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## THE INFLUENCE OF CELTIC MYTH AND RELIGION ON THE ARTHURIAN LEGENDS

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THE INFLUENCE OF CELTIC MYTH AND  
RELIGION ON THE ARTHURIAN LEGENDS

by

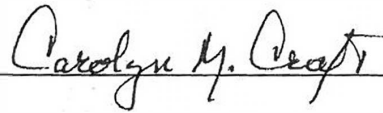
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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

Longwood University

2004



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April 30, 2004

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## PREFACE

The person and idea of King Arthur conjures up various images ranging from a young boy pulling a sword from a stone, to a triumphant warrior in battle, to an aging man floating on a barge to the mystical isle of Avalon. Some of the current scholarly discussion regarding Arthur revolves around his historicity. Whether or not a man, warrior, or king named Arthur ever actually walked the earth has little effect on the literature of the man and his legends. These legends were birthed from cultures that needed a hero, one who could shoulder the hopes of all of Britain. The man and his retinue who emerge from the legends known as Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table has roots firmly embedded in Celtic history. Celtic mythology and religion laid the foundation for the legends of Arthur. This thesis will establish three tracts from which the Arthurian legends derive their roots from Celtic mythology and Celtic Christianity.

Celtic characteristics are prevalent in Arthurian literature and the feats of Arthur and his knights find their heritage in the tales of Celtic mythology. Direct parallels can be drawn from Cú Chulainn in the Ulster cycle tales, from early tales of Arthur such as are found in the Mabinogion, and even from Malory's Morte d'a Arthur. Similarly, the legends of Gwydion in Celtic mythology can actually be considered a precursor to Arthur himself.

Likewise, the magical, or mythical elements seen in the stories of Arthur have direct links to Celtic gods. For example, the Celtic goddess of war and death, Morrighane, is a

precursor to Arthur's legendary sister, Morgan Le Fay. So too, the early Celtic mythological character Myrddin passes his "magic" along to Merlin.

Finally, one of the predominant branches of the Arthurian stories is the persistent quest for one worthy to find the Holy Grail. This holy symbol which is such a cornerstone of this legend can actually be traced back to the Celtic horn of plenty and the cup that Joseph of Arimathea allegedly brought to the British Isles. The Celtic connection between the Arthurian Grail and Celtic mythology and religion is unmistakable.

Arthur is not just a hero of the British: his roots are found among the Celts. As the Celts made their transition from paganism to Christianity, so did their literature, and their heroes. Hence, Celtic symbols, characters, heroes, and gods morphed from pagan to Christian or other "acceptable" forms, into what we now know as the Legends of King Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table.

*Chapter 1*

## CELTIC CHARACTERISTICS AND HISTORICAL ROOTS OF THE ARTHURIAN LEGENDS

King Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table are a distinct image of the glory of Britain in the Middle Ages. After all, he did pull the sword out of the stone to become the King of England. Many retellings of the legends of Arthur and his men project an image of an English king who dominates the British Isles and, in some cases, the mainland of Europe. This view of the legends of Arthur, however, is not a complete picture of this mythical figure. To fully understand the depth of these stories their true origin must be taken into account. There is much debate as to when the Celts reigned throughout Europe. Myles Dillon and Nora Chadwick devote a great deal of energy on this question in their work The Celtic Realms. It is their opinion that by 300 BC, the Celts dominated most of Europe, including the British Isles (5-6). Once feared as a bloodthirsty, savage people, the Celts of the Island were not afraid of battle but preferred a life of harvest. They fiercely defended their land against invaders, including the Romans around 50 AD. It is from this history and culture of the Celts that the legends of Arthur find their true origins. Celtic characteristics are prevalent in Arthurian literature: the feats of Arthur and his knights find their beginnings in the tales of Celtic Mythology.

Early Celtic Mythology is steeped in prophecy: its fulfillment and its frustration. The legends of Arthur too are bathed in the idea of destiny based on prophecy. One of

the means of hearing prophecy was through the druids, or religious leaders, of the Celts. One of the earliest written compilations of Celtic literature is *The Táin Bó Cuailnge* or The Cattle Raid of Cooley. The Tain is myth, legend, and history, like the Arthurian legends. One does not have to read further than the introductory page to the legends before encountering a prophecy that will shape the course of the story.

Nes the daughter of Eochaid Salbuide of the yellow heel was sitting outside Emain with her royal women about her. The druid Cathbad from the Tratraige of Mag Inis passed by, and the girl said to him:

‘What is the present hour lucky for?’

‘For begetting a king on a queen,’ he said.

The queen asked him if that were really true, and the druid swore by god that it was: a son conceived at that hour would be heard of in Ireland forever. The girl saw no other male near, and she took him inside with her.

She grew heavy with a child. It was in her womb for three years and three months. And at the feast of Othar she was delivered. (The Tain 3)

The result of this prophecy was the birth of Conchobhar, the great king of the men of Ulster.

Arthur too was born into a prophecy, under strikingly similar circumstances. During his siege on the Duke of Cornwall, Uther Pendragon essentially wrests a special

favor from Merlin, to sleep with the Duke's wife, prompting a prophecy from Merlin.

Malory's version describes it thus:

'Syre,' said Merlyn, 'I knowe al your hert every dele. So ye wil be sworn unto me, as ye be a true kyng enoynted, to fulfille my desyre, y shal have your desyre.'

Thenne the kyng was sworne upon the four Evangelistes.

'Syre,' said Merlyn, 'this is my desyre: the first nyght that ye shal lye by Igrayne ye shal gete a child on her; and whan that is borne, that it shall be delyverd to me for to nourisshe thereas I wille have it, for it shal be your worship and the childis availle as mykel as they child is worth.' (4)

The main difference between Malory's version of the foretelling of Arthur's conception, surrounding circumstances, and birth and the one found in Geoffrey of Monmouth's History of the Kings of Britain, is when the prophecy of Arthur's coming is actually given. In Geoffrey, Merlin prophesies of Arthur's coming when an unusual star appears in the sky before Uther even comes to power as king of Britain.

Hasten forward, most noble leader! Hasten forward, Uther, and do not put off for a moment making contact with the enemy. Victory shall be yours and you will be King of all Britain. The star signifies you in person, and so does the fiery dragon beneath the star. The beam of light, which stretches towards the shore of Gaul, signifies your son, who will be a most powerful man. His dominion shall extend over all the kingdoms which the beam covers. (Geoffrey 201)



The means by which Uther begets Arthur on Igraine in Geoffrey is essentially identical to Malory. Like the druid Cathbad who gives the prophecy and then helps to fulfill it, Merlin is both the prophet and the means of its fulfillment. Prophecy sets the stage for men of great renown, but, in each case, the prophecy relies on the holy man or druid to assure its fulfillment. The stories of Arthur share this trait with their Celtic predecessors.

There are two distinct segments of Celtic mythology; one is truly mythical where the heroes either are gods or have distinctly god-like qualities, such as the Celtic mythological hierarchy, which includes Dagda, Brigit and Lleu. The second is a very human mythology where might and abilities are esteemed above all. This includes various folklore and history materials, including the tales of the four branches of Ireland. The mythical elements will be discussed in a subsequent chapter. As for the human mythology, one of the most recognizable is Cú Chulainn - a bold, daring, and sometimes foolhardy young man whose feats are meticulously recorded in *The Táin Bó Cuailnge*. It is in the reign of Conchobhar that this hero warrior of Arthurian dimensions comes into his own. Cú Chulainn is a prime example of a human whose mythological deeds are the precursors for Arthur's. This character provides a blueprint for the super human feats Arthur tackles in his lifetime without being dubbed a god.

For example, in the tale "How Cú Chulainn Got His Name" found in a collection of Celtic stories translated by Kenneth Jackson, a young boy single-handedly beats "three-times fifty boys" in "the hole game" (*Celtic Miscellany* 30). Nothing in the description from Conchobhar suggests a belief that the boy is a god, or even god-like.

He simply has amazing abilities. “And when it was their turn to hurl and his (the boy) to keep goal, he would catch the three times fifty balls outside the hole, and none would get past him into the hole. When it was their turn to keep goal and his to hurl, he would put the three times fifty balls into the hole without missing” (Celtic Miscellany 30). As Conchobhar observes the boy he comments to his own warriors that whatever people birthed this young warrior are fortunate to have such a boy grow into a man to fight for them. On the suggestion of his friend Ferghus, Conchobhar invites the boy to join the warriors at a feast. The boy is unwilling to leave his play but promises to join Conchobhar when he is through.

The boy’s feats are seen again as he attempts to join Conchobhar and his men at the home of Culann the smith for the feat. Culann has loosed his bloodhound to watch over the feasting warriors. In his own words: “I have a good bloodhound; when his dog-chain is loosed from him, no traveller or wayfarer would dare to approach the same canton as him; and he recognizes no one but me myself. As for strength, he can do the work of a hundred” (Celtic Miscellany 31). The boy is given the chance to prove himself again as he approaches Culann’s home. Jackson’s translation reads:

The bloodhound observed the little boy [and] what he wanted was not to bite him up to eat, but to swallow him down at one gulp past the trunk of his ribs and the width of his throat and the midriff of his chest. And the boy had no means of defense; but he threw a cast of the ball so that it went down the gaping gullet of the bloodhound’s throat, and brought all the internal guts in him out through the back way; and he

seized him by the two legs and dashed him against a standing stone, so that he fell in scattered pieces on the ground. (32)

Still, although his deeds are magnificent, it is never suggested that he is anything other than fully man.

It is not until the feasting warriors hear the commotion outside caused by the boy and the bloodhound that the narrator reveals that Conchobhar is the boy's uncle. There is some question in Kinsella's translation as to whether or not Cú Chulainn might actually be the child of Conchobhar. The result of this episode is that the boy is given a new name to represent his feats and new station in life. They call him Cú Chulainn, the "hound of Culann," for he will serve as protector for Culann until a new bloodhound can be found to replace the slain one. Once again, the emergence of a druid to mark the significance of the moment is notable. When the boy rejects his new name in favor of his given name, Sédanta son of Sualtarnh, the druid Cathbhadh speaks. "Do not say that, little boy, for the men of Ireland and Scotland shall hear of that name, and the mouths of the men of Ireland and Scotland shall be full of that name" (Celtic Miscellany 33). A boy whose renown will last for future ages comes into his own through wondrous feats, which result in a new name to represent his new place. Cú Chulainn is the Celtic precursor to Arthur in his god-like traits but maintaining his fully human status.

The story of Arthur's accession has a similar bearing with that of Cú Chulainn. Between the prophecy and conception of Arthur, Malory leaves the story of Arthur until after Uther Pendragon's death. According to Malory, between the time of Uther's

death and the reappearance of Arthur, Britain was “in grete jeopardy long whyle” and many of the great knights of the realm “wende to have ben kyng” (7). Merlin steps in to prepare for a conspicuous emergence of the boy king:

And whan matyns and the first masse was done there was sene in the  
chircheyard ayenst the hyhe autler a grete stone four sware, lyke unto a  
marbel stone, and in myddes therof was lyke an anvylde of stele a foot  
on hyghe, and theryn stack a fayre swerd naked by the poynt, and letters  
there were wryten in gold about the swerd that saiden thus: ‘WHOSO  
PULLETH OUTE THIS SWERD OF THIS STONE ANDs ANVYLD IS  
RIGHTWYS KYNGE BORNE OF ALL EN(G)LOND.’ (7)

Many try to wrest the sword from the stone, but none can cause it to budge.

