

VANCE BOURJAILY'S THE MAN WHO KNEW KENNEDY:

A NOVEL OF CAMELOT LOST

William A. Francis

The University of Akron

Akron, Ohio

Soon after President John F. Kennedy's death in November, 1963, Americans were quick to accept the parallels that were drawn between Kennedy and King Arthur. Americans wanted a myth framework to help them understand their grief. Indeed in 1963, few Americans were unfamiliar with the legends of King Arthur, the subject of numerous popular retellings. Perhaps the most memorable retelling of the Arthur story was the musical Camelot, by Alan Jay Lerner and Frederick Loewe, which opened in New York on December 3, 1960, three years before Kennedy's death. Kennedy himself loved the story and the music. In fact, on the evening before he and Mrs. Kennedy left for Dallas, the Marine Band serenaded the President and the First Lady with music from Camelot.

In an essay by W. Nicholas Knight entitled "'Lancer': Myth-Making and the Kennedy Camelot," the evolution of this Kennedy-Arthur parallel is outlined. As Knight points out, almost immediately after Kennedy's death Jacqueline Kennedy insisted that Theodore H. White, reporting for Life, use the word "Camelot" to symbolize the Kennedy era. The journalist in White resisted, but he finally agreed to do so. He phoned in his story from the Kennedy kitchen in Hyannisport; Jacqueline Kennedy listened as he spoke to

his editors at Life.¹ Knight observes that "as she watched her personal Camelot vanish, she was creating the public one for history."²

Knight further observes that William Manchester became "the Malory of the myth by identifying Kennedy with the Arthur of Legend"³ in a book entitled The Death of a President, the working title of which was The Death of Lancer. The second book Manchester wrote about Kennedy was entitled One Brief Shining Moment, the one line above all the others in the musical Camelot that Jacqueline Kennedy had become obsessed with.⁴ The myth was quite firmly in place. It told the story of a great man who, like Arthur, had a vision of peace, of nobility, of opportunity. The Peace Corps was the civilian army of peace. Astronauts were modern-day Parsifals who "would see what no humans had ever seen."⁵

Not long after the assassination, Vance Bourjaily was invited to contribute a story to a collection of stories honoring the late President. Bourjaily took the character named Barney James from "Expedition" (later published as Brill Among the Ruins, with Barney James renamed Robert Brill) and used him in the story for the collection.⁶ Unfortunately, the collection of tribute stories never appeared. But Bourjaily developed his story into The Man Who Knew Kennedy, which was published on January 30, 1967, the title openly taken from Sinclair Lewis's The Man Who Knew Coolidge.

The Man Who Knew Kennedy employs aspects of the Arthur myth, but not in a direct and systematic way. Rather, Bourjaily employs ironic motifs

of knights and their quests. Mock medieval trappings underscore just how sadly lacking America is in its dreams and directions. Central to Bourjaily's irony is a motif of names, and intertwined with the names is a motif of wood and cross images. These motifs function ironically in an age that lacks truth, certainty, honesty and commitment.

A motif of British, Scottish, and Irish names underscores the novel's Celtic idiom. However, the motif is almost entirely ironic and parodic. Barney James, the narrator and close friend of Dave Doremus, the man who knew Kennedy, lives in Scott's Fort, Connecticut. Barney is something of a Connecticut Yankee in his views and in his business acumen. Scott's Fort is an appropriate name calling to mind Sir Walter Scott and his rich novels of medieval pageants and Arthurian spirit. Barney's personal fort comes under siege when Kennedy dies. Barney and his wife, Helen, learn of the assassination on their way to Puerto Rico where they are to go on a cruise with Dave and Connie, Dave's new bride. But Barney, fearing further national catastrophes, insists that the cruise be postponed and that he and Helen return at once to the Scott's Fort and their three children. Helen balks: "Am I supposed to be an unnatural mother, if I don't feel these great patriotic necessities of yours?"⁷ Her sentiment is an echo of Lewis's title: it can't happen here. (Bourjaily got the name Dave Doremus directly from Lewis's novel in which there is a newspaperman named Doremus Jessup).

