

## From Camelot to Sandlot: Gothic Translation in *A Kid in King Arthur's Court*\*

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In the last several decades, numerous adaptations of the Arthurian legend have come out on the big screen.<sup>1)</sup> A majority of these cinematic versions have one thing in common: presentation of familiarized material and narrative structure to make sense the original in modern context. Such adaptation can be seen as a way to get rid of the otherness of the Gothic (the Middle Ages), a kind of de-gothicization<sup>2)</sup> premised on contemporary social values or

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- 1) For a bibliography of as well as a collection of critical essays on the Arthurian cinema, see Harty, 2002, and also Harty, 1999.
- 2) In this paper, I use the term “Gothic” to conveniently refer to its traditional association with the Middle Ages (as notably represented by Gothic cathedrals and Gothic arts) as well as its later association with the Gothic genre (as typically

ideologies that renders the material from the distant past less foreign and obscure. Arthurian legend is thus domesticated to contemporary audience with easily accessible material and readily consumable value. One consequence of this process of cultural translation (literally from one place to another), to the dismay of some critics, is to turn Arthurian legend into a historical commodity only to cater to the taste of the modern audience, without doing justice to its historical context.

When it comes to Disney comedy-adventures for family (especially children) involving adaptation of Arthurian materials, critical reception tends to be doubly negative.<sup>3)</sup> As one major icon of the American-based globalization, Hollywood cinema has often met with strong critique from academics for its implication with the dominant ideologies of the western cultural values and capitalist economy.<sup>4)</sup> This censure is certainly well founded, but sometimes its overarching generalization can blind us to some subtle ambiguities at work in the production and reception of Hollywood cinema.<sup>5)</sup> *A Kid in King Arthur's*

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marked by an unsettling encounter with other-difference). The latter feature and the subsequent development of Gothic studies have explored in various ways the intersection and thereby the ambivalence of familiarity (self-same) and unfamiliarity (other-difference) or, to put it another way, modernity and its opposite. Modern interest in the medieval can be understood as an effort to de-familiarize (gothicize) the present. But paradoxically, this return to the medieval past may occasion a moving away from the medieval Gothic as a result of its familiarization or translation of the Middle Ages. Therefore, “de-gothicization” carries the double sense of removing the gothicness/otherness of the Middle Ages/the Gothic. For a succinct introduction to the idea of Gothic, see Botting and Townshend; for a useful outline of Gothic studies, see Hogle.

- 3) This has much to do with the nature of Arthurian narrative, which involves many R-rated scenarios such as seduction, adultery, incest and bloodshed. Adaptations of Arthurian legend for juvenile audience usually have to sacrifice depth and complexity for morally acceptable presentation.
- 4) For some recent studies on related topics, see Bernardi, Schatz, Scott, and Wheeler.

*Court*, a 1995 Disney modernization of Mark Twain's *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, is a good case in point, for it brings us to the realization that problems of cultural translation of the Middle Ages, such as translation from medieval past to familiar present, and translation from scholarly interest (academic medieval studies proper) to juvenile instruction or entertainment (contemporary popular medievalism) may prove more complicated than they appear to be. In this paper I will try to show that the film demonstrates an intricate process of what I will call gothic translation, in which the cinematic rendition/translation of the otherness of Arthurian legend to its prospective viewers involves gothicization (de-familiarization) as well as de-gothicization (familiarization) of both medieval culture and contemporary popular culture.

As its title suggests, *A Kid in King Arthur's Court* (hereafter *A Kid*) tells the story of a kid who undergoes a time travel (or, in Twain's words, "transposition of epochs") back in the Arthurian England. One sunny day in a baseball game, Calvin Fuller (Thomas Ian Nicholas), a timid, unsure 14-year-old little leaguer from Reseda, California, steps up to bat and strikes out without even trying. As he is despondently walking back to the dugout, a terrible earthquake strikes. The hapless Calvin with his backpack is swallowed up in a gaping chasm and magically fallen to the medieval kingdom of Camelot. It turns out that Calvin is transported into the Middle Ages under Merlin's (Ron Moody) magic summons for a knight to save King Arthur (Joss Ackland) and Camelot from the conniving Lord Belasco (Art Malik). Shortly afterward, Calvin is taken to Arthur's court, where Belasco challenges him. He shocks the court members with his futuristic "magic" by introducing rock and roll via CD player. Later he also shows them other modern inventions that win him

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5) One only needs to remember the case of Hollywood left. There have been discussions of the decreasing influence of the Hollywood industry as well; see Fischer.

adulation and renown. While Calvin receives his knight training from Master Kane (Daniel Craig) to help Arthur retain his crown, he also finds himself falling for young Princess Katey (Paloma Baeza). After the wicked Belasco kidnaps Katey to force her older sister Sarah (Kate Winslet) to marry him, Calvin's ensuing rescue mission sparks a journey of personal growth that enables him to help King Arthur, Princesses Katey and Sarah, and Camelot as a whole. Eventually Calvin saves Camelot and King Arthur from a possible destruction, and returns to real life with full confidence and a home run.

