

Chivalry Should Be Dead

Knighthood in Modern American Culture



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Introduction

In the inherently paradoxical setting that is the American capitalist democracy, it is hard to define, exactly, what our culture values. The founders of our government espoused equality while ensuring the preservation of racial, gender, and economic hierarchy—an ideological contradiction that is still foundational to American society. There has always been a breach between what America symbolizes and what it actually is—between its ideals and its realities. One way that we gloss over this discrepancy is through myth. Myths make deception easier.

A deconstructionist understanding of myth posits that mythologizing allows ideology to transcend the limits of history and culture. In fact, a good myth conceals its ideological underpinnings, presenting itself as passive or inert—it claims to reflect, rather than construct, some universal truth or reality. Roland Barthes writes:

What the world supplies to myth is an historical reality, defined, even if this goes back quite a while, by the way in which men have produced or used it; and what myth gives in return is a *natural* image of this reality...myth is constituted by the loss of the historical quality of things; in it, things lose the memory that they once were made (142).

Barthes, in his groundbreaking *Mythologies*, conceptualizes myth as a “second-order semiological system” (114):

It can be seen that in myth there are two semiological systems, one of which is staggered in relation to the other: a linguistic system, the language, which I shall call the *language-object*, because it is the language which myth gets hold of in

order to build its own system; and myth itself, which I shall call *metalanguage*, because it is a second language, *in which* one speaks about the first (115).

Both systems function to derive symbolic meanings from the association of a concept and a form; in each case, the association is mediated by historical and cultural particularities. The first-order system—language—involves the construction of linguistic symbols from concepts and acoustic images. The second-order system—myth—then takes language as its form. Thus the linguistic symbol is both the final term of the first system and the first term of the second system: “it is at the same time meaning and form, full on one side and empty on the other” (Barthes 117).

As the linguistic symbol becomes the mythical form, its story—the historical events and cultural values that constructed it—is put at a distance, swept away so that it can receive a second-order meaning. The mythical meaning, “the motivation which causes the myth to be uttered” (118), absorbs the discarded history of its form. Barthes writes:

I do not wish to prejudge the moral implications of such a mechanism, but I shall not exceed the limits of an objective analysis if I point out that the ubiquity of the [form] in myth exactly reproduces the physique of the *alibi* (which is, as one realizes, a spatial term): in the *alibi* too, there is a place which is full and one which is empty, linked by a relation of negative identity (‘I am not where you think I am; I am where you think I am not’) (123).

Thus, myth performs a kind of sleight-of-hand, allowing uncomfortable realities to recede into its unlighted corners. There they can be forgotten or ignored, but their influence is

far from lost—tucked away in their hiding places, they become virtually immune to criticism or attack. For one cannot attack what one does not see.

A culture's myths, therefore, can be understood as a record of those things which it cannot otherwise explain or rectify. We cling tightly, for example, to the myth of the American dream because it allows us to make sense of the class hierarchy that so rigidly stratifies our so-called democracy. The most enduring of a culture's myths represent its most foundational lies.

Perhaps no myth in the history of the English language has endured so well as the legends of King Arthur. As one nineteenth-century American writer put it:

The centuries as they roll bring no season without its fresh laurel for the brow of King Arthur. The sun never rises and sets, but it leaves some new gleam of light on the jeweled hilt, on the fine-tempered blade, of Excalibur—sword of Arthur, “flower of kings” (Conway 85).

Many of us will never read Thomas Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur*, but we all know the story, more or less. King Arthur and his court have been passed down in the English literary and historical tradition for almost nine centuries¹, their stories remaining cherished bits of a cultural inheritance that has in time far surpassed its roots in its realm of influence. In and of itself, such a myth is not necessarily dangerous—after all, it is an important historical artifact, of interest to any scholar of ancient British culture. In its original form, it is also a work of enormous complexity, not easily reducible to simple ideological or moral lessons. But in the hands of certain interpreters, the Arthurian

¹ The first full account of Arthur comes from Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae* (“History of the Kings of Britain”), completed around 1136 (“Geoffrey of Monmouth”).

legends have become the inspiration for a number of myths that *are* dangerous. In particular, they have provided an idealized image of Anglo-Saxon² masculinity that has historically been used to uphold and reinforce the systematic oppression of other groups.

The Arthurian legends remain relevant for the same reason that anything is preserved—value. And the value of these centuries-old tales, like all good myths, is that they offer badly needed explanations, justifications. They give us guidelines and purpose—think of the knight, whose title is still synonymous with bravery, honor, courtesy, etc. The knight is an ideal of manhood towards which men still strive today.

Beyond this, the legends evoke a sense of nostalgia—they always have, as they were written centuries after the supposed fall of Arthur’s Camelot. They are still used to this effect in the modern era, perhaps the best example of which is the connection drawn between Camelot and the JFK presidency following Kennedy’s assassination. The stories have the shimmer of a golden era, a perfect moment in time, lost now but perhaps attainable once more...if one only plays the part right.

But what it *means*, in our modern world, to play that part is a matter of interpretation. And there have been many different interpretations. Arthurian influence is seen throughout nineteenth century American literature, inspiring such writers as Hawthorne and Twain to twine the historic legends into stories of contemporary life (Lupack and Lupack). In the early twentieth century, T.S. Eliot wrote “The Waste Land,” which incorporated the Arthurian Grail story into a grim depiction of post-World War I society (Lupack and Lupack 114-5); this poem became an inspiration for “Lost

² In this text, I use “Anglo-Saxon” in the 19th century racialist ahistorical sense—meaning generally any race of Germanic origin. Historically, the term refers more specifically to the inhabitants of England prior to the Norman invasion in 1066 (“Anglo-Saxon”).

Generation” writers such as Hemingway and Fitzgerald, who in turn used the symbolism of “the wounded king and his ravaged land,” gleaned from the Grail story, to describe post-war conditions:

Hemingway in particular found [in “The Waste Land”] perfect symbols for the post-World War I world and the disillusioned and scarred soldiers who returned to a new society. This less romantic view of the Grail quest also made its way into the works of Fitzgerald...His *Great Gatsby*, among other of his characters, is depicted as a Grail quester, but Gatsby’s Grail is the shallow Daisy Fay, who chooses old wealth over knightly devotion. Gatsby’s failure becomes a comment on the American Dream, a quest that is often doomed to failure (Lupack and Lupack xii-xiii).

These and other writers saw the legends as a basis for social criticism, drawing analogies between modern hardships and Arthurian elements of tragedy.

But the versions of the Arthur story that have been most influential in mainstream American culture do not portray the Arthurian characters as “doomed.” Widely read children’s books offer edited versions of the story, stripped of much of its complexity and tragedy. One popular text, *The Boy’s King Arthur*, purges women almost entirely from its pages, and “new explanations are created for matters that would otherwise require some tarnishing of the knights who are meant to be models for the young [male] readers” (Lupack and Lupack 77). Violence, however—far from tarnishing—is neither edited out nor downplayed. Generations of young men—the book was first published in 1880 and reissued in 1917 (Lupack and Lupack 75)—would learn that killing could be a laudatory act.

G. Stanley Hall, sometimes called the “father of American psychology,” once declared that the stories of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table were “perhaps the very best ideals for youth to be found in history” (Lupack and Lupack 60-1). In 1893, William Byron Forbush founded a network of boys’ clubs called the Knights of King Arthur which would become increasingly popular over the next decades, boasting over 125,000 members in 1916. This organization would later become the inspiration for the Boy Scouts, whose widespread influence continues today (Lupack and Lupack 62).

Far from the tragedy and strife that many writers saw in Arthurian legend, the public found reflections of the myth in the ideals of American society. This is, as Arthur scholars Alan and Barbara Lupack refer to it, the “paradox” of King Arthur in America:

[T]he Arthurian legends in America...are even more popular than in Britain. Yet those legends are seemingly at odds with American ideals and values. The social order of Camelot, after all, is based on inherited rank rather than advancement by merit (xi).

They go on to characterize “the appropriate American response to such an order”:

[I]t would appear to be that of Hank Morgan, Mark Twain’s Connecticut Yankee, who sought to undermine the aristocratic system he parodied in Arthur’s kingdom by giving opportunity to the talented (xi).

And yet, “While Twain parodied aspects of the Arthurian world, many others have found ways to Americanize and democratize [it] and to incorporate it into America’s own mythologies” (Lupack and Lupack xi). This, it seems, is the real paradox of Arthur in America: the belief that one *could* democratize such a world, where bloodlines formed the basis of a draconian social order.