Later in the novel, before the long cruise that will take Barney, Helen, Dave and Connie on a journey toward their individual fates, Barney visits a

"castle" house with a young man named Artur LaBranche, where they see a table covered with bottles of liquor: Dewar's, King's Ransom, Hennessy, and Bushmill's Irish. Both drunk, Art and Barney play with names.⁴ They become "Irish LaBranche" and "O'James McBarney, the Pride of Killarney" (220). Ironically, the Celtic heritage has been reduced to distilled spirits in bright bottles.

Names from Arthurian legend occur in a comically ironic way. Among the royalty in the mock Camelot are "Sir Barney of the Slag Heap," (262) who is later called "Galahad" (265); an over-weight but loyal retainer of Dave's who, we are cautioned, should not be mistaken for "the flower of knighthood" (72); and Dave Doremus, a former Senate Page, the man whose life roughly parallels Kennedy's. Younger Dave remembers Kennedy as "a kind of American Prince of Wales" (146). And there is an actual Arthur, if in name only, in the person of Artur LaBranche. There is no Merlin, except in the reference to the "Merlin engine" (241) that powered Barney's Mustang in the Second World War. Something rather magical did happen in that plane, however, when Barney looked through the window and saw the new German jets, the ME-262's. The Merlin engine, no match for the jets, is transformed in his imagination into a "sewing machine" (241).

Other mock medieval images permeate the novel. Dave buys a boat from a woman he calls "Maid Marian" (43). The Robin Hood connections are playfully expanded when Dave calls Barney by the name "Barney Ozark Jesse James" (37), Jesse James having been made into the West's Robin

Hood by modern myth makers. Again, one hears the ancient past in the name Roland, the name of a dog owned by Dave's retainer, Stiggysy Miller, the wilted "flower of knighthood" mentioned earlier. Stiggysy has an office over a movie theater building where Warlock is being shown. He is the local bookie for men who like to play the horses but who seldom ride them. A motif of horses is seen throughout the novel. Stiggysy's knight, Dave Doremus, imagines himself a crusader on "a white horse" (147) in his tilt against the evils of McCarthyism in the fifties. He loses the election in 1952 and has his "iron pants beat off" (147). The woman to whom Dave was married for a brief ten days, a singer named Sunny Brown, is addicted to heroin, which is commonly called "horse," and which is sold in the slums of New York by Spanish-speaking "horsemen" who peddle their heroin by calling out "Caballo, Caballo" (218) along the street.

Ironic names emphasizing the social and moral bankruptcy culminating with John Kennedy's assassination occur in a motif of Greek and Roman allusions. Kennedy's death, the third in the "doomed" (78) family's history, reminds Barney of a Greek tragedy with "a screen play by Euripides" (79). Helen's Uncle Troy possesses a name that calls to mind the heroic battle of Troy and Homer's epic account of the events. Like her namesake, Helen of Troy, Helen James is very beautiful; "men like to look at Helen" (13). Among the men who look with passion at Helen is Dave Doremus, who proposes to her during their long sea journey. Uncle Troy's son, Troy, Jr., is called Tully, the name suggesting Marcus Tullius (hence Tully) Cicero, the

Roman orator and statesman. If classical influence is felt at all, in the modern era, it is in a diminished way, as viewed in high school elections in "the style of a Roman republic." In these elections sophomore Dave Doremus was elected to the rank of "tribune" (17). He studied Latin at school, and even his surname closely resembles the Latin word oremus, "let us pray." Dave and Barney spend an idyllic summer with twins possessing Latin names, Lavinia and Letitia, who "engineered the Roman comedy identical-twin joke of switching beds one night" (59).

The social and moral bankruptcy of the age is also seen in a motif of comic book and cartoon character names. A man named Dick Tracy has a brief affair with Helen. A man named Buster Brown, no lad living in children's shoes, is a sadistic bully, aptly named for his destructive violence. There are references to the cartoon characters Betty Boop and Popeye, and a host of little creatures appear in "Mouse cartoons" (115). Barney's son, Goober, speaks of Dave as "Mr. Dormouse" (122), probably influenced by his father, who played with Dave's name, too, calling him "Dave, the Dormouse" (41).