There are some important parallels of narrative structures between Twain's *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* and *A Kid* (e.g., the movement from the familiar present to the unfamiliar past and the subsequent unfolding of the fusion of the two), but critics, while recognizing the sophistication of Twain's novel, tend to disparage the attempt of *A Kid* (e.g., Sklar 97-106). It is true that Twain invests his characters with dynamic personality traits and complex psychology. The leading role Hank Morgan most remarkably demonstrates contradictory behaviors and beliefs. He condemns the aristocracy but joins their rank when he becomes no less powerful than the king (in fact, before he earns the title "the Boss" he already shows that propensity at the very beginning of his encounter with Camelot [cf. Ch. 2]). He embraces violence when he appeases the Queen by having her band hung (Ch. 17), not to mention the later holocaust of twenty-five thousand men in the showdown war (Ch. 43). He looks down upon the medieval people at the outset (e.g., Chs. 2, 3), tries every possible way to change their culture, but ends up being absorbed into their world, psychologically and linguistically. Hank's relation with Sandy epitomizes this tangled complex. Initially a nuisance to Hank, Sandy later serves as his valuable cultural guide and eventually becomes a love interest that he identifies with. As she replaces his former love, the world of Arthurian

England also comes to take over that of the nineteenth-century as the dominant frame of reference. The last scene of the novel dramatizes the conflation of the two worlds by way of Hank's "delirium" when he translates whatever is contemporary and immediate into things and persons of his medieval engagement/attachment.

Whereas Mark Twain's bizarre Gothic setting frames the narrative and generates magical transformation and ambivalent relationship between the protagonist and the medieval world through a vibrant textual encounter with provocative ambivalence, in this Disney version the familiar baseball field<sup>6)</sup> opens up the fantastic journey which, while mainly aiming at young audience, does not seem to invite serious inquiry.<sup>7)</sup> In her review of some recent progeny of Twain's novel targeting pubescent audience (including *A Kid*), for instance, Elizabeth S. Sklar calls attention to the incompatibility of romance narrative's integrative optimism and Twain's "bitter apocalypticism." She then bluntly concludes: "In short, these projects should never have been undertaken in the first place: they were doomed from the start" (106). As a Disney family comedy-adventure, the film renders the original in a form more accessible to the younger generation, while also maintaining some kind of exoticness. Thus, instead of a protagonist from Connecticut, we have the adolescent Calvin from

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6) Although some critics have noted that the frame of baseball game is indebted to the 1984 film *The Natural* (cf. Umland and Umland 59), the motif is already present in Twain's novel (cf. Ch. 40).

7) Here are some samples of reviews on the film published in some major U.S. newspapers in August 1995. Caryn James for *New York Times*: the film is "sluggish and low-energy"; Hollis Chacona for *The Austin Chronicle*: "*A Kid in King Arthur's Court* is a pretty prosaic picture. There are simply not enough sparks here to fire the imagination." Chris Hicks for *Deseret News* makes it clear that the film "is a childish variation on a classic piece of literature that has been adapted several times before. But this one is a negligible piece of juvenile fluff."

California, home of Hollywood; and the name of his baseball team, rather than the ready, yet all too familiar, professional team “The Yankees,” is simply called “the Knights.” The movie adopts the allegorical journey motif prevalent in Hollywood movies, in which the protagonists complete their rites of passage in a self-fulfilling quest. They travel either back or forth in time, or far away in space in a quasi-Sci-Fi narrative, but must return to their domestic place at the end. The purpose of this circular journey is not to examine the existence and value of modern culture by highlighting the discrepancy or irony with other worlds, but to reassure the immanent power of the protagonists and re-endorse the value of their own worlds. *A Kid* appears to fit into this kind of stereotype. Throughout the Camelot plot, Calvin reiterates his desire to go home. In the course of his adventure in Camelot, he restores his self-confidence by saving the shaky kingdom. For all the romantic appeal of the Middle Ages, he finally returns home and realizes that he can be the person he aspires to.