Later, as the ten best knights in the land gather for a contest to see who is worthy to draw the sword, the young boy Arthur races to retrieve a lost sword for his brother Kay. When finding their lodgings locked for the day, he says to himself, “‘I will ryde to the chircheyard and take the swerd with me that stycketh in the stone, for my broder sir Kay shal not be without a swerd this day.’ And so he handled the swerd by the handels, and lightly and fiersly pulled it out of the stone” (Malory 8). Cú Chulainn was harassed by Culann for killing his bloodhound, in the same way, Arthur’s own “family” doubt his claims of pulling the sword. Only after they themselves test the sword do they acknowledge his feat and bow. As Cú Chulainn’s true lineage is discovered, Arthur immediately ceases to be just another boy as his parentage by Uther is revealed. As Cú Chulainn’s name is changed both to signify that he has come into his own and for the

recognition of the land, Arthur's name is also changed. He ceases to be Arthur, son of Ector and becomes Arthur, son of Uther Pendragon, king.

There are further similarities between the Celtic hero stories and the legends of Arthur beyond these hero's childhood years. One of these similarities is to a trait that is Norse in origin but is also quite predominant in early Celtic writing, the berserker frenzy. According to the American Heritage Dictionary, a berserker is: "*Norse Mythology*. A fierce warrior who fought in battle with frenzied violence and fury" (126). The same dictionary's definition of berserk is "Destructively or frenetically violent" (126). The berserker frenzy was a term used to describe what happened to warriors in the heat of battle, and sometimes love, to explain their unbelievable feats. The Celts also called this phenomenon the "warp-spasm." The trait is laid out in a description of Cú Chulainn: "The Warp-Spasm over took him: it seemed each hair was hammered into his head, so sharply they shot upright. You would swear a fire-speck tipped each hair. He squeezed one eye narrower than the eye of a needle; he opened the other wider than the mouth of a goblet. He bared his jaws to the ear; he peeled back his lips to the eye-teeth till his gullet showed. The hero-halo rose up from the crown of his head" (The Tain 77). This characteristic can be seen throughout early Celtic literature and on through the Arthurian legends.

Several examples come from the tales of Cú Chulainn starting early in his life. In his search for a wife, at the ripe age of seventeen, a prospect named Emer tells him that he will not win her heart and body before he "has done the feat of the salmon-leap carrying twice his weight in gold, and struck down three groups of nine men with a

single stroke, leaving the middle man of each nine unharmed” (The Tain 27). Later in the same tale, Cú Chulainn is attempting to speak to another woman and must cross a seemingly impassable bridge: “He stepped to the head of the bridge and gave his hero’s salmon-leap onto the middle. He reached the far end of the bridge so quickly it had no time to fly up at him” (The Tain 29). Each of these incidents mentions the “salmon-leap” which refers to a abnormal occurrence that takes over Cú Chulainn as he attempts to accomplish different tasks or goals.

In a later tale, Cú Chulainn is being asked where his loyalties lie. The questioning that he is enduring brings out the fury in him. “Cú Chulainn had taken off his shirt, and the snow was all round him up to his waist as he sat, and the snow had melted for a cubit around him because of the intensity of the warrior’s heat” (The Tain 37-8). Only some time later is the full intensity of this “warp-spasm” revealed. After multiple skirmishes with warriors from his enemies Ailill and Medb, Cú Chulainn is resting in front of a fire. Suddenly, he sees the whole of his enemy’s army coming over a hill toward him:

Rage and fury seized him at the sight of that army, at the great forces of his foes, the immensity of his enemies. He grasped his two spears, his shield and his sword and he shook the shield and rattled the spears and flourished the sword and gave the warrior’s scream from his throat, so that demons and devils and goblins of the glen and fiends of the air replied, so hideous was the call he uttered on high. [And] one hundred

warriors fell dead of fright and terror that night in the heart of the guarded camp. (The Tain 141-2)

This characteristic is commonplace throughout The Tain as is seen here with Cú Chulainn. However, despite the super human strengths and abilities that he shows, he is still accepted as fully and completely human. “Let us not make too much of it,” Medb said. “He has only one body. He can suffer wounding. He is not beyond being taken” (The Tain 76). Despite the fact that he is single handedly defeating Medb’s entire army, Cú Chulainn is not representative of the gods.

One of the first examples of this characteristic in Arthurian legend is found in Geoffrey’s History. Very early in his rule, Arthur is attempting to push the Saxons out of England. During an intense battle where the Saxons appear to be dominating, Arthur’s own berserker frenzy kicks in.

When the greater part of the day had passed in this way, Arthur went berserk, for he realized that things were still going well for the enemy and that victory for his own side was not yet in sight. He drew his sword Caliburn, called upon the name of the Blessed Virgin, and rushed forward at full speed into the thickest ranks of the enemy. Every man whom he struck, calling upon God as he did so, he killed at a single blow. He did not slacken his onslaught until he had dispatched four hundred and seventy men with his sword Caliburn. (Geoffrey 217)

This berserker frenzy does not just effect Arthur. In another battle, two of Arthur’s knights are outraged by the slaughter of their fellow knights: the result is another

berserker episode. Together with his men, Hoel attacked with a fury: “He was raging like a thunderbolt in another sector, encouraging his own men and bringing death to his enemies. He parried their attacks with the utmost courage, giving and receiving blows, but not drawing back for a second” (Geoffrey 254). The terminology may be different, but the signs and results are the same in the Arthurian legends.

Malory also contains feats that can be attributed to this same characteristic. King Ban of Benwick enters a field of battle “as fierce as a lion,” to the consternation of his foes. His battle fury is known throughout the realm. “So whan thes two kyngis, Ban and Bors, com into the batayle, they com in so fersely that the strokis re[d]ounded agayne fro the woode and the watir. Wherefore kynge Lotte wepte for pité and dole that he saw so many good knyghtes take their ende” (22). Each of the knights in turn become incensed by an injustice, or a battle that their fellow knights are faring poorly in, and becomes enraged enough to turn the tide of the battle. The continuance of this trait from Celtic heritage through the Arthurian legends is clear.

Another Celtic influence on the Arthurian legends is one of cyclical life. Much Celtic mythology follows a cyclical pattern. One of the most obvious and prevalent examples of this is death and rebirth. The druids believed that death and birth were essentially one and the same. This is evident in how these two worlds, Celtic and Arthurian, viewed the right of kingship. This idea in both Celtic literature and the Arthurian legends is almost a patterned reincarnation. When a king dies, it is his blood that must ascend in his place. In their comprehensive work on the Celts, Myles Dillon and Nora Chadwick explain that the druids “taught that the soul was immortal and



passed after death into another body” (14). Perhaps it was their belief that a part of their soul was passed into their heirs. The son must not only succeed the father, but the father must also die for the son to fully take his place as ruler. Both Celtic literature and the Arthurian legends illustrate this idea.

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, the ascension of Cú Chulainn to a place of king-like honor under Conchobhar takes place only after Conchobhar realizes that the boy is his nephew. At that time, Conchobhar makes sure Cú Chulainn is well cared for, as if already grooming him for the role of successor. In the end, Cú Chulainn is essentially raised by a panel of the community’s finest individuals: “In this manner he will be formed by all –chariot-fighter, prince, and sage. He will be cherished by many, this boy, and he will settle your trials of honour and win your ford-fights and all your battles” (*The Tain* 25). The idea that Cú Chulainn is blood heir to Conchobhar is furthered when the men of Ulster decide they must find him a wife, who will bear him a son, so that this rite of “re-ascension” through bloodline can continue: “There was the danger besides that Cú Chulainn might die young and leave no son, which would be tragic” (26). Conchobhar himself sends men out to find a suitable wife for his “reincarnated” heir. There must be a known commodity as successor, an idea fuelled by a belief in the idea of cyclical kingship.

Later in *The Tain*, Cú Chulainn himself is caught in the struggle to produce an heir. However, he runs into a dilemma that Conchobhar did not face. In an attempt to shield his own son from danger until it is time for Connla to rule, Cú Chulainn and Connla’s mother, Aife, send him away. The directions Cú Chulainn give are that the

child shall be named Connla and that he “was to reveal his name to no man, that he must make way for no man, and refuse no man combat” (The Tain 33). In an Oedipal turn of events, it is Cú Chulainn himself who encounters his son upon his return to Ireland. “Seven years to the day after Cú Chulainn left Aife, the boy came looking for his father” (39). The men of Ulster watch his arrival by boat and are amazed at what they see the child doing, the feats he is accomplishing on his way to their shores. Cú Chulainn sees the boy and fears the country that the child is from because surely “their grown men can grind us into dust if one of their young boys can do that” (40). After the boy puts several of the Ulstermen to shame, Cú Chulainn goes to the water’s edge to meet this “threat.” The child obeyed the only command from his father seven years ago and so refused to give Cú Chulainn his name. They fight and Connla is eventually killed. Now the cycle is broken and the twilight of the Ulstermen begins to dawn. Neither Conchobhar nor Cú Chulainn die in The Tain, so they have no reincarnation. They remain stagnant as do the Ulstermen as a whole.

Reincarnation as a theme appears frequently in the Arthurian legends. Going back to Merlin’s prophecy regarding Arthur’s birth in Geoffrey, this idea presents itself: “There appeared a star of great magnitude and brilliance, with a single beam shining from it. At the end of this beam was a ball of fire, spread out in the shape of a dragon. From the dragon’s mouth stretched forth two rays of light, one of which seemed to extend its length beyond the latitude of Gaul, while the second turned towards the Irish Sea and split up into seven smaller shafts of light” (200-01). When Merlin interprets the meaning of the star, he tells the death of Aurelius Ambrosius, the current king. He also

prophesies the ascension of Uther Pendragon to the throne and the birth of a son to Uther who would overshadow his father with his greatness. Arthur is but a child when Uther becomes sick and dies. Malory and Geoffrey's accounts of Arthur's ascension to the throne differ substantially. Geoffrey does not allow the right of succession to hang in the balance; Arthur is undoubtedly Uther's son and is present at his father's passing so there is no question who will reign following Uther's death. Malory however, has Arthur growing up in obscurity and the right of succession seems to vanish. In Malory's version, with the absence of a king, the people appear to be somewhat lost.