Barney is most at ease in the workaday world of his hardwood company. He loves the soothing racket of the plant machinery as much as he loves fine hardwood products, though sometimes his passion for fine wooden products conflicts with sound business sense. Dave criticizes Barney's buying of certain woods:

"You let this Ozark manager of your keep doing it," he told me in my office. "He's going to have you so loaded up with butternut and wild cherry, it'll push you right back into the spindle-bed and rocking-chair business." (77)

Fine wood is analogous to the moral strength of good men, and to truth itself. The word truth derives from the Indo-European *drew-, meaning tree. It is a supreme compliment, therefore, when "indestructible" Kelso Clark is likened to the hard "teak" (250) of The Bosun Bird's immaculate deck. As Barney loves the truth and the permanence he associates with hardwood, so he disdains superficial and deceptive veneer. Barney, unlike a knight of old, preserves not the honor of maidens. Rather, he preserves a fine walnut tree which someone "was going to turn ... into veneer" (117). And were it not for the unpleasant necessity of "getting into veneers and plastic finishes" (7) he would gladly resume cabinetmaking, the industry upon which Gibson Hardwood was founded in the nineteenth century. Nor does he wish to branch into the manufacturing of fiberglass canoes: "A canoe is something made of wood and canvas. . . . Not out of glass or aluminum or quick-drying jello" (298). Because of his loathing of veneer he "kept the old yellow brick structure" (102) of the plant when it was remodeled. The word "veneer," therefore, has special significance for Barney, and he uses it when he characterizes ruthless, cold, and unyielding Jane Carlsen, whose "Ivy-League-girl brightness . . . can be a veneer for anything" (63).

Barney loves woods and trees, a love which perhaps passed on to him from his father, who also "dealt in fine wood" (75). It is not surprising, therefore, that, when under the influence of Art's Irish wit and Irish whiskey, Barney imagines that a lovely tall girl is a tree. She stands amid a "growth of sports shirts and neat, nautical blouses" (215). She has the "musky" (216) fragrance of the forest and her "laugh was happy hail in the branches" (221). She is his aspen:

At first I picked a willow. Then I thought, no, something with smoother bark. An aspen. One of the ones that grows away from water, a little out of place, by itself, in a grove of oak and hickory (219).

Ironically, however, the tree girl is neither truth nor stability. Rather, she is bold temptation, and Barney tumbles into bed with her as casually as he did years earlier with the two young women who shared The Friendship Sloop with himself and Dave. Despite his yearning for a better world, Barney succumbs to sexual temptation and to alcohol with little hesitation.

The motif of woods and trees is closely related to the motif of sacrificial, redemptive crucifixions. In a figurative sense, Kennedy is crucified on the crossed hairs of Oswald's telescopic sight. Dave, whose life closely parallels Kennedy's, is also a victim, for even though he was worshipped—"I used to worship Dave. Our whole town did" (93)—he is ultimately destroyed by one he loved: "Dave loved the one who wanted to tear him up" (70). His little miracles are testified to by all who knew him.

He is the business genius who made things come "back wine instead of water" (181).

What Bourjaily suggests in the cross-crucifixion metaphor is that martyrdom in the modern age is without redemptive significance. Redemptive grace does not flow from Kennedy's death. Rather, society simply sinks more deeply into darkness.

As Dave's death slowly approaches after the brutal beating he suffered on the beach, so his worldly kingdom diminishes, for even the citizens of Wonamasset turn their backs on him. Pathetically, only a few days before he makes his "stately run" (255) to San Salvador as Columbus did in the fifteenth century, Dave's diminished kingdom is symbolized by the therapeutic rubber ball he holds like a globe in his weak hand. Dave's noble quest for the Savior, for San Salvador, is frustrated.

An ironic knight in the age of materialism, Dave carries the symbol of his sacrifice on his back, which is "crisscrossed" (42) with scars. (The word crisscross, from the Middle English Christcross, means Christ's cross.) The emblem for Christ, the Greek X, becomes an ineffective logogram in the age of materialism. For example, when Kelso Clark writes his letters on borrowed commercial stationery, he boldly "crossed out" (114) the heading with a sweeping X. This sign is even imagined to be visible on the water through which Dave guides The Bosun Bird to San Salvador: "Now I think if we go up on deck, there'll be a nice black X in the water, where we're just

crossing over" (252). Even the force of "San Salvador" is lost in the material age, as is the potency of Christ's cross on the shields of Arthur's knights.