On the other hand, although this Disney version has a kid as its titular hero and thus appeals to families with a good message for kids about courage, honor, love and self-actualization, it may be tainted with the disciplining ideology of patriarchal authority in the presentation (cf. Pugh 69-81). In a similar logic, *A Kid* may be seen to indulge itself in the individualist didacticism, thus canceling out the historical irony of the time travel noticeable in Twain’s novel. This is what Kevin J. Harty has in mind when he disparages cinematic adaptations of Twain’s classic: “As with all the previous screen adaptations of Twain’s novel, *A Kid* ignores the book’s dark side, which is, of course, crucial to its theme” (1996: 117).<sup>8)</sup> While Twain launches a critique on the American industrial capitalism through the time-travel device (although some critics still consider it

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8) For a brief discussion of adaptations of Twain’s classic, see Keebaugh.

a failed attempt<sup>9)</sup> ), *A Kid* “markets” it through a displaced allegory of (bourgeois) self-reliance. But if the movie is meant for juvenile audience, the omission of the dark side is understandable. Besides, this should not be totally bad, for it may invest the medieval encounter with a more positive image, not to mention that the dark side can never represent the whole story. As we will see, the real issue lies not in whether the dark side is dealt with but rather in the intersection and convergence of two different worlds. For if the two frames of reference become indistinguishable, then the binary opposition of good and bad can no longer stand.

Like many other renditions of *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, the film plays on the novelty of the cultural clash, or, to put it in another way, the gothicization of both Arthurian and contemporary worlds as they meet. Besides his strange outfit, speech and behavior, Calvin stuns his historical audience with the technological gadgets he brings along. In the face of Belasco's challenge, Calvin decides to play “combat rock” by pulling out of his backpack a CD player, which he ingeniously connects to a pair of horns as earphone amplifiers, shocking and awing the crowd with blaring heavy metal. Later, items such as flashlight, Big Macs, candy bars, bubble gum also prove fortuitous. He further instructs the royal blacksmith in making roller skates and a makeshift mountain bike, both of which help him win Katey's affection. More importantly, Swiss army knife and electronic equalizer save Katey from Belasco's abduction.

If we focus only on the celebration of wondrous treasures of twentieth-century technology and American material culture as ready solution to

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9) In his study of Twain's novel for instance, Lawrence Howe discusses Twain's failure to work out problems regarding the representation of history and his own ideology (155-73).

the problems Calvin encounters in the medieval world, we would tend to see the film as inventing a cultural myth of modern material life with a heightened sense of superiority, as some critics have suggested (e.g., Sklar 101-02). (In fact, compared to Twain's Hank, who overturns the medieval culture in a series of radical and large scale aggressions, Calvin's use of high-tech ingenuity to enlighten the Arthurian court is remarkably restrained.) When Calvin dines at Camelot, he frowns on such "disgusting" foods as pig snouts; he prefers hamburger to Arthur's feast; when he shares with Kane a candy bar, he remarks: "Compared to what you're used to, it's gourmet dining." All these instances seem to amount to the impression that Calvin is not really willing to experience Arthurian cultural life deeply. There is no need to learn more about Camelot, because Calvin, as a boy from a far more advanced civilization, knows more than the medieval people and therefore is superior. In the same token, the Arthurian legend in this film seems to be another material exploited to rejuvenate the old moral in American popular cinema. Without learning more about the legendary past from the movie, the viewers are only reminded of familiar morals that have been continually delivered by the mass media.

If we continue this line of reasoning, we may come to the conclusion that the task of Michael Gottlieb, the director, and Disney, the distributor, to produce a typical Disney-style pop-movie has to limit this film to a superficial presentation of the Arthurian legend. The experience is not meant to be a painful self-examination or a soul-searching journey toward growth, but simply entertainment, as the light rhythm of the movie seems to suggest. The movie invites young viewers to another Disneyland, where they can see all the fantastic, the historical and the exotic encapsulated in 100 minutes of commodity image. The travel to Camelot is fun, and all the dark sides of the cultural and historical shock are understated. As in a Disneyland, even a

haunted house is not threatening but is rather meant for thrilling, yet exciting, amusement.

