



Making Men Modern

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You can't depend on your eyes when your imagination is out of focus," Mark Twain—a man of keenly focused imagination—wrote in his 1889 novel *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*. Twain's perennial classic is the story of the progress of modern civilization over feudalism, witnessed and instigated by an American time-traveler: an account, through his eyes, of the good reasons for this progress, of the blessings which it brings, and of the satisfactions enjoyed by those who feel themselves responsible for its triumphant march. In poetic form, it is the birth of modernity condensed into a fraction of a lifespan.

The chronological imposter is Hank Morgan, a likeable young man from Connecticut, endowed with the defining sensibilities of late nineteenth-century America. Having picked a fight with a coworker who clocks him with a crowbar hard enough to send him to the Middle Ages, he comes to in the darkest days of feudal England. This Camelot is a place of almost unimaginable harshness with very little of its mythic Arthurian charm. Hank finds widespread slavery, poverty, ignorance, casual cruelty, and a ruling class established mostly on the grounds of inherited incompetence.

The innocent languish in prison; the powerful are indifferent to the fate of their subjects, whom they scarcely consider human; and all are subject to disease and superstition.

Instantly impressed with all these problems, Hank believes that, possessed as he is with the benefits of a modern education, he should do what he can to relieve medieval man's estate. He endeavors to build an educational system, encourage inventions, establish a free press, promote freedom of conscience and a multiplicity of religious sects, improve communications and transportation, and diminish suffering and injustice wherever he encounters them.

The book concludes with the massive death and destruction brought on when Hank's reforms meet with a counter-revolution and a bloody civil war. Hank's following, which had been growing since his arrival, collapses in the end, and only fifty-four boys remain loyal to him. They—along with their Gatling guns, mine fields, man-made floods, and electrocuting fences—are still sufficient to kill twenty-five thousand knights; but in the end, all of the Yankee's reforms are undone and all his factories destroyed. He and his few loyalists remain surrounded by three

circles of corpses, and they conclude that they will die if they leave their protective perimeter and die also if they remain holed up within it. Excitement and satisfaction at their initial victories give way to the realization that they, the conquerors, have now been conquered. If much of the novel appears to be a celebration of reform, progress, and Yankee ingenuity, the end is distinctly otherwise.

Hank, the prototypical American, is a cheerful, optimistic fellow, slow to take offense and wedded to modern conveniences and to the way of thought that underlies them; all problems can be solved pragmatically, he seems to think, and he expects that he himself will be central to their solution. He is committed to republican government, religious diversity, modern science and technology, patent laws as a way of promoting the useful arts, comfort and cleanliness, and public newspapers to make information available to all. Instinctively averse to human suffering, his heart goes out to victims of injustice and disease. He undertakes great personal risk for good causes, such as the liberation of unjustly enslaved prisoners and the education of the king.

Appalled as he is by the injustices of rule by a foolish aristocracy and a corrupt established Church, he nonetheless believes that the people of this dark age are to be forgiven for their follies and even for their cruelty—

they are as innocent as children, rabbits, or lunatics, he variously thinks to himself. At some level he sees that it would be foolish to expect them to unite immediately in opposition to the institutions and principles that have shaped their lives, miserable though they are. Many of his ameliorative measures he initiates in secret, knowing they will likely be resisted.

A factory-trained mechanical genius, Hank was capable (in his nineteenth-century life) of making anything:

guns, revolvers, cannon, boilers, engines, all sorts of labor-saving machinery. Why, I could make anything a body wanted—anything in the world, it didn't make any difference what; and if there wasn't any quick new-fangled way to make a thing, I could invent one—and do it as easy as rolling off a log.

He is also an efficient capitalist, always with an eye to profit, loss, and economy. In the sixth century, he sees economic activity as one way of helping to shatter the misguided enchantment of the medieval world: turning King Arthur's Knights of the Round Table into sellers of toothpaste and hats, for example, would help to extinguish knighthood by making it absurd. In another episode, he visits the Valley of Holiness and its "godly hermits." On encountering one stylite whose reverence is expressed by ceaseless

bowing, Hank's deepest reflection leads him to harness the hermit to pulleys and a sewing machine and thus to employ his energy for the good purpose of making shirts. After all, "it seemed a pity to have all this power going to waste. It was one of the most useful motions in mechanics, the pedal movement."

