

The Overview Effect and the Camelot Effect

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The story of King Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table has been told and retold for centuries. At the heart of the legend is the mystical city of Camelot, where Arthur held court and the knights gathered before embarking on their quests.

To this day, debate rages over whether there was ever a “real Camelot” and/or a “real King Arthur.” Numerous sites in Britain are said to be Camelot’s location, and I have visited one of them in South Cadbury. King Arthur and Queen Guinevere are said to be buried in nearby Glastonbury.

Skeptics argue that these stories are myths, meaning they are untrue and have no historical grounding. However, the debates about “history vs. myth” obscure the *meaning* of the narratives that are passed on century after century. The discussion overlooks the fact that most history has an overlay of myth, and most myth has a foundation in history. For this reason, I have coined the term “mythies” (plural: mythies) to describe these tales.

Moreover, these debates would easily subside if we understood Camelot and similar locales to be as much a state of mind as a physical place. As Charles Smith writes in *The Merlin Factor*, Camelot is:

Not so much a place as a moment in time when life is a work of art. Camelot happens when great accomplishment, surprise, and cooperative effort brilliantly coalesce to acknowledge that this is a “great place to be.”⁽¹⁾

Camelot is among the most enduring and important of these mythies, and there is a line in the 1960’s Broadway musical by the same name that echoes Smith’s insight. When he first meets her, King Arthur sings to his Queen-to-be, Guinevere: “In short, there’s simply not...a more congenial spot...for happily-ever-aftering, than here in Camelot.”⁽²⁾

Smith also notes that what makes Camelot possible is a leader who is open to it and who integrates the rare qualities of personal vulnerability and strength of character to take bold and extraordinary action for the success of the kingdom and the well being of the people.⁽³⁾ The Arthur archetype is precisely this kind of ruler. He comes to the throne as a young man of questionable birth, with a knack for empowering others rather than taking all the glory to himself.⁽⁴⁾

Camelot resurfaced in the past half-century not only on Broadway but also in a film based on the musical, a movie called *Excalibur*, and as a description of the brief Presidency of John F. Kennedy.

The linking of President John F. Kennedy's administration with Camelot represents a unique manifestation of the myth, and one that has been discussed at length, but often with a flawed understanding of what really took place from 1960 to 1963 in Washington, DC.

The typical description of the birth of the so-called "Camelot myth" in connection with the President is that Jacqueline Kennedy invented it after his death, as an attempt to burnish his image before the historians started defining him. Meeting with journalist Theodore White a week after the assassination to discuss Kennedy's legacy, she brought up the Camelot connection, recalling how the president enjoyed listening to songs from the musical:

This line from the musical comedy's been almost an obsession with me. At night before going to bed... he'd play a couple of records... It was a song he loved... "*Camelot*." "Don't let it be forgot that for one brief shining moment there was Camelot." ⁽⁵⁾

However, she also revealed something more, i.e., that Kennedy had been fascinated with the Arthurian legend from his youth, when he had been ill and often confined to bed, where he spent much of his time reading:

History made him what he was...he sat and read history...all the time he was in bed this little boy was reading history, was reading Marlborough, he devour[ed] the Knights of the Round Table...if history made Jack that way, made him see heroes, then other little boys will see...men are such a combination of bad and good... He had that hero idealistic side but then he had that other side, the pragmatic side... ⁽⁶⁾

This passage describes a President deeply influenced by Camelot, and suggests that the link began long before the interview of the widow by the journalist. Instead, he appears to have structured his administration to mirror the court of Arthur. Indeed, in the early 1960s, Washington, DC was alive with the energy of the young president and his "New Frontier." Young and old embarked on quests with the Peace Corps, Vista, and as part of the civil rights movement. When we view the Kennedy years in this new way, everything that happened then takes on a different meaning. In particular, we see the Apollo moon program, the greatest quest of all, in a new light.