But does this mean that Camelot or the Middle Ages is only a vulnerable, feminized other subject to modern appropriation? And are there things medieval at all in the representation? The image of Camelot the film presents is worth investigating here. Calvin arrives to see a Camelot in trouble: Arthur corrupts; treacherous Lord Belasco plans usurpation; the people, stricken by diseases and starvation, are breaking away from the king. This deplorable situation drives the ghost of Merlin to bring a savior to the endangered Camelot, now like a helpless maiden awaiting the heroic rescue of a young knight. As an object of desire and contention, Camelot is slipping from the grip of the ineffectual Arthur amidst Belasco's scheme on taking over the ownership. For Calvin, Camelot is also the exotic object of his gaze from the outset. When he starts to identify with Camelot, he recognizes the analogous structural significance of Camelot and Katey: "Belasco plans on stealing Camelot, just like he stole Katie." If Camelot is feminized and objectified in this way, it is also this feminine Camelot that empowers our young hero, to grant him his masculine identity. A misfit turned "savior," Calvin is actually an unlikely hero. And it is only through his interaction with Camelot that he and Camelot achieve each other's redemption: Calvin discovers or recovers his self-esteem, and Camelot restores her past glory. Moreover, Calvin, instead of dominating the course of action as a powerful character, usually has to respond passively to what happens in Camelot. Not intent on modernizing Camelot, he gradually accommodates himself to the world of Camelot. His rescue mission of Katey sets off on the bike but ends up on horseback. After the successful release of Katey, Arthur dubs him a knight, a ritual both symbolizing his official membership in knighthood and affirming his identity in Camelot. Unlike Twain's Hank, who

never puts on medieval armors when “jousting,” Calvin in the last tournament takes off his baseball suit and lets go his treasure backpack, both being the most visible and handy symbols of his modern identity. Although the visual details of Camelot may not be genuinely historical, in the world of the film they still function to evoke a place that represents, at least semiotically, Arthurian England, a significant cultural site that serves as the counterpart of the contemporary American culture.

The gender issue touched upon earlier brings us to the notable female roles in the film. The important roles of Katey and Sarah immediately draw our attention. Receiving Calvin at court without the ceremonial company of the legendary Round Table knights, Arthur is instead flanked by his two daughters, who shine in the spotlight. Princess Katey is a refreshing and lively character among the group of flawed males. She soon reveals herself the better combatant than our protagonist (she performs better with the jousting dummy, maneuvers a bow and arrow skillfully, and knocks Calvin into the water when sparring with sticks). She takes the initiative in developing their relationship by first approaching Calvin in his chamber at night. She also verbally corrects Calvin’s wishful imagination of the heroes in medieval romance (“rescuing damsels and killing dragons”) by stating that the knights are usually “training hard for the tournament.” If Katey serves more than as a cultural guide in teaching Calvin important lessons and skills in medieval culture, Sarah as the Black Knight turns out to play the decisive role in the medieval plot. She “welcomes” the arrival of Calvin with a timely collision that literally transforms his unprepared intrusion into a fortuitous descent. She assigns Calvin the crucial task of rescuing Katey, as if showing him the way to become a hero. In the last tournament, her timely appearance saves his life from the murderous hands of Belasco. In an important sense, Sarah’s physical presence defines

Calvin's appearance and experience in Camelot, and as such she is Calvin's real Master in the Camelot plot. Sarah's disguise as the Black Knight to relieve the exploited Camelot poor also embodies the other side of Camelot's power and glory and the potential regeneration brought forth by feminine inspiration. She wins the tournament and the right to choose for her marriage, freeing both herself and Camelot (and in a sense Calvin) from the debilitating confines of the status quo.

This highlighting of the roles of Katey and Sarah, the two princesses who outshine and inspire Calvin the modern boy, certainly empowers female characters, and, by inference, it may even suggest a valorization of the supposedly feminized Camelot or the Middle Ages over the modern time. Critics have generally agreed that *A Kid* is a politically correct movie on gender issue, although with limited promises for changing the patriarchal status quo (cf. Sklair 103-04; Umland and Umland 62). In an essay about the gender issue in the film, Tison Pugh argues that even though *A Kid* emphasizes female agency and autonomy, the female characters are eventually either disciplined or banished from the narrative to clear a space for masculine authority from the previously marginalized position. Pugh's argument focuses on two points: Guinevere is absent in the medieval plot, and Sarah is absent when Calvin "reunites" with Katey and Arthur back in California. Despite his fine discussion on the ideological complications of heterosexual patriarchal authority, Pugh's analysis ignores some important details in the film. To begin with, Guinevere's absence does not deny her importance. (One might wonder why Pugh has nothing to say about the unusual absence of all the legendary Round Table knights.) After the passing of Guinevere, things crumble in Camelot to such an extent that her significance and influence seems to have replaced that of Arthur. Grieving at the loss of his queen, Arthur can only lament, "Camelot