Hank's ambition rises to the surface from time to time, and he confesses a desire to rule England or, as he puts it, to "boss the whole country inside of three months," and indeed, due to his cleverness and his aptitude for political theater, he arranges to have himself appointed King Arthur's prime minister—or, as the people soon take to calling him, "the Boss." But Hank's ambition does not simply mark him as a member of the "family of the lion, or the tribe of the eagle" about which Lincoln warned in his Lyceum address; Hank's self-promotion is tied believably to the goal of bringing the benefits of practical reason to a benighted people. He sees himself as an ardent defender of "hard unsentimental common sense and reason" (echoing Lincoln's exhortation, also from the Lyceum address, of "cold, calculating, unimpassioned reason" as necessary for the maintenance of a free republic). Moreover, Hank appears willing and able to curtail his ambition both in deference to the present king and out of a belief that limiting executive power is necessary for good government.

Clearly on Twain's mind in 1889 was the resemblance, in institutions and outlooks, between medieval feudalism and the plantation country of the American South. Undone by the war and the aftereffects of a miserable Reconstruction, the nostalgia for "the Southern way of life" had a powerful romantic pull. Hank, "a man with the dream of a republic in his head," is reminded of the South when encountering resistance from the very people he means to help free:

It reminded me of a time thirteen centuries away, when the "poor whites" of our South who were always despised and frequently insulted by the slave-lords around them, and who owed their base condition simply to the presence of slavery in their midst, were yet pusillanimously ready to side with the slave-lords in all political moves for the upholding and perpetuating of slavery, and did also finally shoulder their muskets and pour out their lives in an effort to prevent the destruction of that very institution which degraded them.

Twain's critique of feudalism targets not only its injustice but also the way it blinds its members to the truth of their cruelties and superstitions. Bringing out what might be called the social causes of moral blindness should diminish the hatred and indignation that would otherwise accompany so strong a critique

of injustice—whether such a critique is felt by the North against the South, or anywhere else that error is the foundation for injustice—for the “guilty” come to light as ignorant and misguided, not as simply evil.

The Yankee’s project of enlightened reform seeks to do away with this ignorance. He is convinced that his work has changed the way the people of Camelot view the world—that he has educated them out of their superstition. He does, after all, make considerable progress in remaking the raiment of feudalism, so it might appear as though the battle of minds has been won. As he put it himself:

Slavery was dead and gone; all men were equal before the law; taxation had been equalized. The telegraph, the telephone, the phonograph, the typewriter, the sewing-machine, and all the thousand willing and handy servants of steam and electricity were working their way into favor. We had a steamboat or two on the Thames, we had steam warships, and the beginnings of a steam commercial marine; I was getting ready to send out an expedition to discover America.

He even had his knights turning their competitive energies toward baseball.

Notwithstanding these impressive signs of progress, Hank has badly misjudged the people of Camelot. He may have brought them the trappings

of modernity, but they are not moderns. His external reforms have not been matched by an internal transformation. The Yankee ought to have foreseen this problem, having earlier repeatedly lamented the imperviousness of the English to rational arguments like his; such arguments “have no chance against petrified training; they wear it as little as the waves wear a cliff.” Reason and argument cannot easily divert the “inherited ideas” that flow “in ruts worn deep by time and habit.” The people of Camelot, he had recognized, were intractable:

Training—training is everything; training is all there is *to* a person. We speak of nature; it is folly; there is no such thing as nature; what we call by that misleading name is merely heredity and training. We have no thoughts of our own, no opinions of our own; they are transmitted to us, trained into us.

Had Hank recalled these earlier observations, he might have been less surprised by how shallow were the ruts his new ideas had worn. But he does not anticipate the catastrophe that ends his modern revolution.

Hank and his modern principles certainly do not bear full responsibility for the terrible turn of events: The final disaster is preceded by civil war among the Knights of the Round Table, one that breaks out while the Yankee is out of the country and one which—although it is sparked by a trading quarrel on the stock market

Hank instituted—is fought out with vices and weapons that are wholly traditional. And while the knights are killing one another in their accustomed manner, the Church seizes the opportunity to reassert its authority.