The Caribbean cruise itself is a symbolic crossing. The cruise, from the Latin crux, for cross, is a literal as well as a figurative crossing. Barney would like to dub the crew "KELSO'S CRUISERS" and imagines an appropriate coat of arms emblazoned on "satin jackets" (293). What Barney does not yet know when he says this is that Dave has taken his own life, and that he is ~~to~~ buried beneath a "white cross" (307) at Arlington. It is ironic that Dave foreshadows his own death when, aboard The Bosun Bird, he plays the role of Champ Clark, whose political career and presidential ambition were destroyed largely by the manipulations of William Jennings Bryan. Dave says to Barney: "James Beauchamp Clark, reporting, Mr. Bryan." And Barney responds in a parody of the cross-of-gold speech: "They shall not crossify you on a cruce of silver, Champ" (257). Champ Clark is all but forgotten, and Bryan's cross of gold speech, memorable in itself, is rendered ineffective. Crosses and those who die for a cause upon them are without meaning and potency in the modern age.

The cross image becomes the ironic emblem of the age, for it is a "criss-cross world" (124) in which Kennedy and Dave are destroyed. And The Bosun Bird represents this age in a microcosmic way, for just as Dave and Barney were "paired off crisscross" (59) with Vinnie and Tish, so they are also paired off crisscross with Helen and Connie. Once again Barney's marriage is threatened by the trading off of spouses, as it was when Dick

and Dottie Tracy swapped mates. Aboard The Bosun Bird relationships are so tense as a result of the crossing, both literal and figurative, that Helen becomes a tableau vivant of the unpleasant episode when she stands at the bow of the boat, "her arms crossed in front, hands close to her neck, so that her shoulders were pulled forward, making her look small and guarded" (263).

The Bosun Bird, like the nation, faces the perils of the collision course. In addition to the marital strife aboard ship, the crew is threatened when Kelso Clark becomes ill, and its crew is diminished when Art surrenders to the Coast Guard officer and when Dave impulsively flies off to Wonamasset to rescue Sunny from Buster. And after a storm, which Kelso and Barney weather, the schooner is assulted by "the gauntlet of hoots and cauliflowers" (292-93) as it is being guided through the treacherous crosscurrents of Hell Gate's rip tide, whose tide "is more than our engine could go against" (292). The passage from Hell to New Haven (Connecticut) promises some hope of redemption, however.

Although the novel concludes with a disturbing reference to the nation's next war burning on the horizon, the war Brad James might well be involved in, there is nevertheless the promise of hope in the kingdom so long as there are such fine people as Connie, or Constance, meaning "standing together." "She's like a queen . . . whose country lost the war" (299) and her brother, Buddy, is a federal circuit judge in the South, who defends civil rights at great personal risk. Connie thinks of her brother as another Kennedy and as another Dave Doremus: "Whenever I hear Dave talk about

having known Kennedy, I think of growing up with Buddy" (163). After Dave's funeral, Connie thinks that she may go to her brother, who is caught up in the "marches and murders" (304) of the South during the sixties: "Perhaps there'd be something useful she could do down there" (307).

The Kennedy-Doremus magic has not entirely vanished. The Bosun Bird is safe for Kelso's successor, Art LaBranche, whose name suggests both the tree-truth metaphor and the greatness of King Arthur. In an image from Zacharias, the biblical passage sanctifying the moment, Dave observes that Art is "Kelso's brand from the burning" (223).

The Memory of Kennedy and Dave Doremus will live on in Arlington. Kennedy will be remembered as long as the perpetual flame scatters some of the spiritual darkness of America. And Dave will be remembered by Barney in the private symbol which characterized their friendship: the postcard of Champ Clark, the Missouri hero: "To Champ Clark . . . may he rise again" (65).

**William A. Francis
The University of Akron
Akron, Ohio**

NOTES

¹W. Nicholas Knight, "'Lancer': Myth-Making and the Kennedy Camelot," Avalon to Camelot, 2 (1986), 30.

²Knight, p. 28.

³Knight, p. 30.

⁴Knight, p. 28.

⁵Knight, p. 31.

⁶"Authors and Editors," Publishers' Weekly, 6 Feb. 1967, p. 39.

⁷Vance Bourjaily, The Man Who Knew Kennedy (New York: Dial Press, 1967), p. 82. Page numbers of subsequent references will appear in parentheses after each citation.

