It could be argued that Hank sees all of the Britons as second class citizens (although he emphasizes it by calling them " seventh-rate") in the same way that African Americans were discriminated against where he comes from. Hank also states that rich people gain their prosperity by repression of others, as slave owners and especially plantation owners did in America. When he is offered a title he does not want it, on the contrary, he wants to distance himself from the aristocracy as much as he can. But he is willing to make an exception

<https://assignbuster.com/mark-twains-a-connecticut-yankee-in-king-arthurs-court-arthurian-legend-armor-slavery-and-catholicism/>

when push comes to shove: " This title, translated into modern speech, would be THE BOSS. Elected by the nation. That suited me." Aside from the fact that Hank is suddenly an expert in Old English, he agrees to the title because it was chosen " by the nation". Only that kind of title suits him, being an American who has just experienced the Civil War. He wants to force democracy upon a people that is by no means ready for it. They do not understand the appeal, in fact, one old man would gladly become Hanks slave if that means he will learn how to read and write: "" I? I would give blood out of my heart to know that art. Why, I will be your slave, your—" " No you won't, you won't be anybody's slave" (72). Hank truly sees King Arthur's subjects as slaves: " The most of King Arthur's British nation were slaves, pure and simple, and bore that name, and wore the iron collar on their necks; and the rest were slaves in fact, but without the name; they imagined themselves men and freemen, and called themselves so" (Twain 42). However, there are some problems with Hank's conclusion. Firstly, there were no coherent people in England at the time that could be " King Arthur's British nation". Instead, many rivalling tribes inhabited the land we now know as England who enslaved each other after battle. The north, an area that comprised Scotland and most of Northern England, was home to the Picts, a brutal and savage tribe that kept to themselves most of the time and was largely left alone by the Anglo-Saxons who were not interested in their less than fertile lands. Secondly and more importantly, slavery as an institution did not exist in sixth century England. Other tribes or foreigners that became prisoners of war were often enslaved by British tribes, but slaves were not bought or sold. The Old English word for slave is " þēow" (pronounced ' the-ow'). Anglo-Saxons often referred to a slave as " wealh" (' <https://assignbuster.com/mark-twains-a-connecticut-yankee-in-king-arthurs-court-arthurian-legend-armor-slavery-and-catholicism/>

hwealg'), which meant "foreigner, stranger, slave; Briton, Welshman; shameless person". These slaves had more rights than American cotton plantation slaves since they were able to earn some money and eventually even buy their own freedom. No such rights existed for black American slaves. In sixth century England there were also slaves called "wítepéow" ('wee-tuh-the-ow') which meant that people were reduced to slavery by law. These criminals were enslaved as a punishment for their crimes and they often worked the lands. The Britons did have word for slavery, namely "níedhiernes" ('nee-ed-ghee-er-nes'). This term is radically different etymologically than the other terms for slaves, which could suggest that the practice of slavery was foreign to the Britons. The Romans were of course much more familiar with slavery and because they conquered more and more of England, Britons would have been increasingly in contact with them and their customs. Another slavery related term is a bought servant, who was called "céapcniht", which literally meant 'house boy'. Old English also had a term for a slave born in a master's house: "inbyrdling" (in-bu-rd-ling'), but this term was coined much later. Although there are clear similarities here with plantation slaves in Virginia for example, who were initially bought by their masters but later encouraged to start families so save cost for the plantation owner, this was not comparison does not apply to King Arthur's time. Another theme in A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's court that does not apply to sixth century England is Hank's opposition to Christianity and Catholicism in particular. Hank is not a fan of Catholicism to say the least: "There you see the hand of that awful power, the Roman Catholic Church. In two or three little centuries it had converted a nation of men to a nation of worms" (43). Hank experiences that without title and heritage

<https://assignbuster.com/mark-twains-a-connecticut-yankee-in-king-arthurs-court-arthurian-legend-armour-slavery-and-catholicism/>

people are nothing in King Arthur's time and he feels this is because of the church. He says that the church "invented the divine right of kings" (44). He is also proud that his knights who carry advertisements will influence people in a way that the Church cannot control: "This would undermine the Church. I mean would be a step toward that. Next, education—next, freedom—and then she would begin to crumble" (85). However, Christianization of the Anglo Saxon kingdoms did not start until the end of the sixth century.

Therefore, Catholicism was by no means recognized as the main religion during King Arthur's time. In fact, the Old English word for God and king can be the same: "æðeling" ("atheling"). The words that were most often used to describe the king are "cyning" ('kuu-ning'), and "æðeling". The word for God is simply "God" or "æðeling", which means Christ in this context. From the end of the sixth century Catholicism slowly conquered the land from the south via the Roman invaders. Old English did have a word for the symbol of the Roman Catholic fate: the Pope's chair, namely "pāpseld" or "pāpsetl", but it was not used until Catholicism was firmly in place in Britain.

Catholicism replaced Anglo Saxon paganism, a polytheistic faith that worshipped Norse gods like Wodan and Thor but also had cultic aspects. The superstition that comes with cultic aspects of religion is also evident in A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court. Merlin the magician has a very prominent place by King Arthur's side and everyone is afraid of him and his magical powers. When Hank announces that he is also a magician everybody is shocked at first but they quickly believe him after the eclipse, which he makes people believe is his work. Another example would be the Valley of Holiness that Hank and Sandy encounter on their travels. The people there have not bathed in the water since it suddenly dried up many years ago

<https://assignbuster.com/mark-twains-a-connecticut-yankee-in-king-arthurs-court-arthurian-legend-armour-slavery-and-catholicism/>



when some monks made a bath and washed in it. When the bath was destroyed “ the waters gushed richly forth again, and even unto this day they have not ceased to flow in that generous measure” (121). Hank concludes that people stick to their superstitious beliefs: “ Then I take it nobody has washed since” (Ibid.) So *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* is true to history with regard to pagan tradition but misplaces Catholicism in sixth century England. Clearly, *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* parodies Arthurian legend in a way that makes nineteenth century readers able to identify with Hank Morgan. Although Mark Twain largely remains true to Malory's outline of Arthurian legend, he departs from it by having the knights wear steel armor. Knights wore cuir bouilli armor in sixth century England because steel armor was far too restrictive. Hank Morgan also laments the idea that all of the British people are slaves to their king. This is problematic historically because there was no British nation in sixth century England and slavery as an institution did not exist either. Hank is also firmly against Catholicism and he sees it as a source of oppression. However, Catholicism was by no means the most important religion in Arthurian times. The different Anglo Saxon tribes that made up England worshipped Norse gods like Wodan and Thor and they also subscribed to pagan traditions.

Bibliography  
Barr, C. W. “ Failed Foreign Marriages in Japan: Boom or Bust?” *The Christian Science Monitor*. March 14, 1996. Web. 22 October 2012.  
Eschenbach, Wolfram von. *Parzival*. Penguin Classics, 1980. Print.  
Lupack, Alan. *King Arthur in America*. D. S. Brewer, 2001. Print.  
Malory, Thomas. *Le Morte d'Arthur*. Simson & Brown, 2011. Print.  
Old English Dictionary Online. [http://home.comcast.net/~modean52/oeme\\_dictionaries.htm](http://home.comcast.net/~modean52/oeme_dictionaries.htm)  
Troyes, Chrétien de. *Perceval, the Story of the Grail*. D. S. Brewer, 2006. <https://assignbuster.com/mark-twains-a-connecticut-yankee-in-king-arthurs-court-arthurian-legend-armour-slavery-and-catholicism/>

Print. Twain, Mark. Conneticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court. Penguin Group USA, 1990. Print.