From King Arthur to David Beckham: Celebrity Culture, Iconicity and the Modern Male Heroic

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After delivering a paper at a conference in the UK in 2005, I found myself, for the first time in my academic career, on the receiving end of intense media interest and considerable media hostility. My 'crime' was to have presented a paper at a conference on celebrity, and, more specifically, to have focussed upon David Beckham. Before, during and after the conference I was pursued by journalists for interviews and used to provide copy which was a mixture of outrage and baffled amusement. Part of the reason for this strong reaction was that I had tried to explain the Beckham phenomenon by drawing parallels with traditional male heroism, as exemplified by a famous representative of the ancient chivalric code, King Arthur. It seems that it was bad enough to take modern celebrity seriously, but to link celebrity and the heroic was a step too far. Moreover, journalists are clearly unsympathetic towards any academic trespass on what they see as their own major hunting ground. Thus, what might otherwise appear to be a curious reaction, given the astonishing popularity of Beckham across a wide social spectrum and his role as captain of the national football team, makes some sense as a kind of territorial backlash. Hence, this academic invader was labelled 'Another inhabitant of Planet Barmy' by *The Sun*.[1] My aim in this paper is to further explore celebrity culture, which I take to be a crucial and complex feature of modernity, using Beckham as my

[1] Janet Street-Porter attacked the conference in *The Independent*:- 'The unlikely venue of Ayr Racecourse has this week been hosting possibly the world's first gathering of distinguished academics debating the heavyweight subject of celebrity culture. Organised by the University of Paisley, more than 80 delegates from across the world have pitched up to read densely argued papers on such taxing issues as "Age and Sexuality in Celebrity Culture - the case of Helen Mirren" and "From Disney to Dirty: Christine Aguilera and the Representation of Gendered Ethnicity".'

main resource, as he has significant celebrity status both in the UK and in Japan. The first part of the paper will address the broad issue of the nature of modern celebrity and the second part will focus upon Beckham.

You will all have noticed, perhaps with some trepidation, that celebrity is an increasingly obsessive concern for the media in both countries. It has become the main source of journalistic copy and, it seems, of consumer interest, either causing or responding to a decline of enthusiasm for traditional news items. Notoriously, in Japan the role of celebrity in the public sphere dominated the last general election, enhancing the need for a fuller understanding of the growing significance of celebrity in modern life. The reaction to my paper suggests a media fear that celebrity might be exposed, by academics whose livelihoods do not depend upon it, as a dubious object of fascination, and a distraction from 'serious' news items. There is a paradox here which invites attention. The more that celebrity coverage drives out other forms of news and dominates the media, the less it is deemed worthy of academic critique on the grounds of its triviality. The key term here is critique; so long as celebrity can be said to be treated with uncritical awe, journalists are happy enough to produce academic authorities to shore up their own awed fascination with those whom fame has touched. Thus, Nirmal Shekar is happy to oversell Ellis Cashmore in order to reinforce a typically sycophantic account of Beckham's global reach:

> 'He is the purest sports celebrity in the history of the world,' Ellis Cashmore, professor of culture, media and sport at Staffordshire University, said in an interview to *USA Today* recently. Cashmore, who has authored a wonderful sociological study of the footballer, a work simply called *Beckham*, said: "Tiger Woods? Michael Jordan? They redefined their sport, and they are respected. But Beckham has transcended that. He is worshipped. His fan base goes far beyond

sports; many of them don't even care about football." This is very true.[2]

It is scarcely possible to exaggerate the extent to which the media, particularly print journalism, concerns itself with celebrity, with what might be called a celebrity discourse penetrating all sections of the media, in Japan no less than in the Europe and the US.