However, any myth with the staying power to remain culturally relevant for almost a millennium must be amenable to changing social environments. And the Arthurian legends have proved themselves to be particularly malleable, taking on different meanings in the hands of different interpreters. In this thesis, I aim to show how this myth has been utilized by opposing movements in the pursuit of opposite ends. More specifically, I identify the Arthurian-inspired figure of the knight as a common behavioral paradigm—a mythical form that is still used to express morality. I analyze a tendency for social movements to self-mythologize in these terms, rendering themselves—in their own eyes, at least—morally superior to their adversaries.

What I will argue is that this relic of the Arthurian world has been coopted and utilized by modern American social movements, often in the pursuit of opposing ends. I assert that the Arthurian tradition has provided support for ideologies of racial superiority and ultimately became the basis for that infamous institution which was born on the tails of Appomattox, and which lives to this day: the Ku Klux Klan. Yet the same Arthurian concept used by the Klan to promote its hateful agenda—knighthood—would ultimately be employed by anti-Klan activists advocating racial equality. I argue that these efforts, which successfully disempowered the Klan in the short-term but ultimately failed to destroy it, could not effectively or permanently undermine Klan ideology because they were grounded in the same myth. What I hope to demonstrate is that the *form* is problematic—the chivalrous hero cannot defeat the Klan, because his ethos, in an important way, mirrors theirs.

Chapter One: *Chivalry, Slavery, and the Civil War*

Mark Twain, in his 1883 work entitled *Life on the Mississippi*, levels the following accusations against Sir Walter Scott:

Then comes Sir Walter Scott with his enchantments, and by his single might checks this wave of progress, and even turns it back; sets the world in love with dreams and phantoms; with decayed and swinish forms of religion; with decayed and degraded systems of government; with the sillinesses and emptinesses, sham grandeurs, sham gauds, and sham chivalries of a brainless and worthless long-vanished society. He did measureless harm; more real and lasting harm, perhaps, than any other individual that ever wrote. Most of the world has now outlived good part of these harms, though by no means all of them; but in our South they flourish pretty forcefully still. Not so forcefully as half a generation ago, perhaps, but still forcefully. There, the genuine and wholesome civilization of the nineteenth century is curiously confused and commingled with the Walter Scott Middle-Age sham civilization; and so you have practical, common-sense, progressive ideas, and progressive works; mixed up with the duel, the inflated speech, and the jejune romanticism of an absurd past that is dead, and out of charity ought to be buried. But for the Sir Walter disease, the character of the Southerner—or Southron, according to Sir Walter's starchier way of phrasing it—would be wholly modern, in place of modern and medieval mixed, and the South would be fully a generation further advanced than it is. It was Sir Walter that made every gentleman in the South a Major or a Colonel, or a General or a Judge, before the war; and it was he, also, that made these gentlemen value these bogus

decorations. For it was he that created rank and caste down there, and also reverence for rank and caste, and pride and pleasure in them. Enough is laid on slavery, without fathering upon it these creations and contributions of Sir Walter. Sir Walter had so large a hand in making the Southern character, as it existed before the war, that he is in great measure responsible for the war (468-9).

Twain is, perhaps, stretching the truth a bit. But the cultural effects of Scott's *Ivanhoe* are well documented—it restored, in Twain's words, “the world's admiration for the mediaeval chivalry-silliness” (470). Scott's most famous novel, *Ivanhoe* presents an inaccurate but apparently compelling account of England's origins (Duncan). The nineteenth century's fascination with, and understanding of, medieval history and culture was molded by Scott's romantic depiction of the period. Its theme—the formation of a distinct and nationalistic Anglo-Saxon identity—bolstered ideologies of white Protestant supremacy, and was echoed in the pride that American Southerners took in their regional character. That character, marked by an exalted notion of chivalry, was inseparable from the dark institution of human bondage on which Southern society relied. Thus chivalry itself became intertwined with slavery in the mind of the South.

An 1838 abolitionist periodical published a series of letters between South Carolina Congressman F. H. Elmore and James Birney, a secretary of the American Anti-Slavery Society. The slave-owning members of the House had formed a committee, for which Elmore was the South Carolina representative, “to obtain authentic information of the intentions and progress of the Anti-Slavery associations” (Birney 3). Birney pointedly notes the use of chivalry as justification and validation of slavery in the South:

The abolitionists believed from the first, that the tendency of slavery is to produce, on the part of the whites, looseness of morals, disdain of the wholesome restraints of law, and a ferocity of temper, found, only in solitary instances, in those countries where slavery is unknown. They were not ignorant of the fact, that this was disputed; nor that the “Chivalry of the South” had become a cant phrase, including all that is high-minded and honorable among men; nor, that it had been formally asserted in our National legislature, that slavery, as it exists in the South, “produces the highest toned, the purest, best organization of society that has ever existed on the face of the earth.” Nor were the abolitionists unaware, that these pretensions, proving anything else but their own solidarity, had been echoed and re-echoed so long by the unthinking and the interested of the North, that the character of the South had been injuriously affected by them—till she began boldly to attribute her *peculiar* superiority to her *peculiar* institution, and thus to strengthen it (27).

Underscoring the entrenched association between the two, he goes on to assert that the abolition of slavery would necessarily entail the erasure of chivalry from the Southern ethos:

Certain it is, that the time when southern slavery derived countenance at the North, from its supposed connection with “chivalry,” is rapidly passing away. “Southern Chivalry” will soon be regarded as one of the by-gone fooleries of a less intelligent and less virtuous age. It will soon be cast out—giving place to the more reasonable idea, that the denial of wages to the laborer, the selling of men and women, the whipping of husbands and wives in each others presence, to

compel then to unrequited toil, the deliberate attempt to extinguish mind, and consequently, to destroy the soul—is among the highest offences against God and man—unspeakably mean and ungentlemanly (28).

This correspondence highlights the role of medieval constructs in the antebellum South—particularly their implication in the oppressive and brutal treatment of African-Americans. As medievalist Andrew Galloway writes, “[E]arly American notions of Anglo-Saxon traditions or other kinds of antiquity often emphasized ideas of original ‘purity’ of race and culture” (726). Chivalry, conceptualized as a feature of Anglo-Saxon masculinity, had become a symbol for white supremacy.

Even in the North, despite vast cultural discrepancies, the figure of the knight was galloping through the cultural imagination. It had been adopted by abolitionists who saw chivalry as a basis for advocating the better treatment of African-Americans. In an 1861 essay titled *The Rejected Stone: Or Insurrection vs. Resurrection in America*, Moncure Daniel Conway urges Americans to act on behalf of abolition for the reason that slavery contradicted American ideals: “Why does [this nation] not, own what is whispered in every heart, that this war means *freedom for all or chains for all*, at once inscribe EMANCIPATION on its banner?” (87).

Conway draws on the knightly notion of serving the needy and poor to explain the obligations of white Americans: “Our relations to the Negro make him for us the sign of eternal justice and inviolable honor...The more lowly and incompetent that race, the more sacred its cause to all loyal men” (27). Though he uses it to a different end, Conway here employs the same underlying logic at work in the South: that chivalry defines the particular nature of the white man, rendering him superior. Despite his distaste for

slavery, Conway displays a marked disdain for its sufferers. The chivalry that he describes seems inherently to involve a certain condescension—an act is only chivalrous, after all, if its beneficiary is an inferior.

Conway illustrates, as well, the ironic result of such emphatic attention to the “honor” of charitable acts: they become selfish. The glorification of selflessness offers a self-interested motivation for such acts. If the goal is reputation, it is enough to merely appear selfless and charitable—one need not actually serve others. The chivalry that Conway advocates becomes a marker that serves to reinforce the superiority of the chivalrous. Thus not only does Conway’s version of a knight act according to self-interest, but his actions also ultimately serve to reinforce the system that makes his chivalrous interferences necessary.

