CHAPTER 3

THE CASE OF THE DISAPPEARING TEXT:
CONNECTICUT YANKEE FOR KIDS

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Mark Twain’s three previous solo novels—Tom Sawyer, The Prince and the Pauper, and Huck Finn—were published primarily for children. . . . Is A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court intended for children? Is it appropriate for children?

—Andrew Jay Hoffman

Mark Twain’s A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court is arguably the single most visible and widely disseminated individual text in the entire neo-Arthurian canon. Internet searches for the title turn up two hundred and twenty-three hits on the OCLC, more than six hundred on Amazon, and a daunting nine thousand nine hundred and seventy on Google. According to the current Books in Print, twenty-seven different editions of Connecticut Yankee are immediately available, ranging in price from under $4 for mass-market productions such as the Airmont Classics series or Tor Classics to $60 for the Iowa–California edition. (A reprinted library edition, publisher and editor unspecified, sells for $79.) Vintage editions of the text command considerably more. The Limited Editions Club version (1948), a fancy, high-end production illustrated by Honoré Guilbeau and introduced by Carl Van Doren, typically sells for about $100, while first editions go for anywhere between $200 and $2,000, depending on the condition of the specific copy.

Connecticut Yankee has also proved to be a wondrously protean, infinitely exploitable, and highly marketable text, having been profusely reedited, reduced, amputated, spun-off, ripped-off, and in the extreme reaches of textual bad manners, mauled. Treatments of this book range from the reverential to the downright sassy, flitting from high to popular culture and
back again with remarkable agility. Versions of one sort or another appear in every medium imaginable: in standard print texts, illustrated novels, audio-cassette readings, a variety of comic-book and comic-book-like formats, cartoons and animated films, television adaptations, stage versions (including musicals), films, and e-texts, at least one of which is formatted for PalmOS. And it turns up in the most unexpected places, ranging from a 1988 edition of the novel published in Tokyo and a 1987 Russian film version (Novye prikluchenia yanke pri dvore Korola Artura) to a Spanish animated cartoon adaptation (“Un Yanqui en la corte del Rey Arturo”) and a Spanish imprint of the Illustrated Classics comic book version.

Twain’s novel has been interpreted in non- or extra-textual media as well. Two movements of Paul Alan Levi’s Mark Twain Suite, a work for mixed chorus, tenor solo, and orchestra, for example, are based on Connecticut Yankee episodes (“The Great Joust: L’Homme Arme” and “The Awful German Language”); contemporary artists such as Donato Giancola and Paul Berenson have painted their interpretations thereof; and a 1985 Romanian stamp entitled “Un Yankeu la Curtea Regului Arthur” featured Disney’s Goofy as the stake-bound Yankee incanting “incipea eclipsa mea” as he points to a partially eclipsed sun. The book has provided the pretext for any number of time-travel films, at least one detective fiction (A Connecticut Yankee in Criminal Court: A Mark Twain Mystery), themed costume parties (“Costume-Con [Convention] 2000 Friday Night Social, A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court. Hear Ye! Hear Ye!”), and numerous spin-off titles, such as A Contracting Officer in King Arthur’s Court (a thematized legal guide to the contract appeals process, complete with illustrations); A Connecticut Yankee in Penn’s Woods: The Life and Times of Thomas Bennet; Connecticut Yankee in the 8th Gurka Rifles: A Burma Memoir; and Connecticut Yankee in the Frontier Ozarks: The Writings of Theodore Pease Russel. The list of Connecticut Yankee products could be expanded a hundredfold.

Amidst this welter of Connecticut Yankee material is a sizeable body of editions, abridgments, and adaptations in a variety of media specifically targeting a juvenile audience. In the pages that follow, I shall be examining some of these youth-oriented versions of Twain’s novel, with a primary emphasis on print texts. But a preliminary caveat is in order: this is not by any means as straightforward an undertaking as it might seem. I shall begin, therefore, by addressing some of the issues that complicate this enterprise.

Problematics

By rights, the study of juvenile versions should be unnecessary, a mere exercise in redundancy, because A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court is popularly and academically regarded as “children’s literature” already. It is