Arthur, like Cú Chulainn, has trouble concerning his heir. Although each version of the Arthurian legend handles the topic of Mordred slightly differently, most versions at least agree that Mordred is the son of Arthur's sister. Some go so far as to suggest that Mordred is the son of Arthur himself, with his sister. In either case, Mordred is the closest relation to Arthur and thus, like Conchobhar and Cú Chulainn, would be successor to the throne. However, as seen in Malory, a prophecy from Merlin attempts to hinder this succession. Per Merlin's advice, Arthur sends all the children that were born on May day away on a ship. "And so by fortune the shyppe drove unto a castelle, and was all to-ryven and destroyed the moste party, save that Mordred was cast up, and a good man founde hym, and fostird hym tylle he was fourtene yere of age, and than brought hym to the courte" (37). Mordred's downfall is that he attempts to bypass the natural order of succession. He attempts to take on the kingship without his "father/uncle's" passing. Instead he supplants himself in his father's absence, with both the crown and his wife. "And aftirwarde he drew hym unto Wynchester, and there he

toke quene Gwenyver, and seyde playnly that he wolde wedde her (which as hys unclys wyff and hys fadirs wyff)” (707). Again, as in the story of Cú Chulainn and Connla, the Oedipal theme dominates. Mordred’s choice to act outside the natural cycle of kingship sets up the final battle with Arthur, the “wycked day of Desteny” (713):

Than the kynge gate his speare in bothe hys hondis, and ran towarde sir Mordred, cryyng and saying, “Traytoure, now ys thy dethe-day com!” And whan sir Mordred saw kynge Arthur he ran untill hym with hys swerde drawyn in hys honde, and there kyng Arthur smote sir Mordred undir the shyld, with a foyne of hys speare, thorowoute the body more than a fadom. And whan sir Mordred felte that he had hys dethys wounde he threste hymselff with the myght that he had upp to the burre of kyng Arthurs speare, and ryght so he smote hys fadir, kynge Arthure, with hys swerde holdynge in both hys hondys, uppon the syde of the hede, that the swerde perced the helmet and the tay of the brayne. And therewith Mordred daysshed downe starke dede to the erthe. And noble kynge Arthure felle in a swoughe to the erthe. (Malory 714)

So, like the story of Cú Chulainn, the father kills his son and heir, which should leave the kingdom in jeopardy.

Although the era of the round table and the glorious deeds of Arthur seem to come to a close, Malory and Geoffrey leave open the question of Arthur’s death. Both versions have Arthur being taken away for the healing of his wounds. Geoffrey has him taken to the Isle of Avallon, itself a direct Celtic link.

Malory has him taken on a barge by several queens. Geoffrey tells that Arthur was “mortally wounded,” and taken away for healing, but does not speak of his death. Interestingly, he claims that Arthur “handed the crown of Britain over to his cousin” (261). Malory shows a grieving Sir Bedivere mourning over the body of a knight, recently slain, at a monastery. However, Malory makes sure to note that “the ermyte knew nat in sertayne that he was veryly the body of [kyn]ge Arthur” (717).

The twentieth century fantasy novel by T.H. White, based on the life of king Arthur accurately portrays this quandary in its title: The Once and Future King. Arthur is the consummate example of the Celtic idea of death and birth being the same. He is the ultimate king who has no need for an heir to follow him. His own reincarnation is the only need for his reign to be complete.

The stories of Arthur do not simply contain interspersed characteristics of Celtic influence. Here is how Myles Dillon and Nora Chadwick describe the Celts:

The whole race, which is now called Gallic or Galatic, is madly fond of war, high-spirited and quick to battle, but otherwise straightforward and not of evil character. And so when they are stirred up they assemble in their bands for battle, quite openly and without forethought, so that they are easily handled by those who desire to outwit them; for at any time or place and on whatever pretext you stir them up, you will have them ready to face danger, even if they have nothing on their side but their own strength and courage. On the other hand if won over by gentle

persuasion they willingly devote their energies to useful pursuits and even take to a literary education. Their strength depends both on their mighty bodies, and on their numbers. And because of this frank and straightforward element in their character they assemble in large numbers on slight provocation, being ever ready to sympathize with the anger of a neighbour who thinks he has been wronged. (Dillon and Chadwick 7)

These comments on the Celts could easily be a commentary on Arthur and his knights. For example, the idea of a gathering such as the Knights of the Round Table was not common: knights banded together to protect common land or property, or to pay allegiance to their king. Arthur gathers around him a band of warriors for camaraderie, mirroring the clans of the Celts. More often than not he and his men ride into battle hopelessly outnumbered. Only after intervention from Merlin or a fury of berserker fighting from his own men does Arthur ultimately win the battle. As in the example of King Ban of Benwick, only his good timing causes Arthur and his men to win the battle.

Like the Celts, Arthur's men stand ready to fight against an offense at any time. They are even willing to fight against their fellow Round Table knights if the offense is clear: "Ryght so the two men departed and lefte hym with sir Kay that scorned and mocked hym. Thereat was sir Gawayne wroth. And in especiall sir Launcelot bade sir Kay leve his mockyng" (Malory 178). Launcelot and Gawain are ready to fight with their friend Sir Kay over his mocking of an unknown knight. Other knights display the

same traits: ‘Than kynge Marke had grete dispyte at sir Trystram. And than he chaced hym oute of Cornwayle” (Malory 353). “So as they rode by the way kynge Marke than began to mocke sir Dynadan, and seyde, ‘I wente you knyghtes of the Rounde Table might in no wyse fynde youre macchis.’ ‘Ye sey well,’ seyde sir Dynadan. ‘As for you, on my lyff, [I] calle you none of the good knyghtes. But syth ye have such dispyte at me, I require you to juste with me to preve my strengthe.’” (358). Almost any knight in Arthur’s company can be observed taking up a fight for himself or one another for the smallest offenses.

That they are quick to give battle is clear; however, it is not just in the case of offenses that these knights desire battle. There is a pride that comes with their fighting. For example, Malory dedicates an entire book, “A Noble Tale of Sir Launcelot Du Lake,” to speak almost entirely of Sir Launcelot’s feats in various battles. Launcelot moves from one skirmish to the next with both knights and giants. However, at the end of this group of stories Launcelot does something unusual. “So on the morne sir Launcelot arose erly and leffte sir Kay slepyng. And sir Launcelot toke sir Kayes armoire and his shylde and armed hym; and so he wente to the stable and sadyld his horse, and toke his leve of his oste and departed” (164). There are two explanations for Sir Launcelot’s assuming Sir Kay’s persona. The first is given by Sir Kay himself upon finding his armour missing. “And bycause of his armoire and shylde I am sure I shall ryde in pease” (164). In other words, no matter where Sir Kay goes in Sir Launcelot’s disguise, no one will dare fight with him because of Sir Launcelot’s renown. The second explanation can also be explained in Sir Kay’s words. Sir Launcelot is “madly

fond of war.” His deeds are so well known that he can not find men to battle with him in his own visage. Therefore, he dons the appearance of Sir Kay so that he can continue to find men who will fight with him. Like their predecessor Celts, Arthur and his knights are, again in the words of Dillon and Chadwick, “high-spirited and quick to battle, but otherwise straightforward and not of evil character” (7).

Arthur’s own “oath,” to which his men swear, speaks to this Celt-like balance of battle, good character and brotherhood:

And [Arthur] charged them never to do outerage nothir mourthir, and  
allwayes to fle treson, and to gyff mercy unto hym that askith mercy,  
uppon payne of forfiture [of their] worship and lordship of kynge  
Arthure for evirmore; and allwayes to do ladyes, damesels, and  
jantilwomen and sydowes [socour:] strengthe hem in hir ryghtes, and  
never to enforce them, uppon payne of dethe. Also, that no man take no  
batayles in a wrongefull quarell for no love ne for no worldis goddis.

(Malory 75)

Like the Celts before them, Arthur and his men eventually spread their influence beyond their own boundaries. According to Dillon and Chadwick, the Celtic people’s ability to expand seemed “inexhaustible in energy and manpower. This rapid expansion over an enormous area implies great fecundity and a great spirit of adventure” (6). Arthur’s attempt to expand the borders of his kingdom all the way to Rome hints at the Celtic heritage in his blood. The great quest for the Holy Grail by the Round Table



knights speaks to the “great spirit of adventure” that they inherited from their Celtic roots.

Arthur and his knights of the Round Table owe much of their fiery, indomitable spirit to their Celtic heritage. Their beliefs, their love of battle and their heroic forms are rooted in Celtic legends and histories. From prophecies to berserker frenzies to the cyclical nature of death and birth, the legends of King Arthur have their beginnings among the Celts.

*Chapter 2*

## CELTIC MAGIC – CELTIC GODS AND THEIR ARTHURIAN FORMS

Every culture has a mythology, an otherworldly heritage that precedes its natural history. Although cultural mythologies may mirror each other in certain aspects, each culture's mythology is also unique to itself. Myth is a way to explain the unknowable, to make tangible the unreachable. It is a way of defining a culture, where its beliefs and ideals originated. Inevitably, mythology must intersect with factual history. The myth fades into a story, a dream, a fairy tale passed from generation to generation. Different aspects are incorporated into newer tales and some into history itself. Celtic Mythology and the stories of Arthur are an example of this transition.

The legends of Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table embody this intersection of mythology and reality. The very fact that these stories and characters straddle the fence between reality and legend reveals the strong ties to the mythology. Numerous Arthurian characters probably have a Celtic heritage. This chapter will focus on three main metamorphoses, those of Morgan le Fay, Merlin, and Arthur.

Of the few female characters in the Arthurian legends, Arthur's own sister, Morgan le Fay, stands out as one of the only "evil" women in the stories. Although she is seen relatively little in the stories of Arthur (modern retellings aside), her acts and choices make her unforgettable. Her biologically close relationship with Arthur makes her

deeds more appalling. In this character, there are numerous ties to a Celtic heritage. Although somewhat scattered and diluted, the traces are still visible.

Arthur's sister is barely a passing thought in the History of the Kings of Britain, by Geoffrey of Monmouth; she is mentioned only twice. Following the magical coupling of Uther Pendragon and Duke Gorlois' wife, Igrerna (also known as Igraine), Geoffrey introduces Arthur's sister thus: "From that day on they [Uther and Ygern] lived together as equals, united by their great love for each other; and they had a son and a daughter. The boy was called Arthur and the girl Anna" (208). The only other comment about Arthur's sister is to note her marriage. "The British army was put under the command of Loth of Lodonesia, with orders that he should keep the enemy at a distance. This man was one of the leaders, a valiant soldier, mature in both wisdom and age. As a reward for his prowess, the King had given him his daughter Anna and put him in charge of the kingdom while he himself was ill" (209). In Geoffrey, Modred is named as Arthur's nephew. Since Geoffrey only claims one sibling of Arthur's, one could make the case that Modred is then Anna's son. However, Geoffrey does not explicitly state this. So Arthur's sister is simply a benign character to Geoffrey.

In Malory's Works (Morte d'a Arthur), one of Arthur's three sisters is not Anna, but the more commonly known Morgan le Fay. Malory differs from Geoffrey in who Morgan's father is. When Uther has his rendezvous with Igraine, she has already had three daughters: Margawse, Elayne and Morgan le Fay (5). Morgan is clearly the youngest, and closest in age to Arthur. The other two sisters marry immediately upon Uther and Igraine's marriage. Malory has this to say about Morgan at this time: "And

the thyrd syster, Morgan le Fey, was put to scole in a nunnery, and ther she lerned so moche that she was a grete clerke of nygromancye. And after she was wedded to kynge Uryens of the lond of Gore that was syre Ewayns le Blaunche Maynys fader” (5). Malory names Margawse, wife of Lot of Orkney, as the mother of Arthur’s child and nephew, Mordred.