What begins, however, as a bitter quarrel among feudal nobles is transformed into a counter-revolution against the Yankee’s modernizing project, and the Yankee and his few faithful followers accept this challenge and lose—at great cost to friends, family, and foes alike. It begins to dawn on Hank that he had underestimated the threat posed by the Church and overestimated the extent to which his reforms had transformed the people of Camelot, even his followers. “Did you think you had educated the superstition out of those people?” asks Clarence, his chief assistant. “I certainly did think it,” Hank responds. But while he was planning the overthrow of the Catholic Church and a “complete governmental revolution without bloodshed,” congratulating himself that “the march of civilization was begun,” and even at the very moment he was proclaiming that all political power had reverted to the people and that a republic had been established, powerful opposing forces were forming against him. Finally, he is forced to come to terms with them:

Ah, what a donkey I was! Toward the end of the week I began to get this large and disenchanting fact

through my head: that the mass of the nation had swung their caps and shouted for the republic for about one day, and there an end! The Church, the nobles, and the gentry then turned one grand, all-disapproving frown upon them and shriveled them into sheep! From that moment the sheep had begun to gather to the fold—that is to say, the camps—and offer their valueless lives and their valuable wool to the “righteous cause.” Why, even the very men who had lately been slaves were in the “righteous cause,” and glorifying it, praying for it, sentimentally slabbering over it, just like all the other commoners. Imagine such human muck as this; conceive of this folly!

Yes, it was now “Death to the Republic!” everywhere—not a dissenting voice. All England was marching against us! Truly, this was more than I had bargained for.

The late critic Everett Carter argued that Hank is “morally guiltless” even in these most disastrous moments of the novel. He noted that the forces that attack Hank are reactionary, that Hank is absent on a mission of mercy at the time they assemble (he leaves England to aid the recovery of his sick child), and that they are set in motion by a corrupt aristocracy and a scheming Church. This is all true enough, but Hank also acted with little understanding of the real issues at stake.

A well-meaning philanthropist bent on revolution can unintentionally cause great harm. Optimism, strong convictions, and enthusiasm for the benefits of modern politics and modern science are insufficient political virtues.

The Yankee's greatest failure lies in his underestimation of the power of traditional attachments and his overestimation of the attractiveness of reason as he sees it. A second consequential flaw is his insensitivity to the destructive power of his technology. The combination of these two mistakes leads him to blow up the medieval world for the sake of a lost cause.

As the story nears its end, Hank reveals a great callousness to the destructive power of the weaponry he invents. He is of course *aware* of this power, that being his aim in inventing it, but he feels no horror or even awe. Coolly planning for the battle, he is eager to maximize his kill and do so economically, eminently pleased with himself for teaching Clarence how to redo the ground connection on their electrocuting fence so they don't have to spend a penny for current except when that current is actually conducting a knight to his death. Here, at least, his technical ingenuity is matched with complete insensitivity to the real consequences of his actions.

It may be difficult to imagine that anybody in the nineteenth century

was especially worried about the risks of weapons of mass destruction, even of relatively crude ones, but in the conclusion of the novel these risks are presciently revealed; Twain's critique of slavery, aristocracy, and superstition is matched by an equally serious critique of the violent potential of modern technology. The Yankee's fifty-four stalwarts—those boys most thoroughly "educated" by his new training and kept wholly innocent of the Church's teachings—are armed with a mix of powerful modern weapons and summoned to battle. While they do not wish to destroy their own nation, they are relieved to learn they will destroy "only" the 30,000 knights they expect to attack them; and when Hank concludes his pep talk by saying "While one of these [knights] remains alive, our task is not finished, the war is not ended. We will kill them all," they respond with "loud and long continued applause." This modern weaponry is brutalizing even to those who wield it.

Moreover, these powerful weapons have a problematic relationship with democratic political principles, for they enable the very few to kill the very many. Brought into being in order to support a movement nominally devoted to a republic and to the principles that all men are "exactly equal" and "are upon one common level," the Yankee's weaponry is wielded in utter contempt of the almost universal sentiment of the

nation and becomes a great “unequalizer.” It is a grave irony that the revolution on behalf of republican principles is forced forward by a tiny cadre of dedicated and well-armed followers. Eager to rid society of backwardness, the Yankee’s revolution becomes willing to embrace even brutal means to do so. The fervor for progress burns in some hearts with the intensity religion does in others.

