

Christine Pyle

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Rival Political Orders: the King and the Boss in *Connecticut Yankee*

In *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, Twain criticizes medieval injustices such as slavery and torture. Through words and illustrations, the book clearly puts down the hypocrisy of the Church and the aristocracy. Less evident—but just as real—is Twain's critique of the nineteenth century. Twain uses the Yankee's own words to show the foibles and terrible consequences of Hank Morgan's modern rationalistic, individualistic worldview. In other words, this novel does not fully condemn or endorse either age. Rather, it shows that both medieval and modern systems fail but have identifiable strengths. Beneath the obvious medieval abuses lies a system that provides for an essential human need: community. Community infuses individuals' lives with meaning, purpose, and a sense of belonging. In respect to this human need, both Twain and his character Hank seem to come down on the side of medievalism. This paper contrasts two leaders, the King and Hank, as figures of their respective ages in order to demonstrate one aspect of the novel's conclusion: the medieval age better answers the need for community.

King Arthur is the representative of the relationship-oriented medieval system. This King is the State, the top level of a hierarchy that nonetheless is balanced by concentric spheres of authority. In the medieval order of *Connecticut Yankee*, each individual has strong loyalties to societal institutions that stand between the individual and the state: family, local community, the knightly order, and the Church—which oversteps its bounds, creating a story for another paper. Because these other institutions bear some of the social and political functions, King Arthur does

not exercise direct authority on each subject in his realm. Rather, his authority is diffused by the smaller, local institutions. Furthermore, as a monarch, he is a person to whom the masses attach loyalty. To summarize, the king is an example of human scale; he represents a reinforcement of medieval belonging and cohesion.

Arthur's direct realm of influence is the chivalric order of the Round Table, an extraordinarily personal, familial institution. The knights, who are free agents not closely tied to family, land or other institutions, are personally attached to the king, emulate him and fight for him. Arthur, in turn, personally provides his knights with gifts. This interaction is significant because it demonstrates relational loyalty to a person, not patriotic fervor for an entity.

Conversely, Hank Morgan is the image of a political order in which a huge entity—the Nation or the “Republic”—acts directly upon each individual person, with no institutions balancing the state's power. Hank Morgan is the epitome of nineteenth-century rationalistic individualism, tangled up with a gung-ho American version of nation-worship. He hopes for a rather Marxist revolt, in which the lower classes throw off their chains and he establishes a democracy that ensures their rights. His plan is (1) the overthrow of the Catholic Church to set up a “go-as-you-please” Protestant faith and (2) unlimited suffrage (398). However, his plan goes wrong: Hank creates a dictatorship, not a democracy. He fails to account for the value and meaning of intermediate institutions; he supplants but does not sufficiently replace them. Thus, the people are still firmly loyal to medieval institutions. Hank's love for the ideal of the “Republic” or “Nation” ultimately alienates him from the people.

The King and Hank espouse conflicting visions of leadership. Twain portrays Arthur as an admirable leader who demonstrates greatness and humanity. Arthur remains a man throughout his slavery; nothing can break his spirit or lessen his noble character. Hank repeatedly

acknowledges Arthur's greatness. Hank observes that, on the scaffold, King Arthur was mocked and jeered, but "he put on all his majesty and sat under this rain of contempt and insult unmoved. He certainly was great, in his way" (377). Even in slave's rags and with a noose about his neck, Arthur is a stalwart hero. Hank continually undercuts his positive comments about Arthur, though. For example, he qualifies the above compliment by condescendingly adding "in his way." I attribute these negative insinuations to Hank, not to Twain. Twain effectively communicates that Arthur is human and noble and admirable, and the people can be secure in their subjection to a morally great leader.

As a leader, Hank is the opposite of the brave king. While the King inspires loyalty, Hank alienates the people. Rather than leading by example, Hank attempts to garner support through trickery, fear, and propaganda. He ridicules the people for being dumb, truthful "rabbits," but this is only a cover-up for his dishonest schemes. Initially, he gains power by striking fear through his "magic." During his subsequent rule, Hank's main effort involves sending propagandists throughout the country, as well establishing a re-education campaign. For the latter effort, boys are taken out of community and brain-washed in an impersonal "man-factory." Whereas Arthur's knights fight for honor, the boys produced by this special school fight for the grand rhetoric of "human liberty and equality," which is ultimately empty (432).