As Merlin is leaving Arthur to pursue the Lady of the Lake, he gives a warning to Arthur: “. . . but allwayes he warned the kyng to kepe well his swerde and the scawberde, for he told hym how theswerde and the scawberde scholde be stolyn by a woman frome hym that he moste trusted” (Malory 76). This indeed proves to be the case as Morgan uses her skills in necromancy to cause her husband King Uriens, King Arthur, and Arthur’s knight, Sir Accolon, to sleep for an unknown period of time. Arthur later wakes in a dark prison, and Uriens wakes “abedde in his wyves armyes” (82). The purpose for Morgan’s “imprisonment” of Arthur is to take over the kingdom in Arthur’s stead. The pawns that Morgan uses are Sir Accolon and the stolen Excalibur. She uses trickery to get Sir Accolon to fight his own king. “Now I suppose,” seyde Accalon, ‘she hath made all this crauftis and enchauntemente for this batayle.’ ‘Sir, ye may well beleve hit,’ seyde the dwarf” (84). Later, the Lady of the Lake puts a stop to Morgan’s antics: “The meanewhyle that they[, Arthur and Accolon,] were thus at the batayle com the Damesel of the Lake into the felde that put Merlyon undir the stone. And she com thidir for the love of kynge Arthur, for she knew how Morgan le Fay had ordained for Arthur shold have bene slayne that day, and therefore she com to save his lyff” (85).

Morgan is thwarted in her attempts by a deeper “magic” surrounding, perhaps even protecting, Arthur. At the turning point of the battle, when Arthur is ready to surrender, the Damesel steps in again. “When the Damesell of the Lake behelde Arthure, how full of prousse his body was, and of the false treson that was wrought for hym to have had hym slayne, she had grete peté that so good a knyght and such a man of worship sholde so be destroyed. And at the nexte stroke sir Accolon stroke at hym suche a stronke that by the damesels inchauntemente the swerde Excaliber fell oute of Accalons honde to the erthe” (Malory 87). Arthur then realizes his sister’s role in the treason.

Morgan’s importance in the connection between the Arthurian Legends and Celtic mythology is considerable. Arguments could be made for Morgan’s origins from one of two Celtic figures: Modron or the Morrígan. The renowned Arthurian scholar of the early twentieth century, Roger Sherman Loomis, in his work Celtic Myth and Arthurian Romance has this to say about the Celtic heritage of Morgan le Fay:

Now strangely enough, in the attempts made to explain the name Morgan le Fay, no one seems to have taken the trouble to find out whether Welsh literature supplied us with a daughter of Avallach. One of the triads tells us that she was Modron. She is not represented as a virgin but as the mother of Owein by Urien. If we consult the Huth Merlin we find Morgan le Fay the wife of Urien; pretty generally in Arthurian romance we find Urien named as the father of Ivain; and in Malory Morgan is herself called the mother of Ewaine le Blanchmains.

Thus as daughter of Avalloc, wife of Urien, mother of Ewayne, Morgan le Fay corresponds exactly to Modron, daughter of Avallach, wife of Urien, and mother of Owein. It is easy to see that the name Modron, being forgotten by the Bretons, was abandoned for Morgan, a similar-sounding man's name. But strangely enough Giraldus Cambrensis speaks of Morganis as "dea quaedam fantastica," "a certain imaginary goddess"; and even late in the fourteenth century the author of Gawain and the Green Knight speaks of her as "Morgne the goddes." (192)

The Encyclopedia Mythica gives this description of Modron: "A Welsh goddess, daughter of Avalloc, derived from the Celtic goddess Matrona. She is regarded as a prototype of Morgan (from Arthurian Legend)" ("Modron" 1). Its description of the goddess Matrona is equally sparse: "Dea Matrona: The Celtic deity at the source of the river Marne (northeastern France)" ("Dea Matrona" 1). In his discourse entitled Celtic Myth and Legend, Charles Squire gives a little insight into the person of Modron through his description of Urien: "His wife was Modron, known as the mother of Mabon, the sun-god to whom inscriptions exist as *Maþonos*. Another of the children of Urien and Modron is Owain, which was perhaps only another name for Mabon" (328). There is very little else to describe or define Modron, except through her alleged father, Avalloc, which will be addressed later.

Loomis suggests another possibility for the origin of Morgan le Fay. He quotes Giraldus Cambrensis as seeing in her a "dea quaedam fantastica," "a certain imaginary goddess," a more magical persona that Morgan takes in certain literature (192). It is in

this vein of thought that Morgan's lineage derives in part from the Morrígan. The Morrígan is a Celtic and Irish goddess, according to The Encyclopedia Mythica, of "battle, strife, and fertility" ("Morrigan" 1). Squire's work represents her as:

The Morrígú, or "Great Queen." [This] supreme war-goddess of the Gaels, who resembles a fiercer Herê, perhaps symbolized the moon, deemed by early races to have preceded the sun, and worshipped with magical and cruel rites. She is represented as going fully armed, and carrying two spears in her hand. As with Arês and Poseidon in the "Iliad," her battle-cry was as loud as that of ten thousand men.

Wherever there was war, either among gods or men, she, the great queen was present, either in her own shape or in her favorite disguise, that of a "hoodie" or carrion crow." (52)

She is herself a single goddess, but she is also part of a trio of deities comprised also of "Bodhbh (Badb, scald-crow), and Nemhain ("frenzy") or Macha" ("Encyclopedia of Religion" 161). Loomis himself acknowledges that there is a link between the more benign Modron and the Morrígan in his article "Morgain la Fee and the Celtic Goddesses." He comments:

Despite the paucity of our information about Modron she betrays a resemblance to Macha in bearing twins, a boy and a girl, to a human lover. She reveals her kinship to the Morrígan by her appearance at a ford, by her announcement that she is the daughter of a king, and by the marked similarity between her mating with Urien and the Morrígan's

mating with the Dagda. According to the *Second Battle of Moytura*, a mythological text of the ninth century, the Dagda met a woman washing at the river Unius in Connaught and united with her; she was the Morrígan. Thus in striking ways Modron discloses her relationship to Macha and the Morrígan; and Modron, as we know, was the Welsh counterpart of Morgain. We are therefore confirmed that Modron is in some way an intermediate figure between the Irish goddess and the Arthurian fay.” (195)

The Morrígú is seen in early Celtic work such as the Táin Bó Cuailnge in which she comes to Cúchulainn in the form of a young woman. “Cúchulainn beheld at this time a young woman of noble figure coming toward him, wrapped in garments of many colours” (The Tain 132). Cúchulainn asks who she is, and, according to Squire’s paraphrase, she tells him that she is:

A king’s daughter, and that she has fallen in love with him through hearing of his exploits. Cúchulainn says that he has other things to think of than love. She replies that she has been giving him her help in his battles, and will still do so; and Cúchulainn answers that he does not need any woman’s help. “Then,” says she, ‘if you will not have my love and help, you shall have my hatred and enmity. When you are fighting with a warrior as good as yourself, I will come against you in various shapes and hinder you, so that he shall have the advantage.’ Cúchulainn draws his sword, but all he sees is a hoodie crow sitting on a bench. He



knows from this that the red woman in the chariot was the great queen  
of the gods. (169)

The Morrígú makes good on her promise and attempts to thwart him in his next battle.

The Morrígú and Cúchulainn encounter each other several more times until Cúchulainn's death. He, like Arthur, has just killed his own son in combat, but Cúchulainn is distraught. He gives in to the taunts of his enemies and enters a final, futile battle. It is at this time that the Morrígú appears to him first as "a maiden of the *sídhe* [god who dwells in the earth] washing clothes and armor, and she told him that it was the clothes and arms of Cúchulainn, who was soon to be dead" (Squire 181). Second, she appears to him as three hags (the Morrígú in her three forms) making him eat dog-flesh (Squire 181). And finally, once Cúchulainn is dead, she appears simply as a crow on his shoulder (Squire 183). The Morrígú is fulfilling her role as goddess of battle, both helping and hindering Cúchulainn. In addition, she is also fulfilling her role of goddess of death by choosing him to die, symbolized in the washing of his clothes, and by being present at his death.

The impact of Morgan le Fay's connection with the Morrígan on the Arthurian legends is two-fold. According to Squire, "Badb and the Morrígú lived on as late as any of the Gaelic deities. Indeed, they may be said to still survive in the superstitious dislike and suspicion shown in all Celtic-speaking countries for their *avatar*, the hoodie-crow" (53). The connection between the Arthurian legends, the Morrígan, and the crows comes in the great Celtic storytelling of The Mabinogion. In the "Dream of Rhonabwy," a man named Rhonabwy recounts a bizarre dream he has that essentially

tells the tale of a battle between Arthur and Owain's men while they play a game of "gwyddbwyll." In this dream, Owain's warriors are not men but ravens. At first, Arthur's men are slaughtering Owain's ravens. Various squires come to warn Owain that his ravens are being killed. Owain asks Arthur to call off his men and Arthur's reply is simply, "If you please, play on" (187). This continues for some time through several squires until Owain finally tells his squire:

"Go, and where you see the fiercest fighting raise the standard, and let God's will be done." The page went off to where the fighting was going badly for the ravens; he raised the standard, and at that the ravens rose, full of anger and violence and joy as well, to let the wind into their wings and to cast off fatigue. Having recovered strength and the will to fight they swooped down in anger and joy on the men who had earlier inflicted wounds and injuries and losses upon them. Some carried off heads, some eyes, some ears, some arms, and as they rose into the air their fluttering and gleeful cawing set up a great din, while another such commotion was raised by the men who were being pecked and stabbed and even killed. (187)

Both Modron and Morgan le Fay are known as being wife of Urien and mother of Owain. In the "Dream of Rhonabwy" Owain's fighting force is represented by the raven, the symbolic form of his mother, the Morrígan, goddess of battle and strife. Again, a connection among the Morrígan, Modron, and Morgan le Fay is suggested.

Another interesting similarity between Celtic deities and Morgan is the role that each of them, or their representations, play in the death of their respective heroes through the connection with Avalon. As stated earlier, one of the persistent ideas associated with Modron is that she is the daughter of Avalloc. In one tale, Uriens finds her by a river and “had his will of her. Then she blessed him and explained that she was the daughter of the king of Annwn [the Welsh Otherworld]” (Newstead 942).