rots.... I want her great again, but I fear I'm too weak to bring her back. Oh, Guinevere, my Guinevere. Too old, too tired." Having lost touch with his people, Arthur does not even know that they have begun to turn against him. Arthur's fractured nuclear family also mourns over Guinevere's absence. As Katey relates to Calvin, "My father has never been the same since mother died. I miss my mother deeply." It is against this backdrop of the queen's dominant absent presence that we should understand the two daughters' foregrounded roles. One can argue that the displacement of Guinevere by her two daughters serves double purposes. On the one hand, with a special appeal to young audience, this arrangement gives the center stage to teenagers and celebrates their valor and self-reliance. On the other hand, the absence of Guinevere opens up the narrative energy and dynamism in powerfully rewriting and reimagining the feminine side of the old legend. Indeed, the two princesses flesh out two different images of the queen. In Sarah we especially see a clear image of Guinevere, for, like her mother, she maintains her subjectivity in choosing her love. Arthur points to this essential relation when commenting on Sarah's blunt refusal to wed Lord Belasco: "Thou art as stubborn as thy mother."

Pugh sees the final absence of Sarah as crucial evidence of her diminished influence. In his view, "Transgressive Sarah is punished with absence and banishment from the film's denouement for proving the lie of masculine authority" (80-1). However, the gender reversal in the Camelot plot (Sarah, the prize of the tournament, turns out to be the very winner of the jousting) set in the aftermath of Guinevere's loss, cannot be easily played off in the interest of male patriarchal order. Pugh's interpretation tends to be dictated by a preoccupation with the contemporary setting and a reluctance to recognize the multifarious connections between the two "different" settings, for we can look at Sarah's absence in the final California scene the other way around: even

though she may be absent in the sandlot, she is conspicuously present in Camelot.<sup>10</sup> In view of female agency Pugh emphasizes, Sarah's absence at the end, as a sharp contrast to her earlier shiny presence, may even present itself as a critique on the contemporary masculine ideology by suggesting that medieval culture is more dynamic and liberal than our modern time.

One important comment Pugh makes that deserves our careful consideration concerns Katey's "sudden" emergence at the end of the film to welcome the new-born hero at the home base. He writes, "As a prize for wielding the phallus well, Katey *appears out of nowhere* to reward Calvin for his metamorphosis from loser to winner" (79; emphasis added). Pugh's argument here articulates an ingrained prejudice against the supposed casualness of Disney movies, a remark that ironically reveals the critic's own casualness and blindness. More importantly, it leads us to the most seemingly confusing, yet important, issue in the film, namely the final convergence of Camelot and sandlot. An attentive viewer will notice that Katey, far from popping up "out of nowhere" in the final scene, has been around from the beginning. There is a one-second shot in the initial baseball field scene that features the second base as loaded with a runner, who, upon a closer look, is verifiably Katey. This deliberate shot reasonably explains her appearance in the last baseball scene, taking off the helmet as if she has just run home. Katey, as well as Arthur, is here in the present not because she has jumped after Calvin into Merlin's magic well. The dream girl has always been there in reality, a girl baseball player who just hit a double before a boy player gets a strikeout. The Katey

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10) For all his emphasis on presence, Pugh tends to be self-contradictory in playing on the dynamics of absence and presence. In reference to Jeremy Carrette's reading of Foucault and the power of silence, he writes that "by not appearing when expected, the displaced figure exerts authority and agency despite the disciplinary apparatus in action" (84).

in reality proves what the Katey in Camelot tells Calvin about the necessity of hard work and training in assuring physical excellence and mental strength. More importantly, Katey's presence at the end also confirms that Sarah's absence is not an important issue. What really counts is that Sarah shows Calvin the way to become a hero by assigning him the grand mission of bringing Katey home, which Calvin manages to complete both in Camelot and in sandlot. Critics may doubt how significant this kind of storyline may appear in a typical Disney movie and whether the ways in which the film represents the female characters are in fact devices for commercial purposes rather than expressions of feminine awareness. Whatever it is, the fact that the film needs to address the importance of female roles, sometimes formulaic yet sometimes subtle, shows that even the Hollywood industry or the popular film market is a contested cultural space in which different social forces and interests are vitally negotiated.

The film deliberately plays on the fusion of the medieval and the modern. As the film presents it, the earthquake that devours Calvin deep into the ground is both the San Andreas Fault acting up and Merlin the Magician sending out a call for a brave knight; likewise, the time-travel tunnel is both created by Merlin's magic as well as by modern high-tech special effects. That Merlin can pull Calvin back through time by mistake, perhaps misled by the name of his baseball team on the uniform—the "Knights"—suggests some kind of possible communication or vital connection between the two different worlds. If Calvin falls down through the breaking ground to Camelot of Arthurian England, he also jumps down through the well back to the sandlot of contemporary California. This suggests that Camelot and sandlot are "grounded" in each other, forming an intriguing continuum. Despite the surface exoticness of the medieval kingdom into which the boy hero is suddenly thrown, Calvin soon

finds some common ground with Katey, who confides to him her thoughts on family binding, "I fear I know nothing of karate or lunch money. But I do know what it is like to miss one's parents." Master Kane's reminder to Calvin in his knightly training ("Lean in, protect your steed, fix a point on your opponent's person and have at it") echoes that of the coach to Calvin when he sends him to the plate ("You lean in, you cover the plate, you pick a point in the outfield and you let her rip"). In a humorous parallel, Calvin responds to his adviser with the same words in both cases, "That's four things," thus calling audience's attention to the conflation of the two battlefields in the two different worlds.