When Hank attempts to put down Arthur, show the King's faults, or denigrate his intelligence, the sword point of his own comment often returns to pierce Hank's character. When Hank denigrates Arthur, he reveals his own pettiness. For instance, Hank complains that King Arthur sees himself as superior. Yet, Arthur demonstrates true care for a dying peasant woman, while Hank looks on weakly. In fact, Hank is just as guilty of feeling haughty—and he is less noble in his expressions of superiority. Hank refers to the medieval masses as "the

quaintest and simplest and trustiest race” (63). He elevates himself as a peerless being: “Here I was, a giant among pigmies, a man among children, a master intelligence among intellectual moles” (67). This attitude has pitiable consequences, manifested on the trek with the king. When Hank and the King are with the rural villagers, Hank’s version of “understanding” these peasants’ plight is to play mean tricks on them. He tramples their honest pride for the sake of his own ego.

Besides implementing questionable leadership practices, Hank espouses a philosophy of modern nation-worship that carries sober implications: individuals are parts of the mass and can be sacrificed for the sake of the nation. Certainly, he believes that he is working for the common good. However, he is the only one who decides the nature of this “common good”—modern progress—and it is his duty to impose it on Arthurian Britain. Imagining himself as a hero on a just crusade, he declares, “I was a champion of hard, unsentimental, common-sense and reason. I was entering the lists to either destroy knight-errantry or be its victim” (384). Rather than establishing justice, though, Hank’s delusion results in a totalitarian rule and extermination of almost an entire class of people: the knights. While Arthur and his knights would sacrifice themselves for others, Hank would sacrifice everyone else for his projects of progress.

As he promotes his dehumanizing modern project, Hank himself becomes less and less human. In his battle against the knights, Hank descends to inhuman cruelty. For example, Hank’s ignoble use of a shotgun against the knights in the tournament is revolting to human sensibilities. Hank gloats, “Bang! one saddle empty. Bang! another one. Bang-bang! and I bagged two....Knight-errantry was a doomed institution. The march of civilization was begun” (393). Perhaps he should have declared, “The march of modern alienation and mass destruction

by totalitarian states was begun.” Hank’s warped version of “civilization” not only destroys relationships, but also exterminates innocent people.

Hank’s final attack on knighthood further demonstrates how individualism, combined with nation-worship, leads to inhuman totalitarianism—the opposite of healthy community. Because Hank supposes that he knows the people’s good, whoever stands in the way of this good must be eliminated. Consider Hank’s ironic statement about the piles of dynamited knights: “As to destruction of life, it was amazing. Moreover, it was beyond estimate. Of course we could not *count* the dead, because they did not exist as individuals, but merely as homogenous protoplasm, with alloy of iron and buttons” (432). The brave knights had been blown into unidentifiable bits by the dynamite, and, later, piles of electrocuted knights would also become anonymous masses. When the nation becomes over-powerful and overrun by a dictator, the people become anonymous, i.e., community is destroyed. Ultimately, the state can kill them for the sake of progress.

Despite his disturbingly dictatorial qualities, Hank eventually undergoes a surprising change toward humanity, which could be considered a “conversion” to the medieval order. Near the novel’s end, Hank finds the medieval sense of belonging more powerful than his modern commitment to the Nation. The primary institution, the building block of society, is the family. When Hank marries and has a child, his commitment to family triumphs over his nation-building project. First, he relinquishes oversight of the kingdom when he believes his daughter to be ill. Second, when he returns to the nineteenth century, he feels out of place and, most of all, he misses his medieval wife, Sandy. In his dying speech, an apostrophe to Sandy, he cries that he was “set down, a stranger and forlorn in that strange England, with an abyss of thirteen centuries yawning between me and you! between me and my home and my friends! between me and all

that is dear to me, all that could make life worth the living!" (447) Thus, the final passage of the novel is a testimony of Hank's longing for the culture in which he had found belonging. More specifically, it is a longing for the family, the specific institution which had developed his sense of belonging. He does not cry out for American democracy; he does not bewail the huddled masses or the beacon of freedom. Instead, he cries for his beloved wife and child and, in this final act, testifies to his own humanness and the inherent humanity of the medieval order.

Whom do we instinctively admire: Hank or King Arthur? Hank is a caustic figure whose calculating attitude leaves a sour taste in the reader's mouth. He simultaneously attracts admiration for his wits and repels the reader by his insensitivity. Further, as a conniving, destructive ruler who does not deserve the name of "leader," Hank looks subhuman next to the noble, compassionate King Arthur. Snapshots of Hank the dictator reveal a repulsive, frightening, sad figure. Nevertheless, a medieval system of personal institutions wins even in Hank's life, because it fills his essential human needs of loyalty, security, and meaning. In the end, Hank is converted, unknowingly perhaps, to the medieval order. If Hank had been allowed to continue his rule alongside King Arthur, "the Boss" may have better understood and allowed for the medieval system of community. I even suspect he would have slowly developed personal loyalties to his community, the king, and even knighthood.

Work Cited

Twain, Mark. *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*. Ed. Bernard L. Stein. 1979.

Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1983.