According to Loomis, “Avallach is found in the genealogies as the son of Beli, the sun-god” (Celtic Myth and Arthurian Romance 189). His name is synonymous with both the underworld and the “lord of an elysium—Hades in its aspect of a paradise of the departed” (Squire 329). This Hades name is “*Ynys Avallon*, ‘Avalon’s Island,’ or, as we know the word, Avilion” (Squire 329). Geoffrey of Monmouth elaborates on this idea in one of his works. Loomis describes it thus: the “*Vita Merlini* gives another description of the fairy isle under the name ‘Isle of Apples.’ He tells of the nine sisters who dwell there, of whom Morgan is the fairest” (191). So there are numerous connections between Morgan and Modron and also between Avallach and Avalon. Avalon is both a paradise and a version of Hades. The Morrígan is the goddess of death and appears to warriors as they die. Malory’s version includes Morgan in Arthur’s passing to Avalon:

Than Sir Bedwere toke the kynge upon hys bak and so wente with hym  
to the waters side. And whan they were there, evyn faste by the banke  
hoved a lytyll barge with many fayre ladyes in hit, and amonge hem all  
was a queen, and all they had blak hoodis. And all they wepte and

shryked whan they saw kynge Arthur. "Now put me into that barge,"  
 seyde the kynge. And so he ded sofftely, and there [re]sceyved hym three  
 ladyes with grete mourning. And so they sette he[m d]owne, and in one  
 of their lapis kyng Arthure layde hys hede. And than the queen seyde,  
 "A, my dere brother! Why [ha]ve ye taryed so longe frome me? Alas,  
 thys wounde on youre hede hath caught overmuch coude!" . . .  
 "Comforte thyselff (Sir Bedwere)," seyde the kynge, "and do as well as  
 thou mayste, for in me ys no truste for to truste in. For I muste into the  
 vale of Avylyon to hele me of my grievous wounde. And if thou here  
 nevermore of me, pray for my soule!" But ever the queen and ladyes  
 wepte and shryked, that hit was pité to hyre. (716)

This is an incorporation of both Modron and the Morrígan, the goddess of the dead, as a trio of queens led by Arthur's sister Morgan takes him in a barge to the island paradise afterworld of Avallach's daughter. Celtic mythology is clearly evident in the metamorphosis of the Irish and Celtic goddess of death, to the Welsh and Celtic daughter of the ruler of Avalon, to Morgan le Fay, sister, nemesis, and welcoming healer of Arthur. Morgan's heritage points back to her unique Celtic origin.

Another character of great mythical prominence in the Arthurian legends is Merlin. Merlin's Celtic heritage is not as obvious as Morgan's is. Although there are characteristics in his personality and his actions that hearken back to Celtic influence, the path is not as direct.

The first text to call the mystical companion of Arthur “Merlin” was Geoffrey of Monmouth in his Prophetiae Merlini in 1135. However, there is reason to believe that this is not the first time this character, by any name, finds his way into the history of Britian. Many believe that Geoffrey used a character named Ambrosius from Nennius’ History of the Britons written after 800 AD. The similarities are impossible to deny. For example, in Geoffrey, Vortigern is attempting to build a tower and is foiled on each attempt. When Vortigern asks his ‘magicians,’ they tell him to “look for a lad without a father, and that, when he [Vortigern] had found one, he should kill him, so that the mortar and the stones could be sprinkled with the lad’s blood” (167). The passage in Nennius reads, “Vortigern inquired of his wise men the cause of this opposition to his undertaking, and of so much useless expense of labour? They replied, “You must find a child born without a father, put him to death, and sprinkle with his blood the ground on which the citadel is to be built, or you will never accomplish your purpose” (Nennius). The similarities in these two characters seem to point out an early influence of Merlin’s. Any perusal of Celtic mythology will fail to find a direct correlation between the name “Merlin” and any variation of the name “Merlin” in its annals. Roger Sherman Loomis argues that there was a “Merlin and that he was famous before Geoffrey exploited him” (Celtic Myth 125).

There are several Celtic personalities including Curoi, Lailoken, and Myrddin that also contribute to Merlin’s development. The person of Curoi is found in the same tales as Cúchulainn. He, like Cúchulainn, is a part of the Irish heroic cycle. Although he is not necessarily a god, he is not a mere mortal either. One of his traits, or marks, is

that of a shape shifter. Loomis sees this as a precursor to Merlin's tendency to take on numerous alternate personalities. "The metamorphoses of Curoi are matched in Arthurian romance by the well-known transformations of Merlin. Curoi vaunts his arts, and Merlin his 'crafts.' Curoi, under the name of Terror Son of Great Fear, used to form himself into whatever shape he pleased, and the same was true of Merlin. Among the shapes which we have seen Curoi assume are those of a Giant Herdsman and of a Man of the Wood; the earliest accounts of Merlin show him in the same guises" (Celtic Myth 124). Therefore, Curoi could then be considered an early Celtic predecessor to the figure of Merlin.

Another link to the myth of the Celts is in a figure named Myrddin, a bard who is thought to have lived in the sixth century. In their work The Celtic Realms, Myles Dillon and Nora Chadwick explain how this bard attained god-like traits. He was thought to have "fought on the losing side in the battle of Arfderydd (Arthuret, near Carlisle) in 573. He too went mad and fled into the forest of Celyddon (Caledonia). There he lived for half a century, with no company but the trees and the wild beasts, mourning for the slaying of Gwenddolau and afraid lest Rhydderch should come against him. In this frenzied condition Myrddin acquired the gift of prophecy" (270). Dillon and Chadwick also note the similarities between the stories of Myrddin and an Irish king Suibne Geilt, known as "Sweeney the Mad." He also "lost his reason in the din of battle" (270). The descriptions of Myrddin, and Suibne Geilt, and Curoi are strikingly similar. "*Buile Suibne*, 'The Frenzy of Sweeney,' is the story of his (Suibne Geilt's) life in the wilderness, with some fine poems in which the mad king laments his

misery and describes the forest and animals that roam there” (Myles and Chadwick 270). All three characters are humans, with god-like traits, and are found while roaming aimlessly in the woods. Myrddin provides a link to the modern Merlin.

In his work Celtic Myth and Legend, Charles Squire does not establish a lineage between the Merlin of the Arthurian legends and the Myrddin of the Welsh: he simply assumes that the two are one. “The Zeus of Arthur’s cycle is called Myrddin, who passed into the Norman-French romances as ‘Merlin.’ All the myths told of him bear witness to his high estate. The first name of Britain, before it was inhabited, was, we learn from a triad, *Clas Myrddin*, that is, ‘Myrddin’s Enclosure.’” (Squire 323). There is clearly an important link between this Welsh and Celtic bard Myrddin and Merlin.

Finally, there is a connection between Myrddin the bard and Lailoken as seen in the work The Celtic Realms. “In fact the name [Myrddin] was invented by means of a false analysis of *Caerfyrddin* (Carmarthen), of which the second element is derived from *moridūnon* ‘sea fort.’ In one poem, he is addressed as *Llallawc* and *Llallofan Vyrddin*, and his name is Laloicen in Joceline’s *Life of St Kentigern*, and Lailoken in two other tales, forms plainly adapted from the Welsh epithet” (Myles and Chadwick 270). In the case of Morgan le Fay, there are clear and direct links to Celtic mythological characters; in the matter of Merlin, a conglomerate of historical and mythological characters create the groundwork for Arthur’s mystical advisor.

Another metamorphosis from myth to the Arthurian legends is that of Arthur himself. The idea of a god-like king who reigns in the hearts and minds of a people and a culture is not uniquely Celtic. Many cultures have an Arthur, a mighty, benevolent

king who was, and who will be again. The fight for an utopian existence ruled by a king who will never really cease to exist is not a solely Celtic dream. Despite this, Arthur himself has certain traits due only to his Celtic legacy. Current study on the Arthurian legends tends to focus on the historicity of Arthur. In fact, in her work King Arthur, Norma Lorre Goodrich expresses her frustration at how the mythology and legend of Arthur have obscured the “true” Arthur:

Until recently, much scholarship has been devoted to mythology for an identification for Arthur. [ . . . ] Whatever historical truth was held about Arthur seems to have slipped with him into the fog bank enveloping Avalon. [ . . . ] The legend has not been easy to counter; it has had centuries to swell and be embellished upon. In the hands of Sir Thomas Malory, who recounted the collapse of his own fifteenth century under the guise of a rise and fall of King Arthur’s ancient Celtic realm, and Alfred Lord Tennyson, among others, Arthur’s real life and deeds have been swept aloft into high tragedy.

Romances and modern comedies have served further to obscure the real Arthur from view; that he may have lived on this earth and reigned is, for many, not even a question. What a fate for someone who was for so long a renowned warrior, a defender of the Celtic realm, the greatest and best of kings. He was said to have been brave and powerful, valiant and resourceful, honorable and beloved—an ideal, just ruler. (10)



Contrary to Goodrich's belief, it is not simply Arthur's historicity that keeps him alive in literature. If archeology proved that Arthur never actually existed, his legend would not die. It is the transfiguration from mythical character to relevant legend that resonates in these stories.

Arthur's Celtic roots are set forth in Celtic "mythological history books." In the *Tuatha Dé Danann*, the tales of the tuath (tribe, household) of the goddess Danu, there are several key points the first of which relates to her own son. One of Danu's offspring is known as the greatest of all her children (and she had many). He is "Nuada, called *Argetlám*, or 'He of the Silver Hand'" (qtd in Squire 51). One of his similarities with Arthur is that he is known as their war-god. His brother is known as "Camulus whose name meant 'heaven.' This brother was "possessed of an invincible sword, one of the four chief treasures of the Tuatha Dé Danann" (qtd in Squire 51). In Malory, Arthur's sword and scabbard are also invincible. Merlin explains to Arthur the gift he has been given from the Lady of the Lake and tells him never to part with them: "ye shall lose no blood, be ye never so sore wounded" (36). Morgan exploits the power of the sword and scabbard later when she steals it from her brother and gives it to Sir Accolon to battle against Arthur himself. Without the sword, Arthur nearly loses his life. The idea of a sword that is almost greater than the man who wields it is also found in the Táin Bó Cuailnge. Here Cúchulainn single-handedly holds the Connacht men at bay. His foster-father, Fergus mac Roich is sent to fight him but refuses to take his sword: "'You must be under strong protection, friend Fergus,' Cúchulainn said, 'to come against me with no sword in your scabbard'" (The Tain 164). Squire implies that,

had Fergus come with his “famous sword,” Cúchulainn’s fate might have been different (171). The idea of a magical sword that gives unusual power is a very Celtic motif.

It is not just the connection with Arthur himself that is found in the *Tuatha Dé Danann*. Another interesting link revolves around the goddess Morrígú, a forerunner of Arthur’s sister. “The Morrígú, the heaven-god’s fierce wife, had borne a son of such terrible aspect that the physician of the gods, foreseeing danger, counselled that he should be destroyed in his infancy” (paraphrased in Squire 61). This is strikingly analogous to the tale of Mordred’s attempted destruction in Malory: “Than kynge Arthure lette sende for all the children that were borne in May-day, begotyn of lordis and borne of ladyes; for Merlyon tolde kynge Arthure that he that sholde destroy hym and all the londe sholde be borne on May-day. And so was Mordred sente by kynge Lottis wyff. And all were putte in a shyppe to the se” (37). In the case of the Morrígú’s son, the physician is able eventually to kill her son, but not before his ashes taint an entire river, the river Barrow (Squire 62). As is very evident, Mordred does not die after Merlin’s prophecy. Instead, he is raised by a “good man” and later comes back to Arthur’s kingdom: he eventually becomes the kingdom’s downfall (Malory 37, 714). Again, although not a direct parallel, the precedent of a prophecy that destroys a father through his son, and the fact that it is the Morrígú, the forerunner of Arthur’s sister, who bears the son are significant analogues. As is clear, it is Arthur’s sister (albiet not necessarily Morgan le Fay) who conceives Mordred and for whom the prophecy is made.