In the North, as well, a true knight was defined by his Anglo-Saxon heritage. Conway posits American Anglo-Saxons as the inheritors of King Arthur’s legacy:

[W]hen his race—*our race*—shall be worthy to receive him, King Arthur, the Imperishable, shall return, bringing with him Excalibur the Unconquerable... When we are worthy to receive him; when we stand true Knights of Humanity; when we have set our hearts to strike for the innocent and wronged; when we have bound ourselves in a holy compact, as a Legion of Honor, to strike down those who raise themselves upon the weak,—then the royal Soul of our race shall rise and return to lead us... When our Anglo-Saxon blood mounts to its royal height, and grasps its final, noblest weapon, four million chains will fall,—nay, six million hearts, whose drugged blood owns the same

fountain with ours, will cast off the virus which has maddened them, and every State hasten as a Knight to the Table where Arthur reigns (86).

The emphasis on blood, though in keeping with the original legends, is rather antithetical to the American ideals that Conway espouses elsewhere. Despite his condemnation of slavery, the abolitionist was seemingly entirely uninterested in the fate of freed African-Americans—it was enough that they merely be unchained. His interest in their freedom seemed to lie virtually exclusively in the salvation of the Anglo-Saxon character.

This ideology of Anglo-Saxon supremacy, undisputed even in abolitionist rhetoric, would give rise to Southern outrage as former slaves gained rights and status in the Reconstruction period. Following the South's defeat, the concept of knighthood would be invoked again—not to advocate for African-Americans, but to defend white privilege against them. A new order of knighthood was rising.

Officially, the KKK is named “The Knights of the Ku Klux Klan.” “Ku Klux” derives from the Greek “kuklos,” meaning “circle.” Thus what we have, in essence, are the Knights of the Circle Klan: a name suspiciously similar to Arthur's own Knights of the Round Table. The seeming significance of the Klan's name is also reminiscent of that of the Round Table: in Arthur's Court, the circular table shape represented community and equality amongst the knights—a seeming bubble of democracy in an otherwise hierarchical world. The name “Circle Klan” similarly evokes the image of an egalitarian organization where Anglo-Saxon men of all social classes are united in their common goal of enforcing and strengthening racial, gender, and religious stratification.

There is also clear evidence, as earlier detailed by Twain in his rant against Sir Walter Scott, of the Arthurian influence in the antebellum South. Following the war, as

the Southern elite watched their society crumble under the new order of Reconstruction, the bitterness of a lost “golden age” seemingly strengthened the connection that Southerners felt to King Arthur and Camelot. The original Klan, founded in Tennessee the spring of 1866, was initially composed of a small number of former Confederate officers who “decided to form a social society much like the student fraternities gaining popularity on college campuses” (Bowers 57). In its infancy, the group apparently did not have much of an agenda—even as its numbers grew, the early Klan’s activities were more ridiculous than dangerous:

In strange midnight ceremonies the men donned their ghostly garb, recited their rambling incantations, pledged vows of secrecy, and indoctrinated new recruits. In time, the robed and hooded figures, masquerading as ghosts of Confederate soldiers returning from the battlefield, mounted horses and rode through neighboring farms and villages. The ghastly, ghostly figures told shocked onlookers that they had not had a drink since the battle of Shiloh and had rode twice around the world since supertime (Bowers 58).

Harmless enough. And yet even at this early stage, the group’s evolution from “social club” (Bowers 57) to violent hate group seems to have been almost unavoidable: defeated men with bruised egos—white men who had been taught that superior status and virtually limitless power were their birthrights—flocking together in an effort to salvage something of their shared past. The Klan may not have been founded on violence, but it was founded on a volatile mixture of nostalgia and wounded masculine pride.

Within a year, the KKK was no longer a social group; it had become, in effect, a military government. By 1867, it had elected a former Confederate general, Nathan

Bedford Forrest, as its leader (“Grand Wizard”), given ranks and titles such as “Grand Dragon,” “Grand Titan,” and “Grand Giant” to other former military officers, and “designated the entire South as the territory of the new Invisible Empire” (Bowers 59). A Klan constitution was written, which “expressed allegiance to the U.S. government but also asserted the power to interpret and enforce the law,” effectively making the Klan “judge, jury, and executioner of its own version of law and order” (Bowers 59).

As federal Reconstruction further threatened the already-crumbling social order of the past, affronted Southern whites “vowed to resist what they saw as the trampling of their rights” (Bowers 59). Within weeks of the drafting of its new constitution, the Klan sprang violently into action, targeting anyone—white or black—who supported Reconstruction. Despite the terrorist nature of the group, “Many newspapers characterized the raids as acts of self-defense on behalf of the entire white race. The apologists of the Klan recast its atrocities as heroics and spread fanciful myths about its origins and purpose” (Bowers 60). In effect the Arthurian legends had been recast, with the pre-war South as Camelot and the Klan as its venerable knights.

The thing about myths is that they fall apart if you pay too much attention to detail. In this case, the “detail” that became increasingly hard to overlook was the extremity of the Klan’s violent reign. Public opinion turned against it, the federal government launched an investigation, and even General Forrest himself “declared that the organization had been ‘perverted’ and ordered his followers to stand down” (Bowers 60). Laws were enacted allowing for the trial of Klansmen in federal court, troops were sent south to enforce order, and by the mid-1880s the Klan had largely disappeared (Bowers 61). But by this point, Reconstruction, too, had ended and “The old white ruling

class regained power and restored white supremacy as the rule of law” (Bowers 61). Now a relic, the Klan began to regain its mythical status:

Historians generally glossed over the old KKK atrocities, while southern novelists romanticized them with elaborate tales of a valiant masked and hooded army that rode at night to save the downtrodden white race from the dual horrors of northern tyranny and black rule (Bowers 61).

Ultimately, these exalted and fictional accounts would be the kindling that brought the Klan to life again. All that it needed was a spark.

Chapter Two: *Knighthood, Fraternalism, and Klan Revival*

Twenty-two years before that spark would catch, however, another organization was beginning its rise: William Forbush's Knights of King Arthur (Figure 1). This group, along with others that followed in its wake, helped fuel an increasing public interest in the Arthurian legends. Over the following decades, the growing trend would leave a permanent mark on generations:

To understand the impact of clubs such as the Knighthood of Youth, the Knights of King Arthur, and the Knights of the Holy Grail, one must imagine the members of these groups, nearly half a million in all, thinking of themselves and of those they admired...as knights of the modern world. The concept of knighthood was thus absorbed into the popular culture and transformed from something attainable only by the nobility to a state expected of the moral youth or adult (Lupack and Lupack 70).

This phenomenon was part of a wider social trend that spanned the last decades of the nineteenth century and the first of the twentieth: the rise of American fraternalism. In a 1926 essay from *Harper's Bazaar*, Charles Merz describes what he believed to be the impetus for this trend, which at that time had claimed roughly half the adult population (Merz 1):

To live in a modern world and be an ancient; to live in a humdrum world and be a knight; to live in a gabby world and have a secret—all this is possible. It is the essence of fraternalism that it does its best to make it possible (5).

Thus while not all fraternal organizations were explicitly Arthurian, the figure of the knight—derived directly from Arthurian legend—was almost universally invoked as the

behavioral ideal. Evidence of a common influence is found, for example, in the costumes of Forbush's Knights and the bedsheets of the Knights of the Klan (Figures 1 and 2).



Figure 1: A castle of the Knights of King Arthur.

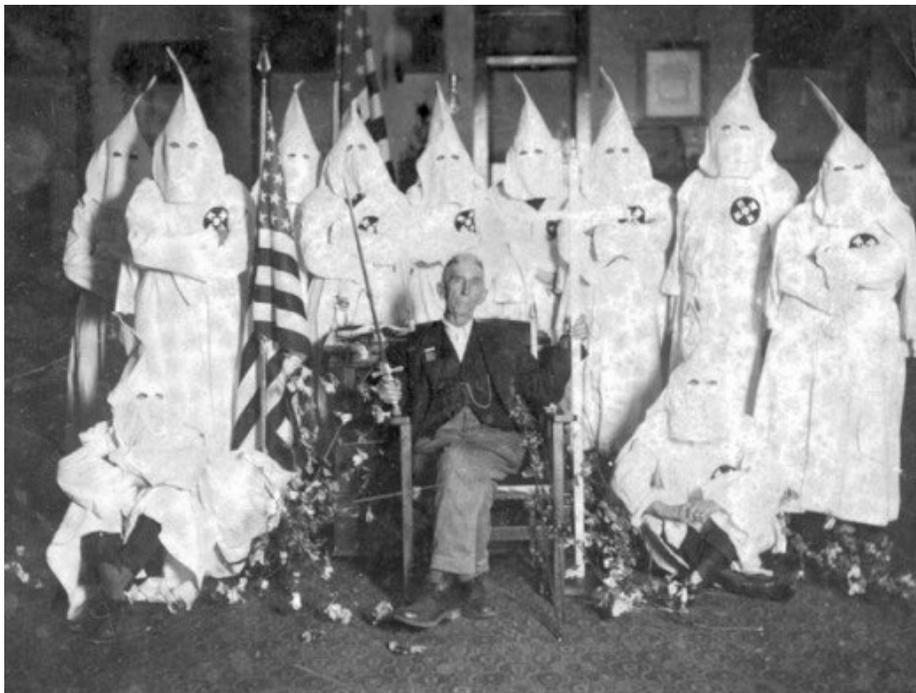


Figure 2: Robed Klansmen.