There are so many significant parallels between sandlot and Camelot that the various characters in Camelot plot function more like doubles projected from Calvin's real life. Despite the limited details, we may still piece together a general picture of the protagonist's life. Calvin is a bullied kid who has to learn karate to protect his lunch money, hopes for a safe desk job in the future, and, even when finally given a chance at bat, has never actually swung at all ("Try swinging this time, Fuller," says one of his teammates: "Mom, he didn't even try!") exclaims his kid sister after his disappointing strikeout). However, he does dream of becoming a hero, and this journey in time probably dramatizes his inner thoughts: "Where I come from there's no Excalibur to make me a hero. I used to think I need one." Master Kane and King Arthur, respectively the teacher and the leader Calvin inspires and transforms in Camelot, are both plagued by fatal weaknesses and self-imprisonment identical to the boy's own. It is significant to see that Kane and Calvin both consider themselves not good enough for their love, Princess Sarah and Princess Katey respectively, two sisters who share deep emotional ties. Apart from the aristocratic code that excludes him from the tournament, Master Kane, however skilled he is as a

trainer, is both unsure of his capabilities in combat and compliant with the status quo: "The tournament is reserved for better men than I." Quite aware that Sarah is soon to marry Lord Belasco, he does nothing to keep his lover with him. Witnessing Lord Belasco's brutalities, King Arthur's corruption, Camelot in crisis, and Sarah in agony, he can only remain in his classroom chopping off puppet heads and training the knights who might be fighting in the tournament for his princess. Calvin, on his part, winces from a mere stare from the pitcher who does not even bother with pitching tactics but strikes him out with three straight fast balls. Like Kane, Calvin is not playing an active role in his world, for he is at once an insider and outsider of the game. In the beginning sandlot scene, instead of warming up, he just sits on the bench watching the game. When finally called upon to the plate, the unprepared boy shuts his eyes before the ball arrives, denying himself any chance to hit a run. At school, his black-belt qualification in karate might keep him from being bullied but does not help with his self-confidence either. Calvin's romance in real life, although unmentioned, is interestingly similar to that of Kane. Calvin may not be totally unaware of Katey's crush on him, but he is never brave enough, nor does he feel deserving, to take actions, except the complacent reflection, "I think she likes me." Only in the Camelot plot does he have the courage to venture on what a boy is supposed to do for his "princess": designing surprises, taking her out on a picnic, walking her back to her room, and coming to her rescue.

If Master Kane's inaction as a consequence of an unnamed inferiority complex mirrors Calvin's major behavioral problems, King Arthur makes clear a deep psychological connection to Calvin that touches upon the boy's fundamental belief and value in life. Like the aged king, the young boy's inner rays are dimmed by self-doubt as a result of supposed physical disadvantages

(Calvin is much smaller compared to the arrogant pitcher). The tendency to blame failure or misfortune on causes other than themselves further obstructs their way to an inner reformation. Just as Arthur believes that he is the monarch because he is born a king, the Valley kid is convinced that he is born a loser. It is only reasonable that “everybody picks [Calvin] last.” When Arthur realizes that he must shore up the responsibility to redeem his kingdom and his honor, he remarks: “If I cannot believe in myself, who will?” Arthur in Camelot is just like Calvin Fuller in sandlot. Katey’s kidnap engenders both Arthur’s and Calvin’s personal growth to a newfound determination to make a change. As Arthur restores the spirit of knighthood in the wielding of the Excalibur, Calvin also finds his confidence in swinging the namesake—his baseball bat.