The theme of the Arthur figure marrying and having a child, or simply having a child with his sister, and from that union is born darkness mirrors the Celtic idea of twin powers. According to Squire, the Gaulish Celts divided their mythology into “opposing camps.” “[This division is] common to all the Aryan religions. Just as the Olympians struggled with the Giants, the Æsir fought the Jötuns, and the Devas the Asuras, so there is warfare in the Gaelic spiritual world between two superhuman hosts. On one side are ranged the gods of day, light, life, fertility, wisdom and good; on the other, the demons of night, darkness, death, barrenness, and evil” (47). This is no different in the gods of the Britons. Their pantheon mirrored that of the Gauls, including a representation of Nuada named Gwydion, son of Dôn god of the sky. Parallel to Arthur, Gwydion had a “sister called Arianrod, or ‘Silver Circle,’ who, as is common in mythologies, was not only his sister, but also his wife” (Squire 261). As the tale goes, Gwydion and Aranrhod (spelling variation) had two sons, Dylan Eil Ton (Sea son of Wave) and Llew Llaw Gyffes (fair, or light, long hand). When Aranrhod gives birth, Dylan is the only one Gwydion is aware of. She hides Llew from him in a chest. Dylan goes to the sea and is eventually killed and Llew is eventually found, much to Aranrhod’s dismay (The Mabinogion 106-07). According to Squire, Dylan and Llew represent “the twin powers of darkness and light. With darkness the sea was inseparably connected by the Celts, and, as soon as the dark twin was born and named, he plunged headlong into his native element” (261). Arthur’s union with his sister and the subsequent birth that results from it mirrors this Celtic idea of twin powers.

Arthur is a perfect example of the blending of myth and history: a mighty war chief who takes on the personification of a god. Squire devotes a great deal of energy to depicting the gods of the Celtic pantheon who find their way into service of Arthur, signifying Arthur's role among the gods (312-313). Roger Sherman Loomis addresses this question directly:

If most of his knights are gods of sun and storm, if his wife is the leading lady in a nature myth, if his son Mordred plays the part of the Irish god Mider, and if Arthur in Avalon is but another form of the Maimed King, embodiment of the enfeebled forces of nature awaiting the spring, must we give up the historic Arthur? Was Arthur from the beginning a god? . . . The probabilities are that Arthur began his career in history, extended his conquests into the realm of Welsh, Dumnonian and Breton myth, and completed his triumph by achieving the sovereignty of European romance. (Celtic Myth 350-51)

The Celts were a proud people who clung tenaciously to their mythology and later to their version of Christianity. It is natural that their mythology, while containing strains of earlier mythologies (such as Greek and Roman), stands apart, true to the hardy people from which it comes. Goodrich had this to say regarding the Celt's indefatigable pride: "The clash [between incoming and outgoing cultures] in Britain must have been more pronounced than that in Gaul, where the incoming Franks accepted the Latin tongue of the conquered natives and their Roman, Christian religion. In Britain, the native peoples clung tenaciously to their own speech, as they

had during five hundred years of Roman occupation. Similarly, they clung to their own history and were said to have refused to convert the Anglo-Saxons to their own mysterious Celtic Christianity” (14). It is no wonder, consequently, that such an indomitable people create these Arthurian legends born from their fierce, unique mythology and steeped in their colorful history. These legends are held up as a standard of the blending of history and mythology for all of Britain.

### Chapter 3

#### THE ELUSIVE GRAIL: SEARCH FOR PERFECTION

*The Celtic hero who in the twelfth century became Perceval le Chercheur du basin . . . in the end became possessed of that sacred basin le Saint Graal, and the holy lance which, though Christian in the story, are the same as the talismans which appear so often in Gaelic tales . . . the glittering weapon which destroys, and the sacred medicinal cup which cures” (J.F. Campbell qtd. in Nutt).*

Specific words conjure fantastic images of battles, love and enmity in relation to the Arthurian Legends. There is, however, one major image that represents the Arthurian legends as a whole, that of the Holy Grail. In a sense, the search for the Grail is both the culmination and the ruination of Arthur’s kingdom, Camelot. It is the culmination of the journey towards attaining human perfection that was begun in the chivalric code and continued in the Pentecostal oath Malory has Arthur give to the Round Table knights. However, as only one knight could achieve the demands of perfection that the Grail required, it was then, by default, Camelot’s demise. Malory has three knights who “find” the Grail: however, only Galahad is deemed Grail king. The rest of Arthur’s knights are lost physically or spiritually along the journey. It is in the evaluation of this quest that the “battle” between the “pagan” mythology and Christianity is most visible.

There are several common threads to most of the Grail stories: a Grail castle situated in an “otherworld” or fairy-like land; a Grail king or keeper who has a wound

that does not heal and who rules a land as afflicted as he is; and finally the Grail itself, in its many forms. Each of these elements is firmly rooted in Celtic myth, and it is only through looking at the combination of elements that the entire legend is understandable. In his work, The Grail from Celtic Myth to Christian Symbol, Roger Sherman Loomis makes this statement: "It is apparent that, since the stories of the Grail belong to the Arthurian cycle, the most likely regions in which to look for their origin and their pristine meanings are Wales and Ireland. It is in the early literature of these Celtic lands, so long and so closely linked by cultural bonds, that we may most profitably pursue our search" (20).

One of the earliest precursors to the Grail story appears in the Mabinogion, in the tale of "Branwen Daughter of Llŷr." This story is important to the Grail legend because it introduces a Cauldron that gives eternal life. The old Welsh tale is of Bendigeidfran (Bran) and his sister Branwen. Bran is king of his land, the Island of the Mighty, and he attempts to forge good relations with the Irish by accepting the Irish king's request for his sister's hand in marriage. Due to a meddling brother of Bran's, the act that was designed to be a peacemaker between the Welsh and the Irish turns into a series of insults and battles between the two. Bran offers to the Irish king, Matholwch, a cauldron to repair the first insult: "I will give you a cauldron, the property of which is this: take a man who has been slain today and throw him into it, and tomorrow he will fight as well as ever, only he will not be able to speak" (Mabinogion 71). This idea of a cauldron or Grail giving life appears numerous times in the Arthurian legends.

The idea of a grievously wounded king who is connected to a fairyland that is, in a sense, an afterlife and connected to a cauldron that is equated with deathless existence are all threads that will continuously reoccur in the Grail legends. Several of these elements of the Grail are evident as early as the tale of “Branwen” (Mabinogion). One is this idea of a king pierced by a sword, “and Brân had been wounded in the foot with a poisoned spear” (79); a second idea is that of a fairy-land existence connected to the king:

Brân commanded them to cutt of his head. “Take my head,” he said, “and carry it to the White Hill in London, and bury it there with the face turned towards France. You will be a long time on the road; you will spend seven years feasting at Harddlech, with the Birds of Rhiannon singing to you, and the head will be as good a companion as it ever was. After that you will spend eighty years at Gwales in Penvro, and as long as you do not open the door to the Bristol Channel on the side facing Cornwall you may stay there and the head will not decay. Once you have opened that door, however, you must not delay, but set out at once to bury the head in London.” (79-80)

There are only seven men who survive to do as Bran bids: “Pryderi, Manawydan, Glinyeu son of Taran, Talyessin and Ynawg, Gruddyeu son of Muryel, and Heilyn son of Gwynn the old” (79). The seven spend the following “seven then fourscore years” in a dream-like state of bliss where there is no remembrance of all that they had been through. This existence for eighty years following Bran’s death follows a pattern of



Celtic tradition and represents the Otherworld. According to Roger Sherman Loomis in his work on the Grail legends, certain traits may be:

Ascribed to a common tradition, for they are paralleled in other Celtic visits to the Other World. They are: they voyage, the island, the fountains, the uncommunicative resident of the island, the beautiful buildings, the hospitable reception, the delicious meal, the longevity of the inhabitants. The specific number of years, eighty, which they had lived on this blissful island, free from adversity and bodily infirmity, is exactly the period which, as we know, the followers of Brân son of Llŷr spent on the island of Grassholm in the midst of abundance and joy.

(129)

The Welsh tale of Branwen gives an early precursor to the later staples of the Grail legends.

Another early source that lays the groundwork for Grail patterns is the Welsh poem “Preiddeu Annwn,” found in the Book of Taliesin. According to many, including Arthur Brown in The Origin of the Grail Legend, this Welsh poem is untainted by later additions to the Grail legend by the French. “In the Book of Taliesin is the oldest Welsh account of the castle of fairyland which nobody supposes has been influenced in any way by French romances” (360). Although there are some ambiguities about the specific meanings of the poem, several facts are commonly accepted. The poem tells of Arthur and his men traveling to obtain the cauldron of the chief of Annwfyn (the Celtic other world) which is protected by nine maidens. The building or castle itself,

like that in “Branwen,” is portrayed as a beautiful abode. Charles Squire includes this description from “Preiddeu Annwn” in his work Celtic Myth and Legend:

The strong-doored, foursquare fortress of glass, manned by its dumb, ghostly sentinels, spun round in never-ceasing revolution, so that few could find its entrance; it was pitch-dark save for the twilight made by the lamp burning before its circling gate; feasting went on there, and revelry, and in its centre, choicest of its many riches, was the pearl-rimmed cauldron of poetry and inspiration, kept bubbling by the breaths of nine British pythonesses. (321)

Another commonality with the Grail legends is the toll that the search takes on those who are seeking it. As in “Branwen,” there appears to be a great battle fought (although in Prieddeu Annwn, the battle is not actually seen) in which the majority of the men are lost. “Thrice enough to fill Prydwen (Arthur’s ship) we went into it; / Except seven, none returned from Caer Sidi” (qtd. in Squire 319). Again, there is the connection with “Branwen” where only seven remain after all is said and done. Each of these stories present themes and images which will persist throughout the Grail legends.

The actual Grail has taken on the importance of numerous Celtic identities. It seems fair to assume that the Grail’s original is a mythological horn or cauldron of plenty. Glimpses of the Grail can be found in Celtic mythology and literature. In his work Early Celtic Christianity, Brendan Lehane made the observation that it was the gods of the air, or of goodness, who first brought with them a Grail-like cauldron:

Other waves followed until the arrival of the Tuatha de Danaan [early Celtic deities], a magical race from the east, who brought with them the archetypal mystical symbols of Indo-European myth: a stone that acclaimed with human voice the rightful accession of a new king; a spear that wielded itself in battle, bringing dire slaughter upon an enemy; a sword that needed no second blow; a cauldron with a never-ending supply of food – the universal cornucopia. (9)

This cauldron was said to be the property of Dagda, and the cauldron, as Squire attests, was called “The Undry, in which everyone found food in proportion to his merits, and from which none went away unsatisfied” (54). The same idea is found again in the story of “Culhwch and Olwen” in the Mabinogion as Ysbaddanden Chief Giant is telling Olwen what he must obtain to have his daughter’s hand in marriage. In the list, he includes: “Though you get that, there are things you will not get. The hamper of Gwyddno Long Shank, for were the entire world to gather round it, twenty-seven men at a time, everyone would find the food he liked best” (156). Ysbaddanden also asks for the “cup of Llwyrr son of Llwyryon” and the “horn of Gwlgawd Gododdin” which pours out for the night (155-56). Each of these vessels has comparable traits such as found in later resurrections of the Grail.