King Arthur's task was clear, especially as it was described in the film *Excalibur*, which remains one of the best explications of the story to date. His challenge was to unify the fractured realm of Britain or it would not survive. In the key moment of the movie, Arthur sends his knights out to find the Holy Grail, which is actually something other than a physical object. In fact, the Grail is the unity of the kingdom under Arthur: "One land, one king." ⁽⁷⁾

By analogy, the central quest of Kennedy's time was the unity of our planet, a place that was sharply divided by the Cold War and threatened with annihilation

by nuclear conflict. Having just pulled back from the precipice that the Cuban Missile Crisis represented in 1962, Kennedy seemed to feel urgency to locate this modern Grail, and the Apollo astronauts became his “Grail Knights.” Though he did not live to see it, they did find the Holy Grail of our era -- the “Overview Effect,” or view of the Earth from space and in space. ⁽⁸⁾

Until recently, historians of the Space Age have seen Kennedy’s commitment to Apollo as a competitive effort to defeat the Soviets in a “space race.” However, new research has shown that the President reached out to his rival, Nikita Krushchev, on many occasions to propose a joint US/USSR moon landing. ⁽⁹⁾ Though the Soviet leader rebuffed the President initially, his attitude seemed to be softening shortly before the assassination. Moreover, Kennedy proposed an even bolder approach to the high frontier in a speech at the United Nations in September of 1963:

Why...should man’s first flight to the moon be a matter of national competition? Why should the United States and the Soviet Union, in preparing for such expeditions, become involved in immense duplications of research, construction, and expenditure? Surely we should explore whether the scientists and astronauts of our two countries—indeed of all the world—cannot work together in the conquest of space, sending someday in this decade to the moon not the representatives of a single nation, but the representatives of all of our countries. ⁽¹⁰⁾

As it turned out, the Apollo astronauts went to the moon without Soviet cosmonauts as partners. Nevertheless, they did discover the Holy Grail of their time, the unity of the planet that served as a context for its incredible diversity. In the words of Apollo 17 astronaut Gene Cernan, the last man to walk on the moon:

“You look back ‘home’ and say to yourself, ‘That’s humanity -- love, feeling, and thought.’ You don’t see the barriers of color, religion, and politics that divide this world. “ ⁽¹¹⁾

Seeing the unity of our Earth is truly a matter of perspective, a shift in worldview. Once the astronaut returns to the surface, diversity reappears. The planet is a holon -- a whole that is also a part, and this is a key insight of the Overview Effect. As I have written in my most recent book, *The New Camelot*:

This is why the Overview Effect is so critical: it offers us the direct experience of unity/diversity that simply was not available in all the millennia of human history until the 1960’s. It is the true Holy Grail of our time. ⁽¹²⁾

Charles Smith expands this idea with his distinction between Glastonbury and Avalon, two other legendary locales in England. Glastonbury represents the physical world of business and doing (diversity), while Avalon represents the spiritual world of transcendence and being (unity). Speaking of an organization that experiences both, Smith says,

“When Glastonbury and Avalon merge in the Round Table, the company finds itself in Camelot.”⁽¹³⁾

Just as there is an Overview Effect, there may also be a “Camelot Effect.” The former is the object of the quest, while the latter is the quest itself. The Camelot Effect reflects our need to create a “space” in which a new and better world might exist, not only as a momentary experience of greatness but also as a continuing reality.⁽¹⁴⁾

As more of us experience the Overview Effect, then, might the planet Earth itself become our “new Camelot?”

Notes

1. Smith, C., *The Merlin Factor: Keys to the Corporate Kingdom*, Kairos Productions, 1995, p. 4.
2. Lerner, A. and Lowe, F., “Camelot,” 1960.
3. Personal communication from Charles E. Smith.
4. White, F., *The New Camelot: Volume One: Camelot and the Overview Effect*, Kindle Books, 2012.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
7. Boorman, J., *Excalibur*, 1981.
8. White, F., *The Overview Effect: Space Exploration and Human Evolution*, AIAA, Reston, VA, 1998.
9. White, *The New Camelot*.
10. Ibid.
11. White, *The Overview Effect*, pp. 183-184.
12. White, *The New Camelot*.
13. Smith, *The Merlin Factor*, loc. cit.
14. White, *The New Camelot*.