

ARTS & LETTERS

ous" because of the predominantly female readership of those publications. The writer's fate, Boyesen said, would be decided by the "Iron Madonna," who "strangles in her fond embrace the American novelist" and destroys his chances for greatness.

Later critics, like H. L. Mencken and Sinclair Lewis, turned on Howells and labeled his new brand of social realism—evident in *The Undiscovered Country* (1879) and *The Rise of Silas Lapham* (1885)—not only "commonplace" and "prudish" but inimical to literary esthetics. Howells, in fact, did believe that wealthy Americans read little and that critics were book-tasters, not book-readers. Women, on the other hand, were better educated, their tastes far more cultivated. Any writer, he declared in "The Man of Letters as a Man of Business" (1893), "must resign himself to obscurity unless ladies choose to recognize him."

Howells' goal was to give America a native and popular literature. As *Lippincott Magazine* editor J. F. Kirk once wrote to him: "You have given us truth instead of fancies, pictures instead of problems, creations instead of conventions." If Howells made any compromises, Goldman concludes, it was because he "had his sights on something far more demanding"—to prove the power of literature to speak to the majority.

Was Arthur a Steppe-Child?

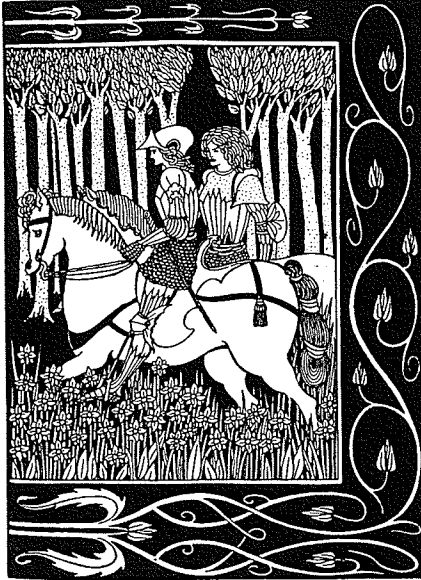
"The Sarmatian Connection: New Light on the Origin of the Arthurian and Holy Grail Legends" by C. Scott Littleton and Ann C. Thomas, in *Journal of American Folklore* (Jan.-Mar. 1978), 1703 New Hampshire Ave. N.W., Washington, D.C. 20009.

No one seems more English than King Arthur, even if scholars have long assumed that the Arthurian tales, as first related by chroniclers Nennius (fl. c. 800) and Geoffrey of Monmouth (d. 1155) were actually rooted in a pre-Christian, Celtic tradition. But two historians at Occidental College in Los Angeles now claim that the legends, which appeared in England in the 2nd century A.D., probably evolved in the steppes of South Russia among an aggressive, nomadic people known as Sarmatians.

According to Littleton and Thomas, the prototypes for Arthur and his paladins can be found in Sarmatian tales of a band of heroes called the Narts. The Sarmatian tradition predates the Arthurian tales but the parallels are clear: Both describe the supernatural destiny of a leader (Arthur), the quest for a sacred cup (grail), and the origins of a magical sword (Excalibur). Even the names of certain characters (Sir Bedivere and Sir Kay as well as Arthur's father, Uther Pendragon) may, the authors speculate, be traced back linguistically to ancient Sarmatia.

Coincidence? If it is, say Littleton and Thomas, then coincidence must account for a great deal more. In 175 A.D., for example, the Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius subdued a renegade force of Sarmatians along the borders of what is now Hungary. Some 5,500 Sarmatian

ARTS & LETTERS



Knights of King Arthur, from a special 1893 edition of Le Morte D'Arthur with English text and original engravings by Aubrey Beardsley.

cavalrymen were captured and sent to bolster Roman garrisons in northern Britain. (Archeological evidence points to a flourishing, close-knit Sarmatian community near the town of Ribchester.) Along with heavy armor, heraldic devices, and advanced cavalry techniques, these warlike Asians may also have transplanted the seeds of the Arthurian legends.

A last coincidence: The Roman commander of the Sarmatians in Britain was named Artorius.

Poetry for the People

"The Decline of Anglo-American Poetry" by Christopher Clausen, in *The Virginia Quarterly Review* (Winter 1978), University of Virginia, Charlottesville, Va. 22903.

During the era of "high modernism" (1920–1960), traditional notions of form and function in Anglo-American poetry became passé. Meter, for example, was abandoned in favor of often obscure prose rhythms, prompting Robert Frost to say that writing free verse was like playing tennis without a net. Meanwhile, notes Clausen, a professor of English at Virginia Polytechnic Institute, fewer original works of poetry were published and poetry declined as a major cultural force. The sad result: Poets very nearly became their own sole audience.

The new modernist ideal held that contemporary human experience was so unique that it could only be described in radically new ways.