Merlin provides a most interesting case regarding the convergence of the two different worlds in the film. Merlin’s role is performed entirely as a watery vision or image in a well, a ghostly, disembodied head floating in a magic well. When he first sees Calvin, he comments on the boy’s appearance: “What matter of armor is that? And that animal seeping on your head?” The confused Calvin replies: “Animal? It’s my hair.” Interestingly, the boy hero’s hair bears uncanny resemblance to Merlin’s. This may suggest that Merlin’s image, the visual other that Calvin sees in the magic well, is a reflection or metamorphosis of the boy’s own self. It is also possible that the entire film is Calvin’s daydream while he is waiting on the bench. The crisis in King Arthur’s court could be a fictional situation in which the protagonist challenges himself and matures. Just like role playing in a simulation game, Merlin, an old wise man with supernatural power, assumes the job to “announce” the beginning of the trial and “declares” its completion, all of which being part of the boy’s vital imagination. The reward for passing the trial reads “the way home,” an interesting pun on Calvin’s

deep-seeded desire to hit a self-proving home run.

A different reading of Merlin's role may likewise confirm the crucial correlation of the two different worlds in view. As the story unfolds, we realize that before Merlin summons Calvin to Camelot's rescue, the Black Knight, Sarah in disguise, has already inaugurated her plan of salvation. It is therefore likely that what Merlin is calling for is the renaissance of Camelot achieved through the collaboration of Sarah from Camelot (past) and Calvin from the California sandlot (present).<sup>11)</sup> Whatever we interpret Merlin's role, one thing remains clear: The movie begins with the magician's invocation for a hero and ends with him saying, "[I] taught the kid everything he knows." In terms of the framing design, therefore, it is difficult to tell whether this film is Merlin's story or Calvin's story. Perhaps the film has it both, and its message is a mixture of medieval myth and modern mirth.

But again one may pose these questions: Is it special to play on the fusion of past and present in the movie? Is the Arthurian legend translatable in this case or is it there at all in this fusion? The answer *A Kid* possibly provides is that translatability and distinct difference are not an issue. It draws our attention to an at once familiar and unfamiliar site/sight where the Arthurian legend is both absent and present, for the Arthurian past is already translated to and incorporated by the present. *A Kid* conveys a genuine gothic atmosphere from the outset. The beginning scene shows the Excalibur covered in dusts and webs in the background of the long deserted room housing rusty armors and scattered utensils. The overall impression of decay and abandonment feature a long shot at the skull that seals the whole scene with the dominant image of horror and death.<sup>12)</sup> The invocation of Merlin, whose ghostly, discombobulated

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11) This reading may somehow explain why Sarah is absent in the final sandlot scene.

12) Later when Calvin and Katey kiss, the camera deliberately dwells on a grotesque

head floating in the well may unwittingly remind the viewers of the skull, then shifts the scene to the rather familiar and lively baseball field in sunny California. In this homely, pleasant environment, a terrible tremor suddenly strikes, opening up the ground of the sandlot to the distant world of Camelot. Yet again, this disaster should come as no surprise in the earthquake-prone California. The initial procession in which sandlot leads to Camelot thus articulates the vital connection of the everyday and the heroic. This is especially true when the film repeatedly addresses the many different forms in which the Arthurian legend enjoys its pervasive presence in Calvin's real world, though they may be no longer like the original. (Arthur's presence in the final California scene may be the embodiment of the perennial influence of the Arthurian legend.) When Katey introduces Calvin to the legendary Excalibur, Calvin's simple remark that he has known the sword from TVs and books points out the familiarity of the Excalibur in contemporary visual and textual culture. His baseball bat, with the inscription of "Excalibur" on it, bears a most immediate testimony to the popularization of Arthurian myth. Furthermore, when Calvin sees the sword in the room, it is not covered in cobwebs, an important contrast with the earlier scene suggesting that the cobwebs are dust off and history is remade. Since the Arthurian world is part of Calvin's frame of reference, the Camelot plot could be a product of Calvin's immersion in and reinvention of the visual and textual popular culture of Arthurian legend.

The reviews of the movie reveal that most critics are only used to seeing what is known to them (such as "This Hollywood movie must be..." or "This is a movie for kids, so it cannot..."). But we need to see the other side of the story. The fact that the familiar is already embedded with the inspiration

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on the left wall, as if the director is keen on creating the exoticness of the romance in the backdrop of gothic setting.