Connecticut Yankee is usually read as a celebration of the triumph of modernity and an attack on sentimental attachment to the past: Hank was trying to build a better world and deserves to be admired for his efforts. Only in the late twentieth century, Everett Carter argued, did American scholars fearing America’s efforts to remake the world in its own image begin to voice misgivings about this reading. In other words, Americans’ increasing doubts about themselves have led to doubts about the Yankee, who epitomizes the American way. Carter’s suggestion is a helpful warning against unduly reading our own views into the novel, but I persist in thinking Twain himself sows the seeds of doubt about modernity. It could as well be that earlier readers, more confident in modern principles, were less sensitive to the darker implications.

And if there is darkness in modernity, there are glimmers of light in the Dark Ages. Even the Yankee is affected by the noble culture, coming

to be troubled by the lowbrow tone of the newspaper he instituted. He never thinks in such bloated terms as “the public’s right to know,” and he speaks candidly of “the whoop and crash of lurid description” as a goal of good newspaper writing. But Hank feels that something is lost when such “whoop and crash” becomes a major influence on public taste. At least on one occasion he criticizes “the good Arkansas journalism” he brought into being:

There was too lightsome a tone of flippancy all through the paper. It was plain I had undergone a considerable change without noticing it. I found myself unpleasantly affected by pert little irreverencies which would have seemed but proper and airy graces of speech at an earlier period of my life.

More powerfully, he develops a positive appreciation of the feudal virtues in witnessing the king’s treatment of a family devastated by smallpox. Though there is little Arthur can do to help and much that he can suffer while trying, the king refuses to abandon them. Hank reflects:

Here was heroism at its last and loftiest possibility, its utmost summit; this was challenging death in the open field unarmed, with all the odds against the challenger, no reward set upon the contest, and no admiring world in silks and cloth of gold to gaze and applaud; and yet the king’s bearing was as

serenely brave as it had always been in those cheaper contests where knight meets knight in equal fight and clothed in protecting steel. He was great now; sublimely great. The rude statues of his ancestors in his palace should have an addition—I would see to that; and it would not be a mailed king killing a giant or a dragon, like the rest, it would be a king in commoner's garb bearing death in his arms that a peasant mother might look her last upon her child and be comforted.

One might be inclined to trace the king's noble conduct simply to his good nature, but both the Yankee and the king himself attribute it to the institutions of his culture. As Hank puts it, "If he considered his knightly honor at stake here, that was the end of argument; he would stay, and nothing could prevent it; I was aware of that." Knightly honor, that is, supports a firm and unbending code of conduct, impervious to calculations of personal profit and loss. This same rigid quality renders the code susceptible to folly, but Hank notes its beauty as well. The king also traces his principles of action to a social code, not to a strictly personal disposition or individual norm. In his formulation, "it were shame that a king should know fear, and shame that belted knight should withhold his hand where be such as need succor. Peace, I will not go." Thus Twain pays at least a passing tribute to a

code of nobility on its way to extinction, a code based on honor, shame, and the special duties expected of an upper class.

And it may be that Hank's reform project is ultimately undone by something else that affects him in Camelot—something that affects him most intimately. Why is it that Hank comes to overlook his earlier astute insights into the intractability of feudal man? Perhaps part of the reason is that, for all his talk of "unsentimental common sense and reason," Hank is subject to sentiment himself. He falls in love with Sandy, a woman who was the very paragon of the irrational and confused superstition that he despised—but who was also brave, romantic, and devoted. Hank speaks touchingly of the love that binds his young family together, and he leaves his new republic for the health of his young daughter, an absence that makes possible the terrible conclusion. The Yankee underestimates the power of sentiment and the weakness of modern reason over others—and over himself.

Twain finally seems ambivalent toward his Yankee, and this ambivalence reflects his complex assessment of the attitudes and principles that characterize his modern hero. The Yankee and his author both condemn the injustice and superstition of Arthurian England, and we may join them in cheering modern liberty and progress. On the other hand, with the blessings of the modern age

come great risks (and lesser ones as well). Oblivious to these risks, the Yankee destroys Camelot, friends and foes alike, without even being aware of what he is doing—one might say that he seems almost as free of real responsibility as a child, rabbit, or lunatic. But with Twain's warning, we are not. Mixing powerful technologies unreflectingly with modern

ideologies makes for a toxic brew, and while our naïve optimism and democratic tastes can be charming, they may not suffice to stave off destruction.

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