One other mention of a “horn of plenty”-type vessel is found in the tales of Cúchulainn’s journey into the otherworld. Cúchulainn and his men overcome many physical obstacles on the island of “*Dún Scaith*, that is, the ‘Shadowy Town’” and emerge with their spoils. Squire’s paraphrase describes it thus: “three cows of magic

qualities and a marvellous cauldron in which was always found an inexhaustible supply of meat, with treasure of silver and gold to boot” (175-6). Another another reference to a cup that is related to the Grail is found in the Fenian branch of Celtic heroic tales. Joseph Campbell, who has studied myth and its social impact in depth, claims: “In all the Fenian stories mention is made of Fionn’s healing cup . . . it is the same as the Holy Grail of course” (qtd. in Nutt, title page). The Grail seems to have been founded on this idea of the Celtic cauldron of inexhaustible supply found in a fairy-land world. As Loomis said: “even those stories concerned with historic kings of Ireland, the main theme is often a visit to a country or a mansion where, as Professor Dillon has put it, ‘there is neither sickness nor age nor death; where happiness lasts for ever and there is no satiety; where food and drink do not diminish when consumed; where to wish for something is to possess it; where a hundred years are as one day’” (The Grail 20-21). The Grail search and abode is Celtic mythology and legend.

If there is solid evidence, then, of a Celtic predecessor to the Holy Grail that is found in the Arthurian legends, what then is the Christian heritage? According to Irish “history,” Christianity came to the Celts due to the proselytizing of Patrick around 435 A.D. However, the Celts did not simply embrace Christianity and discard their own religion or mythologies. For many years, the two coexisted in harmony. In fact, Brendan Lehane says that the Celts were ready to receive Christianity because it coexisted well with their mythology:

Thus, because the new missions were peaceful and anxious to please, their message brought not so much a conversion as a blend of traditions.

In a country which, though no Utopia, was no less happy or healthy than any other, they could lay less emphasis on the aspect of retreat from the world, and more on the enrichment of earthly life through divine blessing. The kingdom of heaven became something near. It was this change of emphasis that enabled the Irish sometimes to locate heaven on earth, not in some ethereal paradise beyond the clouds. In many ways they adapted the new creed to their own elaborate myth and lore and ethic, enriching both traditions. (44)

The metamorphosis of the Grail from a horn or cauldron of plenty to the cup that held the blood of Christ, as is found in Malory's Morte d' Arthur, is a direct result of the coming of Christianity. The Irish (Celts) had an arrogant way of integrating facets of Christian history into their own, as Brendan Lehane describes:

They [the Irish] were at times intolerably self-satisfied. In every life of their saints occur those incidents drawn straight from the gospel descriptions of Christ—the miracle births, the twelve followers, the feeding of large numbers from a basketful of provisions. The idea of the chosen race is always present. It was not peculiar to them; most countries have at one time or another selected an apostle, diverted his last journey to their own land and so assumed a kind of sanctity . . . these are prototype legends in the Christian myth of any country. But a fault does not have to be unique to aggravate others: and the Irish anyway took it farther than most. (196)

The next connection to the Grail is one of those incidents. The popular genesis for the myth of the Grail states that it came to the Celts through a man named Joseph of Arimathea. Biblically speaking, Joseph of Arimathea was the man who buried Jesus' body after the crucifixion. In the Bible, the "Gospel of John" states:

Later, Joseph of Arimathea asked Pilate for the body of Jesus. Now Joseph was a disciple of Jesus, but secretly because he feared the Jews. With Pilates permission, he came and took the body away. He was accompanied by Nicodemus, the man who earlier had visited Jesus at night. Nicodemus brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about seventy-five pounds. Taking Jesus' body, the two of them wrapped it with the spices, in strips of linen. This was in accordance with Jewish burial customs. (19:38-40)

The legend that persists beyond this account is that Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus (also from the gospels) traveled to Britain. Books from the "New Testament Apocrypha," namely the "*Evangelium Nicodemi*," takes Joseph's story one step further. Roger Sherman Loomis paraphrases the story of Joseph and Nicodemus:

Here we read that during the trial of Christ before Pilate, Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews, testified in His favour, infuriating the accusers. After Joseph had deposited the body of the Crucified in the sepulchre, the Jews imprisoned him, but when on Easter Day the door was opened, he was not to be found. Search was made at Nicodemus's advice, and Joseph was discovered at his home in Arimathea. Brought to Jerusalem

he testified that at midnight of the Sabbath day, the prison in which he was confined rose into the air, and fell to the earth. The risen Christ appeared to him, lifted him up, and brought him to his house. (The Grail 224)

Following this experience, Joseph and Nicodemus are said to have taken the Grail out of Jerusalem to Glastonbury. One of the earliest full accounts of Joseph's journey to the "White Isle" is found in Chrétien's *Perceval*. Here the Grail is depicted as a vessel which contains Christ's blood: "Joseph (who did much worthy of praise) came with the Grail which he had caused to be made to Mount Calvary, where God was crucified. He was sorely grieved at heart but he dared not appear so openly. He placed it at once below His feet, which were wet with blood which flowed down each foot, and collected as much as he was able in this Grail of fine gold" (qtd. in Loomis 225). Later in this text, after Joseph has settled in the White Isle, the Grail has taken on a much different role: "When Joseph was defeated and there was a famine, he prayed to God, his Creator, that He would lend him, by His favour, that Grail of which I tell you and in which he had collected the blood. Then he caused a horn to be blown and all went to wash their hands, and seated themselves ceremoniously at the tables. The Grail came at once and served the wine to all and other dishes in great plenty" (qtd. in Loomis 227). In this one telling of the legend, this "Christianized" Grail morphs from the cup that held the blood of Jesus into a form that closely resembles the Celtic horn of plenty. The coming of Christianity to Ireland, whether brought by Patrick, Joseph of

Arimathea, or any other evangelist, influenced the course of Celtic mythology and thus the Arthurian legends.

Whether or not the story of Joseph of Arimathea coming to the British Isles is true is still irrelevant. Loomis believes that this is simply another Celtic method to incorporate this new religion. His opinion is that the monks who lived at Glastonbury (where Joseph allegedly resided) read the *Estoire del Saint Graal*, saw the claims that were made, and then had a decision to make. Loomis asks:

Should this pious narrative be denounced as a fraud? Or should the long-standing claim of their own house to being the site of the earliest Christian sanctuary in Britain, built by a band of missionaries from Gaul, be abandoned as apocryphal? Or should both be accepted and, if possible, reconciled? It was the third course of action which was adopted, presumably after heated debate, and the first result of which, we know, was the insertion into a copy of William of Malmesbury's book on Glasonbury [which] contains the statement that "over them [the monks at the monastery] he (St. Philip) appointed, it is said, his dearest friend, Joseph of Arimathea, who buried the Lord." (The Grail 259)

And so, history is re-written. A people with a strong mythological heritage incorporated new myths based on a religion they were trying to embrace.

A culture whose old myths merge with their new religion, births a legend like that of the Holy Grail – it becomes a unified Grail that embodies the essence of both ideas.



As stated earlier, the search for the Holy Grail is both the perfect culmination and the ultimate demise of Arthur's kingdom. Once Christianity is infused into the legend of the Grail, achieving the Grail becomes a heavenly quest. This is evident when Launcelot first observes the Grail. He has left Arthur in search of adventure and finds it in a town where he rescues a damsel and slays a serpent after which the king (Pelles) invites Launcelot to eat with him in the castle: "And anone there cam in a dove at a wyndow, and in her mowthe there seemed a lyttill sencer of golde, and therewythall there was suche a savour as all the spycery of the worlde had bene there. And furthwythall there was uppon the table all maner of meates and drynkes that they coude thynke uppon" (Malory 479). This vision of the Grail is very similar to that in the early Welsh work listed above. However, this passage continues: "'A, Jesu!' seyde sir Launcelot, 'what may this meane?' 'Sir,' seyde the kynge, 'this is the rychyst thyng that ony man hath lyvyng, and whan this thyng gothe abroad the Round Table shall be brokyn for a season. And wyte you well,' seyde the kynge, 'this is the Holy Sankgreall that ye have here seyne'" (610). This is a perfect example of the blending of the Celtic symbol's being integrated with the Christian symbol.

Also of note in the interchange above concerning Sir Launcelot and the Grail is what occurs with Pelles' daughter, Elaine: "And fayne wolde kynge Pelles have found the meane that sir Launcelot sholde have ley by his doughter, fayre Eleyne, and for this entente: the kynge knew well that sir Launcelot shulde get a pusyll uppon his doughtir, whyche shulde be called sir Galahad, the good knyght by whom all the forayne cuntrey shulde be brought oute of daunger; and by hym the Holy Grayle sholde be encheved"

(Malory 611). Through deception, Elaine takes on the resemblance of Guenevere and Launcelot does indeed sleep with Elaine and impregnate her. It seems incredible that the one knight who will be more perfect than all other knights in valor and virtue is conceived under such circumstances. However, this is a part of the Celtic dichotomy. As Arthur Brown asserts in his introduction to The Origin of the Grail Legend, “The theory is that the Celts have enriched general European culture, that their ancient religion has, through Arthurian romances, contributed a slender but undying thread of the marvelous to our conception of romance, and that the Irishmen, undominated by pure reason, contrived to combine two warring principles – the one of pagan delight in sensual pleasure, the other of Christian renunciation of such pleasure – into one narrative” (12-13, emphasis mine). So the idea that deception and an illegitimate coupling could produce the “perfect” knight is understandable. Out of imperfection can grow perfection; bad and good can work together.

The introduction of the Grail to the legend through Launcelot, as well as the “prophecy” that Launcelot’s son by Elaine will be the knight to achieve the Grail, is important. The next incident with the Grail occurs some time after Launcelot’s son Galahad’s birth. Launcelot’s nephew, Sir Bors, happens upon Pelles’ castle just as his uncle did. There he meets Elaine who has a small child. Bors comments that the child looks similar to Launcelot and Elaine confesses that he is indeed Launcelot’s son. Malory’s description of Bor’s encounter with the Grail is similar to that of Launcelot’s:

Than sir Bors wept for joy, and there he prayde to God that hit myght  
preve as good a knyght as hys fadir was. And so there cam in a whyght

dowve, and she bare a lytyll sensar of golde in her mowthe, and there was all maner of metys and drynkis. And a mayden bare that Sankgreall, and she seyde there opynly, 'Wyte you well, sir Bors, that this chylde, sir Galahad, shall sytte in the Syege Perelous and enchyve the Sankgreall, and he shall be mucche bettir than ever was his fadir, sir Launcelot, that ys hys owne fadir.' And than they kneled adowne and made there devociions, and there was suche a savoure as all the spycery in the worlde had bene there. (482)

Combining the censer of gold, which provides boundless food, with the Christian aspects of devotions and the desire for a knight to be "good" provides an example of the merging of Celtic influence and Christianity. Only a few lines past those above, king Pelles makes an interesting remark when Bors says the castle should be "named the Castell Adventures" (482).