It follows, then, that the ideology of the second Klan was not so different from the views commonly held by the average white American Protestant in the early twentieth century. The Klan boomed in the 1920s, catering to a society that was already deeply segregated:

It is...helpful to understand the second Klan by considering it within—rather than as an aberration from—the ideas and values that shaped white Protestant life in the early twentieth century, fueling religious fundamentalism and prohibitionism as well as the Klan...[Its] underlying ideas of racial separation and white Protestant supremacy...echoed throughout white society in the 1920s, as racial and religious hatreds determined the political dialogue in many communities. Few white-controlled institutions or organizations in the United States either practiced or espoused racial integration or equality, allowing the Klan to proudly proclaim its continuity with established sentiment among whites. A 1924 defense of the Klan's racial exclusivity, for example, noted—correctly—that many fraternal lodges practiced racial prejudice by restricting membership to white males (Blee 17-8).

In American fraternalism, therefore—even before the second coming of the Klan—elements of the Arthurian legends mingled directly with the mythos of white supremacy.

The man who engineered the Klan's second coming, William J. Simmons, was born in 1880—he would have been thirteen when the Knights of King Arthur was founded. Though there is no evidence that Simmons was involved in that group, he certainly would have felt its influence; as an adult, Simmons was supposedly a member of more than a dozen fraternal organizations (Norris) and “proudly told friends and

associates that he was... a professional ‘fraternalist’” (Bowers 64). The son of a Civil War veteran who had ridden with the original Klan, “Simmons... heard the romanticized accounts of valiant, hooded night riders and saw the fear in the eyes of black servants and field hands who had felt their wrath” (Bowers 63). In 1915, no doubt inspired by his other fraternal activities, Simmons set about to bring back the Knights of the Ku Klux Klan.

This resurrection had been his goal for fifteen years (Jackson 351). Simmons himself reported that the idea had begun with a vision that appeared to him in 1901:

One summer night, as the future chief Kluxster sat musing at his window, he suddenly beheld a row of white-robed figures on horseback racing across the sky, and behind them was a rough outline of a map of the United States. To determine its meaning he turned to prayer. “Ere long,” he later wrote, “I clearly conceived the embryonic medium of its supply. I then and there solemnly dedicated my life and consecrated my all, to the task of maturing that medium” (Jackson 352).

After that, Simmons saw the Klan revival as his destiny. He believed he was a prophet, once describing himself as “He who traversed the Realm of the Unknown, wrested the solemn secret from the grasp of night and became Sovereign Master of the great lost mystery” (Jackson 363-4). And while he ultimately lacked the managerial skills to lead a large organization³, Simmons understood well the deep power of myth to guide and inspire human activity:

He was profoundly enamoured with the hocus-pocus mummery which is the corollary of all fraternal bodies. Thus his apology for the Klan ritual: “Symbolism

³ Simmons was ousted as Grand Wizard and eventually banished from the Klan by his successor (Jackson); “Disaffected Klansmen characterized him as an immoral and waffling ruler, ‘a man of weakness and vice [whose thoughts] run to women and liquor’” (Blee 19).

teaches the great principles of life and being and destiny, better than any form of speech. There is in human nature an element of mysticism that responds to suggestion and intimation when no logic or philosophy could reach it” (Jackson 356).

Thus it only makes sense that he purposefully coincided his public announcement of the KKK resurrection with the debut of the pro-Klan film *The Birth of A Nation*. The film, like the aforementioned works of Sir Walter Scott, illustrates the singular power of myth to recast. In *The Birth of A Nation*, the brutal facts of racial oppression are obscured by the fantasy of a Southern paradise—a paradise whose existence is predicated upon this very brutality. In order that the paradox be concealed, the film perpetuates a myth of white superiority—a justification for the horrors of slavery and Jim Crow that allows white Southerners to retain their heroic status. Below, I outline the pseudohistorical myth used by the film to legitimate and glorify the Klan.

The Birth of a Nation depicts the Civil War and Reconstruction from a decidedly Southern point of view, culminating in a fictitious account of the founding of the original Klan. Its plot follows two families—the Northern Stonemans and the Southern Camerons—whose stories weave a narrative of Southern heroics and Northern treachery. The silent film opens on the Cameron family’s Southern home, which is described in plainly nostalgic terms: “Piedmont, South Carolina, . . . where life runs in a quaintly way that is to be no more.”

Back in Washington D.C., Dr. Stoneman—a “radical” Northern senator—meets with a colleague in his home. As the guest prepares to exit, Stoneman’s “mulatto” housekeeper insolently drops his coat, prompting chastisement from the man. When he

turns to leave she spits viciously after him and pouts. Dr. Stoneman, absent for the exchange, returns and finds her pretending to cry. She manipulates him into comforting her and then seduces him—“The great leader’s weakness that is to blight a nation.”

War breaks out, and the Confederates march out of Piedmont while a gathering of slaves cheers them on. Time passes, and “Piedmont [is] scarred by the war.” In the street, a black man and woman laugh at the corpse of a white man. Black Union soldiers break into the Cameron home, injuring Dr. Cameron and ransacking their belongings. Then, with clearly criminal intent, the soldiers set to searching for the hiding Cameron women, who are rescued in the nick of time by Confederate soldiers. The Confederates scare away the cowardly black soldiers—but not before the Camerons’ house has been set ablaze. The war ends with the Camerons in pitiable poverty.

Then, “Reconstruction”: “The agony which the South endured that a nation might be born.” The film quotes Woodrow Wilson—“...The policy of the congressional leaders wrought...a veritable overthrow of civilization in the South...in their determination to ‘put the white South under the heel of the black South’”; “The white men were roused by a mere instinct of self-preservation...until at last there had sprung into existence a great Ku Klux Klan, a veritable empire of the South, to protect the Southern country.”

Dr. Stoneman and his “protégé, Silas Lynch, mulatto leader of the blacks”—now governor and lieutenant governor of South Carolina—arrive in Piedmont. In a scene prefaced as “the black’s condescension,” Dr. Stoneman introduces Lynch to the Camerons’ son Ben; Lynch offers a handshake that Ben refuses (Figure 2). Later, out of sight, Lynch gestures angrily at Dr. Stoneman and then, with a villainous smile, raises a fist in the air. The screen reads, “Lynch a traitor to his white patron and a greater traitor

to his own people, whom he plans to lead by an evil way to build himself a throne of vaunting power.” This is followed by a scene of Lynch strangling a dog, juxtaposed with one of Ben Cameron and his sweetheart gently kissing and stroking a dove.



Figure 3: “The black’s condescension”—Ben Cameron refuses to shake Silas Lynch’s hand.

In a scene titled “Election Day,” a black man shoves two ballots in the box while “the leading whites” are pushed away at gunpoint. Then, “The riot in the Master’s Hall. The negro party in control in the State House of Representatives.” “The helpless white minority” struggles vainly against the “passage of a bill, providing for the intermarriage of blacks and whites.” Later, “The Grim reaping begins”: Gus, “a renegade negro,” proposes to the youngest Cameron daughter. Horrified, she runs away; he pursues her to the edge of a cliff, where she screams, “Stay away or I’ll jump!” He steps closer and she jumps. Following her bloody end on a rock below, the screen reads: “For her who had learned the stern lesson of honor we should not grieve that she found sweeter the opal gates of death” (emphasis in original).

Furious and distraught, Ben Cameron is struck with the inspiration for the Ku Klux Klan. The Klan goes after Gus, so that he can be “given a fair trial in the dim halls of the Invisible Empire.” At a gathering in the shadowy forest, in front of a burning cross, the hooded men proclaim “Guilty,” and the scene fades to black as they drag Gus away. His dead body is left on the steps of Lynch’s house, and the film proclaims, “The answer to the blacks and carpetbaggers.”