of the alien not only proves the dynamic complexity of the familiar but further reveals the subtle links or relations between the two different domains. The fact that Calvin needs the inspiration of Camelot experience to break out his self-confinement toward self-actualization shows that our world (self) has much to learn from and connect to the medieval past (other). While modern appropriation of Arthurian legend inevitably involves imposition of ideology and social values, not to mention reduction or misunderstanding (Calvin's first try at maneuvering a royal hatchet sends him spinning with the remark, "They sure look a lot lighter on TV."), the film sometimes inserts subtle comments that tend to de-romanticize our modern romanticization of the Middle Ages or the Arthurian legend. For example, Arthur looks confused in responding to Calvin's inquiry of the existence of Round Table as the symbol of equality; Katey corrects Calvin's wishful imagination of the knights in medieval romance as heroes busy in "rescuing damsels and killing dragons" by stating that the knights are usually "training hard for the tournament." Moreover, we also need to remember that historical films are not only about the time in which they are made but also about the time in which they are set. It is not reasonable to expect *A Kid* to work on documentary evidence of Arthurian England (even the celebrated medieval Arthurian literature fails in this regard) or to conduct a sociological investigation of what would likely happen given such particular cultural clash. The ancient world can often be used to deliver messages to the contemporary audience about the present, and that is why people are propelled to adapt, translate or reinvent the past so as to address the needs of their own times. The Arthurian legend or the Middle Ages, as historical past, has become part of our cultural memory, which, however, is far from static or fixed but constantly involves and invites dynamic re-imagination and re-composition. Mary Carruthers's insight in her monumental study of medieval practice of

memory is particularly relevant here:

Therefore, to say that memory is the matrix within which humans perceive present and future is also to say that both present and future, in human time, are mediated by the past. But “the past,” in this analysis, is not itself something, but rather a memory, a representing of what no longer exists as itself but only in its memorial traces. (1990: 193)

Memory is not just about the past but is also about the present and future, for what people remember is a past that involves their present concern and expectation for future. In its call to return, memory also introduces a revision to move forward. In light of memory’s vital correlation of past, present and future, what matters for the uses of cultural memory is not their accurate representation of an actual past but their power “to motivate the present and to affect the future” (Carruthers 1998: 67). If the medieval uses of cultural memory are forward-looking, it is not wise to denigrate filmmakers’ celebrations of modern values on charges of anachronism or cultural colonialism, for the Arthurian legend can make special sense to modern audiences when it relates to them. And this is most readily and effectively achieved through modern re-interpretation and re-imagination, a vibrant procession/translation that moves from the ancient past by opening it up to the contemporary present and even to the future.

Mark Twain’s *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* is a rewriting of Malory’s *Morte Darthur*, which as a translation practice in itself problematizes how one uses and locates cultural traditions in the late Middle Ages (cf. Batt). Despite its supposedly reductive appropriation of Twain’s motifs (e.g., time travel, survival through advanced knowledge or modern equipment, cultural clash, old power in danger, outsider hero), *A Kid* witnesses

how popularized Arthurian legend as familiarized difference can continue to inspire an-other novel perspective on the everyday. In this light, we should appreciate the seemingly uncomfortable juxtaposition and even convergence of different worlds and cultures in their peculiar materiality from the perspective of gothic translation, in which the boundary of self-same and other-difference, homely and alien, is called into question. The film, as a translation of the medieval Gothic, is itself a gothic translation that explores the otherwise ignored correlation of sandlot (self) and Camelot (other). Perhaps Arthurians need to accustom themselves to the uncanny experience in popular culture's domestication of the medieval/Gothic other, in which what is familiar to them becomes unsettlingly unfamiliar. This, however, should be something Arthurians are quite at home with, for the Arthurian tradition is almost synonymous with Arthurian translation, a vigorously contested process that keeps on reinventing the other side of the legend and exploring the dynamics between the familiar and the fantastic.

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## From Camelot to Sandlot: Gothic Translation in *A Kid in King Arthur's Court*

Abstract

Ming-Tsang Yang

*A Kid in King Arthur's Court* is a 1995 Disney modernization of Mark Twain's *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*. Whereas Twain's bizarre Gothic setting frames the narrative and generates magical transformation and ambivalent relationship between the protagonist and the medieval world through a vibrant textual encounter, the Disney version's fantastic journey is opened up by the familiar baseball field which, while appealing to juvenile audience, does not seem to invite serious inquiry. However, the film demonstrates an intricate process of translation, in which the cinematic rendition of the otherness of Arthurian legend to its prospective viewers involves a twofold gothic translation of both medieval culture and contemporary popular culture. Despite its reductive appropriation of some of Twain's motifs, the movie witnesses how popularized Arthurian legend as familiarized difference can continue to inspire an-other novel perspective on the everyday. Perhaps Arthurians need to accustom themselves to the uncanny experience in popular culture's domestication of the medieval/Gothic other in which what is familiar to them becomes unsettlingly unfamiliar. The Arthurian tradition is almost synonymous with Arthurian translation, a vigorously contested process that always reinvents the other side of the legend and explores the dynamics between the familiar and the fantastic.

**Key Words**

*A Kid in King Arthur's Court*, Mark Twain, *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, Arthurian legend, translation, Gothic

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