"There com but feaw knyghtes here that goth away wyth ony worshyppe; be he never so stronge, here he may be preved. And but late ago sir Gawayne, the good knight, gate lytyll worshyp here. For I lat you wyte," seyde kynge Pelles, "here shall no knyght wynne worshyp but yf he be of worshyp hymselff and of good lyvyng, and that loveth God and dredyth God. And ellys he getyth no worshyp here, be he never so hardy a man." (482-83)

The castle itself has become a place of Christian influence when a knight can not even win “worship” unless he is in a state of grace. The Christian development in the story is profound.

The Celtic component of the Grail that has not been correlated in Malory yet is that of Bran’s cauldron, the cauldron into which are thrown the injured or dead who come out whole again. However, it is only pages after the introduction of the Grail that Malory’s story hearkens back to that image. Sir Percivale has left Arthur’s Round Table in search of Launcelot. Along the way, as do most of the knights who venture out, he encounters a knight desirous to fight. Percivale acquiesces and they fight until both are sorely wounded:

“Alas!” seyde sir Percyvale, “ye sey that thyng that never woll be, for I am so faynte for bledynge that I may unnethe stonde. . . .” Than they made bothe grete dole oute of mesure. “This woll nat awayle,” seyde sir Percyvale. And than he kneled downe and made hys prayer devoutely unto Allmyghty Jesu, for he was one of the beste knyghtes of the worlde at that tyme, in whome the verrey fayth stode moste in.

Ryght so there cam by the holy vessell, the Sankegreall, wyth all maner of swetnesse and savoure, but they cowde nat se redyly who bare the vessell. But sir Percyvale had a glemerynge of the vessell and of the mayden that bare hit, for he was a parfyte mayden. And furthwithall they were as hole of hyde and lymme as ever they were in their lyff. Than they gaff thankynges to God with grete myldenesse. (494-95)

Again, there is a clear blending of influence. The horn of plenty is here, as well as Bran's cauldron that responds to prayers. Later in the interchange with Percivale it becomes clear that the "holy vessell that is borne by a mayden" contains "the bloode of oure Lorde Jesu Cryste" (495). Malory takes advantage of the best of both worlds, Christian and Celtic mythologies.

Malory makes one interesting addition to the idea of the healing cauldron. After Launcelot has wandered in his apparent insanity for some time, he again happens upon the castle of king Pelles and Elaine. He arrives as a madman, Elaine takes the liberty of attending to him, and he is healed. Elaine speaks to Launcelot thus: "'Than I tolde my fadir, and so were ye brought afore thys holy vessell, and by the vertu of hit thus were ye healed'" (500). In the previous instance, when Percivale and his enemy were healed, they themselves prayed for God's mercy. In this instance, it is Elaine who is interceding for Launcelot. This is clearly a reference back to Bran's healing cauldron, but the idea of one person interceding for another's healing is the result of strong Christian influence.

Throughout the Grail portion of Malory, there is little doubt that Galahad is the knight who will achieve the Grail. After all, it is foretold by the Grail king himself. Arthur recognizes that prophecy when Galahad takes the second sword from the stone and sits in the "Syge Perelous" (Malory 518-19). However, many of Arthur's knights will attempt to procure the holy vessel of Jesu. Arthur's recognizes that the decision of all the knights to depart is the end of Camelot. "'Alas!' seyde kynge Arthure unto sir Gawayne, 'ye have nygh slayne me for the avow that ye have made (to quest after the

Grail), for thorow thou ye have berauffte me the fayryst and the trewyst of knyghthode that ever was sene togydir in ony realme of the worlde. For whan they departe frome hense I am sure they shall never mete more togydir in thys worlde, for they shall dye many in the queste” (522). Arthur realizes that despite the “good deeds” that his knights are capable of, this is a new era and a new quest, one that is predominately Christian. There is little room for failure – sin – when attempting to achieve something as symbolically perfect as the Grail. Launcelot’s face-to-face encounter with the Grail on his quest is symbolic for each of the knights: “So whan the holy vessell had bene there a grete while hit went onto the chapell with the chaundeler and the lyght, so that sir Launcelot wyst nat where hit was becom; for he was overtakyn with synne, that he had no power to ryse agayne the holy vessell. Wherefore aftir that many men seyde hym shame, but he toke repentaunce aftir that” (537). Part of the metamorphosis of the Grail from Celtic mythological figure to Christian symbol is the limitations set on who can “use” it. For the Celts, this vessel or cauldron was available regardless of the status of one’s soul. With the coming of Christianity, the state of one’s soul is the very determining factor as to whether or not that individual can find the Grail. Because of this limitation, Arthur knows he will lose his Round Table.

Malory tells of numerous knights who set out on the Grail quest: “Than aftir servyse the kynge wolde wete how many had undirtake the queste of the Holy Grayle; than founde they be tale an hondred and fyffty, and all tho were knyghtes of the Rounde Table” (524). However, of the one hundred and fifty knights that depart from Arthur’s company, only four attain some interaction with the Grail: Sir Launcelot, Sir

Bors, Sir Percivale, and Sir Galahad. As already noted, Launcelot sees the Grail, but, due to his sin, must return to Camelot empty-handed. Sir Percivale is “unworthy” of the Grail because he *almost* loses his chastity with a woman who is found to be the devil. As penance, he “roff hymselff thorow the thygh, that the blood sterte aboute hym, and seyde, ‘A, good Lord, take thys in recompensacion of that I have mysse-done ayenste The, Lorde!’ . . . . ‘How nyghe I was loste, and to have lost that I sholde never have gotyn agayne, that was my virginité’” (Malory 550). His recompense is deemed enough and he, with Galahad, enter the realm of the Grail. Sir Bors resists evil along his journey to the Grail and is also allowed with Galahad into the realm of the Grail. But in the end, it is indeed Galahad who becomes king of the holy city of the Grail. He alone is above reproach.

The quest for the Grail is the undoing of Arthur’s kingdom for two reasons. First, of those knights who are of sufficiently flawless character to achieve the Grail, two of them (Galahad and Perceval) die and never return to Camelot. They were not intended for this world: Camelot is devoid of faultless knights who would set the standard of perfection Arthur desires. Bors does return but, due to his relationship with Launcelot his brother, is mired in Launcelot’s woes with Guenevere. Secondly, every other knight, except those three who reach the Grail city, is doomed to fail on his task before he even begins. Those that do manage to make even part of the journey are demoralized. When Sir Gawaine is tired of the quest, he has a dream about bulls. The dream is clearly an enactment of the Grail quest. In the dream, the bulls who do not represent the three who find the Grail decide that it is best to “seke bettir pasture” (Malory 558-

59). In other words, there is no point in striving; no other knight will make it. Upon Launcelot, the “reformed knight’s,” return, he is rather quickly up to his old ways: “Than, as the booke seyth, sir Launcelot began to resorte unto quene Gwenivere agayne and forgate the promyse and the perfeccion that he made in the queste” (611). The kingdom of Arthur has begun its demise, and the quest for the Grail is both to blame and an outward representation of what already existed in the hearts of the knights of the Round Table. The door of Bran’s utopian castle has been opened and the years of bliss are over. Arthur’s men have dreamed of something beyond their reach and opened the door that ended their utopian existence.

The themes and nuances of Celtic mythology are clearly played out in Arthurian tradition. The quest for the Holy Grail offers the clearest picture of the interaction between Celtic belief and the coming of Christianity, and, as has been implied, it is the blend of these two elements that gives the unique and unmistakable fantasy found in the stories of Arthur and his knights. Loomis’ remarks on this blend is a perfect summation of this point:

One may safely conclude, then, that the marvellous element which so distinguishes Arthurian romance from other medieval French fiction is a heritage from the mythology of the Irish and the Welsh, which was preserved by bards and story-tellers long after the introduction of Christianity. It is this well-recognized survival of paganism among the Celts which accounts for the fact that we find both in Celtic literature and Arthurian romance an atmosphere of wonder and supernatural



paraphernalia such as are characteristic of mythology—revolving castles, sword-like bridges, springs haunted by fays, isles inhabited only by women, enchantresses who take the form of birds, hags changed by a kiss into damsels of peerless beauty, vessels of inexhaustible plenty, vessels moved by no visible agency, banqueters who preserve a youthful appearance in spite of their many years (The Grail 22).

It is indeed the uniting of two worlds that fuses the greatest story of modern legend.

## CONCLUSION

King Arthur represents the ultimate king of Britain: the Once and Future King, the hope of a people. In order to appreciate fully the depth of these legends it is helpful to know where the legends may have received their origins. The legends of Arthur and his knights are rooted in Celtic myth, literature and Christianity. It is through understanding this medieval culture that aspects of the Arthurian legends are clarified.

The feats and actions of Celtic heroes, such as Cú Chulainn, lay the foundations of the acts of Arthur and his knights. Primary characters such as Merlin, Morgan le Fay and Arthur have strong ties back to Celtic mythological figures. And the Holy Grail, and the knights who search for it, has numerous ties to the culture of the Celts.

Beyond the ties of individuals, there are characteristics that Arthur and his men share with their Celtic forefathers. One of those examples is the idea of the merging of opposite ideas: good and bad. As Arthur Brown stated in his work The Origin of the Grail Legend, the Celts “contrived to combine two warring principles – the one of pagan delight in sensual pleasure, the other of Christian renunciation of such pleasure – into one narrative” (12-13). To fully understand the roles Galahad and Launcelot play in the quest for the Grail there must be an understanding of the Celtic way of incorporating seemingly opposite entities.

It is due to the unyielding character of the Celts that Christianity emerges from their culture rooted in an acceptance of the supernatural. The Celt’s belief system prior to Christianity enabled them to accept that which cannot be explained, or seen. Therefore they had an unquestioning acceptance of a man-king who accomplishes god-like feats

or the quest for a heavenly city, both Camelot and the Grail city, here on earth. It is life as they understand it.

Without Celtic mythology and subsequently Christianity, the stories of Arthur are simply that: stories. Stories die. Legends are birthed from the haze of religion and myth for its characters are than larger than life. Arthur, Guinevere, Lancelot, Camelot, Galahad and the Grail no longer represent simple characters in a book. Each name represents an idea or a theme that exists outside the bounds of the written stories. That is what defines a true legend.

Arthur is not just a hero of the British: he is a world-renowned hero. His roots reach far deeper than that of the British. He was birthed from the world of a medieval culture that thrived on complications and paradoxes. In time, as the Celts made their transition from paganism to Christianity, so did their literature, and their heroes. The world of the Celts morphed and gave rise to one of the greatest legends of all time: the Legends of King Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table.

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