The Klan is outlawed by the outraged Lynch and the Cameron family must escape Piedmont. They find refuge in the home of two Union veterans, and “The former enemies of North and South are united again in common defence of their Aryan birthright.” But Lynch’s henchmen soon discover their hiding spot. As they pound down the door, Dr. Cameron takes his adult daughter by the hair and holds a gun to her head, ready to kill her before she can be defiled⁴ by the black intruders.

Meanwhile, Piedmont has been “given over to crazed negroes” and “Ku Klux sympathizers [become] victims of the black mobs,” who tar and feather them. At last the Klan—now an awe-inspiring army—rides magnificently into town, scaring away the mobs and liberating terrified white families. They also rescue the imperiled Cameron family. In Piedmont, whites now rejoice and blacks run in fear. White supremacy has been gloriously restored.

The film communicates the chivalry of the Klansmen is communicated through the baseness of its black characters. It uses white actors in blackface to convey a childlike yet savage image of African-Americans. They are shown as simple and dull, capable only

⁴ It is interesting to note that a 2013 review of the film from *The New Yorker* describes this scene as having “a harrowing and exalted grandeur that surpasses the film’s specific prejudices to achieve a classical moment of tragedy” (Brody).

of servitude, prone to manipulation by those with more intelligence. And “mulattos,” who represent the dreaded sin of miscegenation, are depicted as conniving, duplicitous, and power-hungry. Further, the film brazenly promotes the “controversial message that white vigilantes had saved decent white families” (Bowers 65) from the tyranny of black rule. Thus when the newly formed Klan begins terrorizing blacks, the audience is primed to regard its actions as defensive and even heroic.

The Klan’s heroics are emphasized as well through the childishness and delicacy of its white female characters (Figure 3). White women have always been utilized as symbols in Klan rhetoric and propaganda: “From the beginning, the rituals and organized terrorism of the first KKK were based on symbols of violent white masculinity and vulnerable white femininity” (Blee 12). The preservation of the “purity” of white women became a central rallying point for those who opposed racial equality. Twice—with the death of the younger Cameron sister, and the near execution of the older—the film indicates that female purity should be preserved over female life. Thus is illustrated the paradoxical relationship between white women and the Klan: “Klansmen insisted that white women benefited from the Southern racial state, even as strict gender hierarchies within white society ensured that women would not be consulted on this matter” (Blee 13).

At the premiere in Atlanta, the soon-to-be thriving capital of the Klan’s Invisible Empire, Simmons’ plan worked perfectly—as the film drew to an end, its message flowed seamlessly off the screen and into the real world:

The entire audience cheered as the Ku Klux Klan rose to the rescue of white womanhood, white power, and white supremacy. Finally the crowd breathed a

final sigh of relief as the robed avengers dispensed with the threat by castrating and lynching the black villain. And the show did not end with the final scene. As the audience filed out of the theater, a bonus scene awaited them on Peachtree Street. More than a hundred men in white robes and hoods stood in military-style formation, rifles raised into the air. Thanks to...[Simmons], the Ku Klux Klan was back—and this was no movie (Bowers 66).

The film gained widespread popularity and became the first American motion picture ever screened at the White House, under Woodrow Wilson. President Wilson is famously supposed to have said of it, “It is like writing history with Lightning. And my only regret is that it is all so terribly true” (Ebert). Perhaps not so surprising, given that he is quoted in the film itself.

With apparent support from even the highest offices of the U.S. government, the Klan was primed for its most successful decade in history. As Stetson Kennedy writes in the 1990 edition of *The Klan Unmasked* (a work discussed in more detail in chapter four):

Twice...in our nation’s history the Ku Klux Klan has boasted, with reason, that it had America “Kluxed.” The first occasion came with the overthrow of Reconstruction, when the original Klan in effect dictated the terms of the “Deal of ‘76” setting aside the total surrender of the Confederacy at Appomattox, making dead letters of the constitutional amendments asserting black rights, and abandoning the freedmen to the not-so-tender mercies of their former masters...The second Kluxing of America took place during the middle of the 1920s when the Klan—“reincarnated” in 1915 in the wake of the Leo Frank lynching—elected a number of Klansmen to Congress and a half dozen as

governors, controlled a number of state legislatures, saw to the passing of racist immigration law virtually barring all black, brown, and yellow people, marched twenty abreast from dawn until dusk down Pennsylvania Avenue in the nation's capital, and inducted President Warren G. Harding in a ceremony conducted in the Green Room of the White House⁵ (274).

⁵This fact has been disputed—Kennedy's only source was the deathbed confession of a man who claimed to have been there.

Chapter Three: *The Caped Knight and the Clan of the Fiery Cross*

After its heyday in the '20s, the Klan all but died out during the Great Depression. President Roosevelt, realizing that the organization had never paid taxes on the significant profits it raked in every year, called upon it to remit the three quarters of a million dollars that it owed (Kennedy 87). It was effectively put out of business—for the time being. At the same time, two Jewish highschoolers from Cleveland, Ohio, were hard at work on a creation that would eventually become another mechanism for fighting the Klan: Superman.

Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster, both misfits among their peers, had found a common means of escape in the world of science fiction. Together, they began creating original content—Jerry as writer, Joe as illustrator. After their graduation, in 1934, the two began their own comic art business, attempting to sell their ideas to editors and publishers. It was that summer, supposedly, that the idea for a hero named Superman suddenly came to Jerry late one night (Bowers 25).

Years before, Jerry and Joe had created a character of the same name—Superman—but he had been a villain, a privileged professor who performed gruesome experiments on the homeless.⁶ What Jerry suddenly realized on that night in 1934 was that Superman was destined for heroics, rather than evil:

The world had no need for an evil superman. The world needed a good superman—a trustworthy and powerful ally who would come to the rescue of regular people... With millions of people out of work, the streets full of crime, the

⁶ It is amusing, as well as indicative of the self-serving function of myth, that the creation of this evil professor character coincided with both boys' failure to pass the twelfth grade and graduate high school.

stock market in ruins, and a war brewing in Europe, readers were starved for hope, inspiration, and a sense of power. A good superman could provide all that (Bowers 26).

The embodiment of modern day chivalry, Superman would establish his knightly disposition early on. The superhero genre in general was quick to draw a connection to the Arthurian legends; King Arthur himself was the subject of a comic series published by DC Comics—also the publishers of Superman—in 1936, two years before the 1938 appearance of the Man of Steel (“King Arthur (DC Comics)”). Further, almost all the major comic book heroes—for which Superman was the prototype—have had “Arthurian adventures” (Lupack and Lupack 284). In one series, Superman and Batman actually travel to Camelot to fight alongside the King, and are ultimately knighted by him (Figure 5) (“King Arthur (DC Comics)”). Superman was a modern-day Knight of the Round Table—not just in form, but in name as well.

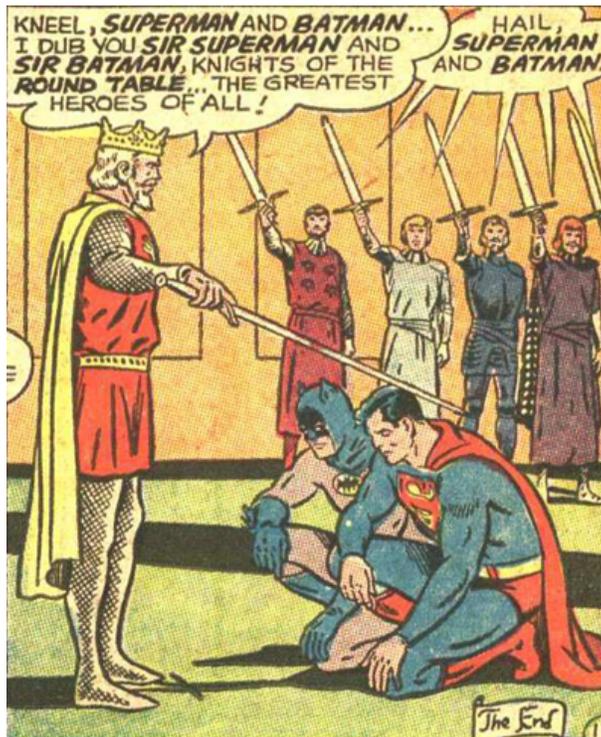


Figure 4: King Arthur knights Superman and Batman.

Action Comics, the series that introduced the story, marketed the hero as “Superman! Champion of the Oppressed” (Bowers 41). Superman’s birth coincided roughly with the presidency of Franklin Roosevelt, and the creators drew on the president’s beliefs and policies in molding the ideology of their character. In the comic’s first edition, “Superman bursts on to the scene as the New Deal blend of optimism and social responsibility, a muscular do-gooder with a boundless passion for justice” (Bowers 41). In its early years, the comic would pluck its villains directly from the real world, pitting Superman against domestic abusers, dictators, dirty politicians, and crooked industrialists. In one episode, for example:

Superman descends into a coal mine to save a miner trapped in a cave-in. After discovering that the cave-in resulted from unsafe conditions—the owner of the mine had failed to maintain the safety equipment and an alarm signal—the Man of Steel swings into action. Rushing to the mine owner’s mansion, Superman crashes a party of well-to-do socialites and promises to let the mine owner and his high-society guests “see how the other side lives.” Then he leads them all into the mine. Deep below the Earth’s surface, the socialites twirl their pearl necklaces, fiddle with their top hats, and express their astonishment that “people actually work down here.” Then Superman pulls down a beam that supports the mine walls, which causes another cave-in and traps the partiers in an underground hole. Since the emergency alarm doesn’t work, the trapped socialites have no choice but to dig their way out: “Knee deep in stagnant water, struggling with unwieldy tools, slipping, frequently falling, the entrapped pleasure-seekers seek desperately...to batter down the huge barrier of coal.” In the end the mine owner

vows to run the “safest mine in America,” and Superman rescues the party (Bowers 43-4).

True to Jerry and Joe’s original intent, the hero could offer a sense of justice to a public that was sorely lacking it. For millions, the optimistic and inspiring stories would become a respite—as fantasy had always been for Superman’s creators—from the hard reality of Depression-era America. At the same time, the two young men from Cleveland could sit back and watch the profits roll in.

It is telling that over time the character’s original epithet (“Champion of the Oppressed”) was scrapped for “Defender of Truth, Justice, and the American Way” (Bowers). The creators’ idea—to capitalize on desperate and downtrodden people looking for a hero—is no less mercenary than the actions of the greedy capitalists they condemned. This underlying scheme closely mirrors the logic of the Klan: for impoverished and discouraged whites, Klan ideology was similarly a source of confidence and hope. For its top ranking officials, it was a highly lucrative enterprise. Like the Grand Wizard and his associates, the Superman team was selling an empty myth for personal gain.

And as the United States careened into World War II, the myth’s discrepancies would become harder to reconcile. In the years leading up to the war, the Superman creators had taken a hard stance in opposition to the Axis powers. A strip commissioned by *Look* magazine, for example, depicted the hero holding Hitler by the scruff of his neck, growling, “I’d like to land a strictly non-Aryan punch on your jaw” (Bowers 99-100). But when the U.S. officially entered the conflict, the Superman team was faced with what *Time* magazine dubbed “Superman’s Dilemma.” While new superheroes like

Captain America and the Star-Spangled Kid were being written into the American armed forces overseas, The Man of Steel was stuck. If he joined the military, “Superman ought to be able to drop thousand-pound bombs from the sky on German troops, flick Japanese Zeros out of the air, and drag battleships to the bottom of the ocean”—in other words, he should have been capable of single-handedly winning the war (Bowers 102). This was not exactly the morale-boosting story that the writers wanted to produce. So, instead, he was made to flunk the military eye exam, accidentally reading an eye chart from the next room with his x-ray vision. He would have to support the war effort from home.

For the first time, Superman’s mythical powers had revealed themselves to be a weakness. The exaggerated character could not relate to the struggles of ordinary people. And yet he remained a favorite among American troops—35,000 copies of the comic book were being shipped overseas every month (Bowers 105). As reported by an article in *Time*:

Superman got a high priority rating last week: the Navy Department ruled that Superman comic books should be included among essential supplies destined for the marine garrison at Midway Islands. For the tough Marines, as for all U.S. Armed Forces, the Man of Steel is still super-favorite reading (Bowers 105).

Here we see blatantly the ideological paradox that Superman fans were unwittingly swallowing. Superman was a hero because of the extraordinary abilities with which he had been born; he was by nature a superior being. Yet the soldiers who adored him were fighting a war that was, among other things, founded on the repudiation of genetic superiority. And while Superman’s powers made him capable of taking down the entire Axis on his own, the real war effort was critically dependent upon the cooperation and

communal effort of average people. There had appeared, it seemed, something distinctly undemocratic about the defender of the American Way.

While for many “Superman...represents the very best in humanity” (“Superman” 340), he is the product of a particular culture at a particular moment in history. Like any myth, he reflected the personal interests and ideologies of its creators. At a time of widespread anti-Semitism in America, the character depicted important aspects of the boys’ heritage: “The all-American superhero reflected many of the beliefs and values of Jewish immigrants of the day” (Bowers 28). At the same time, the character drew on the same vein of inflated masculinity that pervaded the mythos of the Klan. Despite the tagline “Champion of the Oppressed,” the comic is infused with oppressively traditional notions of gender:

In time the classic image would evolve: The handsome, smiling superhero would save Lois Lane from all kinds of danger, hoist her in his arms, soar over the flickering lights of Metropolis, and deliver her safely home (Bowers 28).

This cooptation of imperiled woman as symbol or foil for masculine chivalry is reminiscent of tactics employed by the Klan.

And while Superman may never have committed any hate crimes, the myth presents the same essentialized concept of good vs. evil that the Klan used to incite intolerance among its members. Both mirror the contemporary understanding of knighthood, as represented in popular interpretations of the Arthurian legends such as the pared-down *Boy’s King Arthur*. The logic behind all three—that violence is acceptable and even laudatory when directed against “evil”—is a gross oversimplification and does little but fuel the antagonism between the two sides. In short, despite their superficial

antithesis, the ideologies behind Superman and the Klan were patterned after the same problematic vision of the Arthurian knight.

Though the similarity of the form would ultimately impede Superman's efforts, his knightly nature made the hero seem initially well suited to take on the Knights of the Ku Klux Klan. After all, it seemed to make sense that only a knight could defeat a knight. So, following the end of World War II, finding themselves deprived of their wartime villains, the Superman writers started looking for evil closer to home. They would ultimately produce a sixteen-part series, broadcast on national radio, pitting Superman against the "Clan of the Fiery Cross" (Bowers 134).

In May of 1946—just one month before the series was aired—the Klan, too, was preparing something big. It had been lying relatively low since its brush with FDR some years earlier; now, with black World War II veterans increasingly calling for equal rights, the time seemed right for a revival. On the night of the 9th, over one thousand Klansmen and two hundred initiates gathered near the top of Stone Mountain, outside Atlanta. There, surrounded by more than a thousand spectators, they set a three-hundred-foot-tall cross ablaze. As the Klan had hoped, the event received a flurry of media attention across the nation.

On June 10th, 1946, the first episode of "Clan of the Fiery Cross" went live. The series is centered on a youth baseball team managed by Clark Kent's fellow reporter at the *Daily Planet*, Jimmy Olsen. A Chinese-American named Tommy Lee has recently replaced the white Chuck Briggs as the team's star pitcher. When one of Tommy's pitches accidentally hits Chuck during practice, Chuck angrily refuses to accept Tommy's apology—prompting Jimmy to remove him from the team.

Later, relating the incident to his uncle Matt, Chuck realizes he may have overreacted. Matt, however, stops short when Chuck mentions Tommy's name:

"Wait a minute. What's the kid's name?"

"Lee. Tommy Lee."

"This Lee boy beaming you with a baseball gives me just the angle I've been looking for," Matt responds cryptically. Then he emphatically insists that Tommy was trying to kill Chuck with the wayward ball, and tells the boy that he will bring him to "a meeting of real Americans who know how to take care of these Tommy Lees and others like them." Chuck notices that his uncle's "eyes blazed with an evil fire the boy had never noticed in them before."

The narrator describes the scene of the meeting: "In a glade, casting weird shadows over the hills and lighting the sky above burns a huge wooden cross. Before it kneel half a hundred men clothed in long robes. Pointed hoods, slit only at the eyes, cover their heads and faces, and a low guttural chant issues harshly from their hidden lips." Matt, apparently the leader of the group, explains its motives to Chuck: to make America "one race, one religion, one color." Startled, Chuck replies: "Only one? But the constitution says all Americans have the same rights and privileges." "Constitution!" his uncle snorts, "Ha! We'll change that."

Using the false story about Tommy's plan to murder Chuck, Matt incites the group to action; they leave a burning cross on the front lawn of the Lee house. When Tommy tells Jimmy Olsen, Jimmy rushes to find Clark Kent, who immediately recognizes the grave danger that the Lees are in. On their way to the Lee home, Clark tells Jimmy, "Intolerance is a filthy weed, Jim. The only way you can get rid of it is by

hunting out the roots and pulling them out of the ground.” At the house, minutes later, he muses: “Most Americans realize the danger of allowing intolerance to breed. Now we saw what happened to Germany and Italy and other European countries when a gang of murdering bigots like the Fiery Cross Mob got in power.” Clark then narrowly saves Tommy’s life when his x-ray vision allows him to spot a bomb taped under the boy’s bicycle.

At a baseball game later that day, Clark foils a second attempt to injure Tommy. A furious Matt tells his henchman, “Call a special meeting of the Action Committee tonight...we’ve fooled around long enough with these chinks. Now we’re gonna take our gloves off!” At the meeting, Matt recounts how Tommy’s father, Dr. Lee, “stole” a job in the Health Department from a Clan member (who later admits he is not qualified for the position). “The time has come for action against these foreign scum who dare demand equal rights with Americans!” Matt announces. He describes his plan: kidnap Tommy and “tar and feather him.” “Suppose the kid dies?” a member asks. “Oh, let him die,” Matt snarls. “It’ll teach them all a lesson!”

Chuck, meanwhile, arrives home just as the Action Squad leaves to get Tommy. Unseen, he overhears bits of their plan and hastily tries to phone Clark for help. The Clan successfully kidnaps Tommy, but the boy manages to escape with only a broken arm. Desperate to avoid recapture, Tommy throws himself into a nearby river only to be swept up by a strong current. Superman, alerted by Chuck, rescues an unconscious Tommy and delivers him to the hospital.

With Tommy out of the way, the Clan turns its attentions to Jimmy and to Perry White, the editor of the *Daily Planet*, who has just published a scornful editorial on the

Clan alongside a thousand-dollar reward for revealing the identity of even one member. They leave a flaming cross on Mr. White's lawn and Clark cautions him, "These men are dangerous. Granted they're cowardly—they're still dangerous while they remain anonymous." When the Clan kidnaps Jimmy and Mr. White, Chuck steps forward, revealing his uncle's identity and the group's secret meeting spot. Armed with this knowledge, Superman rescues the two hostages from their imminent execution and rounds up the members of the Action Squad to deliver to the police. Only Matt escapes.

Aware that his nephew gave him up, Matt now plans to kill Chuck along with Jimmy and Mr. White. At the baseball team's championship game—pitched by Chuck because of Tommy's injuries—Matt sees his chance to take out all three. The police assure Clark that the man won't get in, but Clark continues to worry: "Hate and disappointment have made [Matt] a maniac. He won't stop short of murder, not if he can get away with it." Once again, Clark proves correct—Matt has positioned himself on a nearby roof and is taking aim with his gun when Clark spots the sun glinting off the weapon. Quickly changing out of his disguise, Superman soars through the air and snatches all three bullets out of the air moments before they reach their targets. He apprehends Matt, the baseball team wins the championship, and both Chuck and Tommy are awarded trophies by Mr. White. The editor tells the boys, "You've not only proved that you're the best baseball team, but you've proved that youngsters of different races and creeds can work and play together successfully in the American Way." Superman and his friends have successfully thwarted "the cowardly men of hate and bigotry who stalk at night, anonymous in their robes and hoods." Young listeners come away with the

message that “A fighting attitude is the best antidote for a poison like the Clan of the Fiery Cross.”

Klan membership and new member applications dropped almost immediately following the program’s airing. Reports from Klan infiltrators indicated that many members felt a new sense of shame—particularly those whose children had listened to the broadcasts (Kennedy). By 1949 the organization had been forced underground, where it would remain for some time. The revival had been snuffed out—for now.

But though the series had successfully villainized the Klan for a generation of children, they had failed in one important respect. The writers had supposedly scaled back Superman’s heroics in the episodes, hoping to “teach young listeners that ordinary people can stand up to bigotry” (Bowers 134). Yet despite the important roles played by other characters, Tommy, Jimmy, Mr. White, and Chuck—the ordinary people who stood up to bigotry—would all be dead if not for Superman. In their illustration of the Clan’s murderous volatility, the Superman team had sowed fear along with revulsion and contempt. They had portrayed the group as effectively unstoppable except by their hero’s superhuman abilities. And in the real world, there was no Superman.

Chapter Four: *Stetson Kennedy and the Pitfalls of Knighthood*

The eventual showdown between Superman and the Klan was the product of a vast collaborative effort. Not just writers, producers, and voice actors, but educational specialists, cultural anthropologists, and many, many others worked in concert to ensure the success of the venture. One man, however, has historically taken all the credit.

Stetson Kennedy, journalist and anti-Klan activist, claimed to have come up with the idea all on his own—“not the only claim of Kennedy’s that doesn’t match other accounts” (Bowers 131):

The Superman idea came one day when I saw a group of small boys playing with secret passwords in much the same way that grown men played with them in the Klan. Why not get the Klan’s secret password into the mouths of kids? It would make a laughing stock out of the Klan’s gobbledygook rigmarole! ... It was then that I thought of Superman (Kennedy 92).

He took credit not only for the idea but for furnishing the information on the Klan as well. In his book *The Klan Unmasked*, first published in London in 1954, Kennedy describes his experience as an undercover spy in the Klan. He narrates a series of thrilling exploits that showcase his bravery, heroism, selflessness, etc.—and are largely novelizations. While most of the book’s events did take place, Kennedy’s role was far smaller—and much less heroic—than his account made it seem. Much of the real infiltration was carried out by a man whose real name has never even been disclosed. He is known to history only by his code name, “John Brown” (Bowers 129); “It was John Brown who apparently performed many of the most dramatic and dangerous episodes portrayed in *The Klan Unmasked*—physically attending Klan meetings and other

functions in Atlanta—but since Stetson Kennedy was the man who later wrote the book, he rendered Brown’s actions as his own” (*Freakonomics* 55).

In a 2010 edition of the text, the preface notes the similarities between Kennedy’s writing and that of Mickey Spillane, an American author of pulp detective fiction who began his career writing for Superman, Batman, and other comic book superheroes (Sutherland):

The [book’s] style was pure Mickey Spillane, complete with hard-boiled prose and a tough, fearless protagonist who, when he isn’t romancing some lovely lady, is risking his life to take down sleazy, vicious organizations (Patton xiv).

Mike Hammer, the protagonist for whom Spillane was famous, evolved from a character that had been intended for a comic-book series (“Mickey Spillane”). The version of himself that Kennedy chose to present was decidedly reflective of a cartoon hero.

Many aspects of Kennedy’s self-representation could have been gleaned directly from the pages of the Superman comics. He forewent a life of privilege—he was a white man born to an established Southern family—to stand up for the oppressed. Like Clark Kent, he was a journalist by day and a crime-fighting protector of “Truth, Justice, and the American Way” by night. He even had an alias, “John Perkins,” to protect his real identity from the Klan.

Steven Levitt and Stephen Dubner, authors of *Freakonomics*, painted a glowing portrait of Kennedy in their book, only to seemingly discover some time later that their account—based, among other things, on *The Klan Unmasked* and interviews with Kennedy himself—was inaccurate:

A close examination of Kennedy's archives seems to reveal a recurrent theme: legitimate interviews that he conducted with Klan leaders and sympathizers would reappear in "The Klan Unmasked" in different contexts and with different facts. In a similar vein, the archives offer evidence that Kennedy covered public Klan events as a reporter but then recast them in his book as undercover exploits. Kennedy had also amassed a great deal of literature about the Klan and other hate groups that he joined, but his own archives suggest that he joined most of these groups by mail ("Hoodwinked?").

The authors confronted Kennedy, armed with documents from his own archives, and straightforwardly asked him if *The Klan Unmasked* was "somewhat conflated or fictionalized": "Kennedy said no. 'There may have been a bit of dialogue that was not as I remembered it,' he answered. 'But beyond that, no'" ("Hoodwinked?").

Why did Kennedy lie? The argument given by Kennedy himself and by others on his behalf was that the first-person account made for a better story. "Who gives a damn how it's written?" Kennedy is quoted as saying. "It is the one and only document of the working Klan...Everything that the Klan does in that book, they did in life" (Patton xii). The author had begun his career as a folklorist, employed by the Works Progress Administration Florida Writers' Project, a New Deal program that employed writers "to record the life stories, tall tales, folk songs, and fables of ordinary people" (Bowers 52). It was this experience that gave Kennedy the same appreciation for the power of myth that William J. Simmons had utilized in reviving the Klan:

As a folklorist Kennedy knew that the Klan used its invented rituals, concocted language, and biased belief system to imbue otherwise weak men with a sense of mastery and power (Bowers 54).

He saw, in effect, the potency of romanticization and exaggeration. And so he decided to fight fire with fire: “a folklorist at heart, [he] apparently wanted to put across the most dramatic story possible” (*Freakonomics* 55). Ultimately he wrote his own myth.

In one mythologized passage, Kennedy describes an attempt on his life by a member of the Columbians, an organization that was akin to “the juvenile delinquents of the KKK” (150). Some time following the divulgence of his true identity, he had showed up at a trial for three of the members and had been recognized by his former “brothers”:

For a moment they were too flabbergasted to say anything. “Of all the goddamn nerve!” [a member of the Columbians] finally exploded, and the whole pack let out a howl and surrounded me. The deputy who was supposed to hold them in line just leaned against the wall and chewed on his toothpick... “I think anybody who associates with niggers is trash!” a burly new Columbian I had never met hissed. “I think anybody who associates with Columbians is trash!” I countered. At that, the big boy reached into his pocket and jerked out a large switchblade knife. Out of the corner of my eye I could see that the deputy was not going to budge. The Columbian let out a roar and lunged at me, the knife aimed at my throat” (178-9).

Yet, as a reporter for the newspaper *PM*, Kennedy had written a separate account of the trial’s events just after they took place. Published February 16th, 1947—seven years before the 1954 publication of *The Klan Unmasked*, the article gives much the same story as the book, with one glaring exception. There is no mention of the assault. Apparently

deciding the original exchange fell a little flat, he had padded it with an extra dose of danger. Of course, this choice could have been—as Kennedy insisted—nothing more than an attempt to increase public interest in the book and its contents. But it also didn't hurt the heroic portrait he had painted of himself.

What Stetson Kennedy did was, in fact, in some ways heroic. He (with a great deal of help from others) brought the Klan's Invisible Empire into the national spotlight and incited public outrage at their activities, greatly diminishing the number of members and thwarting their immediate agenda. His dedication to fighting the Klan and its agenda of fascist intolerance demonstrated an uncommon ability for empathy and compassion. Despite his upbringing, he managed to see past the racist mythos so deeply entrenched in American culture and particularly in the South. He repeatedly put himself in danger in the hopes of allowing others to live more safely. Many of his actions were, in a word, chivalrous. In the short term, his myth served its purpose.

And yet, like the chivalrous knights of medieval lore, he retained certain views and behaviors that were unsavory as those he opposed. He could, to an extent, see past the popular narrative of white supremacy, but—like Superman—he held conventional views about female inferiority. Throughout *The Klan Unmasked*, he refers to his wife merely as “my wife.” He never gives her name or any details about her life⁷. He viewed her, it seems, as an extension of himself, no more than an accessory to his own plans. At one point he writes, with no hint of jocularly, “I had no sooner returned home after investigating the terror in Miami when the news of another atrocity in south Florida sent

⁷ I considered the possibility that he excluded this information for her protection, but given that he repeatedly put her in mortal danger in order to pursue his own goals, I ultimately found that explanation lacking.

me packing again. In fact, my wife barely had time to launder my Klan robe” (234). And later, in another moment of haste, he calls his wife and orders, “Pack me a bag and bring some money to the Jacksonville airport!” (251). He also hoarded glory, leaving out information that would have forced him to share the spotlight: “Kennedy omitted from his book that he was one of three people who infiltrated the Columbians and then testified against them. He leaves the impression that he was the only one” (Patton xiii).

While some of his intentions were undoubtedly noble, Kennedy came across to many as primarily self-interested and self-serving. Like the leaders of the Klan and the creators of Superman, he was selling a myth from which he personally gained; “Through the years his methods would become more extreme and controversial, and his critics would accuse him of sensationalism, grandstanding, and shameless self-promotion” (Bowers 128).

One anecdote from *The Klan Unmasked*, which describes the author’s 1946 trip to Washington, captures the ambiguity of his motives. Kennedy traveled to the capital with the goal of speaking before the House Committee on Un-American Activities. He had previously sent the Committee a letter offering to deliver to them “trunkloads of documentary evidence of the Klan’s un-American activities” (Kennedy 191); he had not heard back. “Knowing the history of the cordial relations between the committee and the Klan, I was not surprised...” writes Kennedy (189). So, taking matters into his own hands, he decided to enter the House building in full Klan regalia to personally deliver the evidence and “to force [the Committee] to either act on the Klan or admit publicly that it had no intention of doing so...” (Kennedy 191). Yet—obviously—the committee refused to let an apparent Klansman in and Kennedy was escorted out by Capitol Guards.

Luckily, the press had got wind of what was happening and was waiting outside, ready to plaster his name and story across front pages nationwide (Figure 6). To his credit, the media coverage caused “a flurry of organizational and editorial demands across the country that the un-American Committee look into the Klan” (Kennedy 196). But his antics seemingly cost him the chance to present his evidence; even when he returned in regular clothing, the incensed congressmen were unreceptive. And the Committee—as he almost certainly expected—ultimately evaded the requests for an investigation and did nothing.

So, was Kennedy a desperate but genuine activist who sought media attention in pursuit of a worthy cause? Or was he a sort of conman who exploited a social movement in order to sell books and promote his name? The world will likely never know—but it seems safe to say that his showy, overblown tactics ultimately undermined his cause.



Figure 5: Kennedy at the Capitol Building.

Conclusion

Knighthood is a veneer rather than an essence. From the regal armor of King Arthur's court to the haunting bed sheets of the Ku Klux Klan, it has always been a costume—something to display, that can be slipped on and off. Chivalry, likewise, is not really bravery or generosity or selflessness; it is a performance, a construction made of grand yet empty gestures and a little panache. Knighthood is a status. While it has historically been linked to an ethical tradition, the title denotes, simply, social superiority—nothing less, nothing more. The figure of the knight implies a social hierarchy that is at odds with the democratic ideals he is frequently used to convey.

The American conception of knighthood, while distinct from its historical ancestors, nevertheless maintains traces of its lineage—it is endowed with particular racial and gender dimensions which it cannot shed. In fact, the cooptation of knighthood by the Ku Klux Klan seems to represent one of the few accurate modern usages of the term; their ideal is *intentionally* limited in its scope. Those who wish to convey a more universal behavioral model should be aware that chivalry has always been limited in its applicability. It represents the exaltation of Anglo-Saxon masculinity—the domination of one race and one gender, and the subsequent oppression of others.

In the wake of recent political events, the Klan has begun to step out of the shadows of its “Invisible Empire” and into the realm of the visible. When the Klan no longer fears the judgment of the public, it is indicative more generally of a specific political climate. As sociologist Kathleen Blee writes:

The mainstay of the 1920s Klan was not the pathological individual; rather Klan promoters effectively tapped a pathological vein of racism, intolerance, and

bigotry deep within white Protestant communities. In this sense, the history of the 1920s Klan, although distant in time, is frighteningly close in spirit to the pervasive strands of racism and unacknowledged privilege that exist among dominant groups in the United States today (7).

It is a testament to the lack of change in American attitudes, despite the passage of one hundred years, that *The Birth of A Nation* is still considered one of the “greats” of American film. It was “cited until the 1960s as the greatest American film...[and] is still praised as influential, ground-breaking and historically important” (Ebert). Roger Ebert, my favorite movie critic, places it on his exclusive list of “Great Movies”; other critics similarly list it among their top-ranked films.

Perhaps this is our problem: we enjoy a good myth just a little too much. We cling to the lies that make our lives comprehensible, and ignore the realities that would complicate them. In the end, the American idealization of knighthood—and, by association, the society from which that ideal came—is no accident. The knight, in his masculine Anglo-Saxon glory, disguises a truth that we cannot bring ourselves to face.

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