For most commentators celebrity is characterised by its discontinuity with the past, hence the resistance to my exploration of links between Beckham and King Arthur. The way the narrative goes is that pre-modern societies benefited from the existence of outstanding individuals called heroes, typically characterised by ostentatious militarism and disciplined male camaraderie. A typical elegiac treatment of this lost (male) heroic is Rory Stewart's comment on the war in Iraq:

> But the last three years have not produced heroes in the old mould. No Lawrence of Arabia. No Churchill. Wars once threw up heroes as a matter of course. This one has not. We still yearn for people who are greater and nobler than us but we are not sure that they exist. We have Spiderman and Tom Cruise's last samurai. Living heroes are famous but less grand. Whether they are housewives struggling with tragedy, or football stars, we no longer ascribe to them "greatness of soul." They may be better than us at doing certain things, but they are not godlike. We are less superstitious and deferential. We emphasise people's ordinariness. If we put them on a pedestal, we often knock them off it. This is a positive development. But it also represents a loss.[3]

In this supposedly 'post-heroic' age, this sense of loss is paramount; the

[2] *Sportstar*, vol. 26, no. 31, 2.8.03.
[3] *Prospect*, issue 107, Feb. 2005.

celebrity is a shrunken remnant of his worthy predecessor, the hero; a lesser person, whose unearned fame is a provisional gift not a permanent badge of greatness.

This narrative has become the main tradition in academic analysis of celebrity, developed by the so-called 'cultural pessimists', successors to the Frankfurt School. This line has produced the most coruscating condemnation of celebrity and still dominates discussion. In broad terms, it bemoans a perceived disequilibrium between talent/desert and public prominence/status, arguing that in earlier, heroic, times there was a close and healthy correspondence between achievement/talent and public reward/recognition, progressively driven out by the bad currency of celebrity, linked to the rise of consumer capitalism. For the cultural pessimists, the Hollywood studio system represented celebrity's later period of industrialisation, a standardised production system producing celebrities for a passive mass audience; as a result, 'greatness' dwindled to 'star quality'. This is paralleled in Japan by the 'tarento' industry, with its notoriously short periods of stardom. More recently, this attack on undeserved fame has sought to mark a further decline in merit by discriminating between the 'star' and the celebrity, with the latter representing the vanishing point of proportionality, as encapsulated in Boorstin's notorious 'famous for being famous', whereas the former, if not heroic, 'became a star through a series of achievements'. The argument is that celebrity displaces 'star' in the 80s and 90s — because of the 'sheer proliferation of fame' (Moran).

In the recently updated version of Raymond Williams's *Keywords*,[4] entitled *New Keywords*, there is an entry on celebrity by Graeme Turner, which uncritically reproduces this narrative of a gradual separation of public accolade from material grounding, so that the closer

[4] Raymond Williams, *Keywords: a Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (Flamingo, London, 1983).

we get to contemporary forms of celebrity the more absolute becomes the groundlessness of fame. In this context, as part of an increasing 'moral panic' over celebrity, much attention has been given to the phenomenon of 'Reality TV', often depicted as representing the limit point of groundlessness. I want to suggest in this paper, however, that celebrity may be more complex than such a narrative allows and that a simple linear history of decline from grounded to ungrounded celebrity is problematic.

The hero/celebrity binary opposition can be challenged by closer enquiry into the favoured term, hero, in order to problematise such an absolute distinction:-

* Heroism itself was never as stable as the linear narrative implies, fame and fortune being notoriously fickle in pre-modern times.
* The example of King Arthur, a figure of dubious historical provenance, demonstrates that heroism may be no more grounded than celebrity.
* The supposedly grounded (i.e. authentic) hero has been a dangerous phenomenon, arguably more so than celebrity, particularly in the sphere of gender. It has idealised a certain type of male figure, usually violent and autocratic.
* There is a clear class prejudice in operation when the hero, a member of the ruling elite, is preferred above the celebrity, a feature of mass consumption and popular culture.

From this perspective, celebrity appears as central to the ongoing culture wars, which pits high against low, elite against popular, valid against invalid, authentic against inauthentic, linked to 'the rise of the mass media', and to 'More recently ... the concentration of media ownership'.[5]

[5] Tony Bennett, Grossberg L. and Morris M. eds, eds, *New Keywords: A Revised Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (Blackwell, Oxford, 2005), pp. 27-8.

Graeme Turner's *Keywords* narrative is the familiar one of gradual degradation and impoverishment, globalization resulting in 'celebrities [being] traded like commodities across media platforms and global markets'. Not only does celebrity represent the triumph of the low over high, but it serves to reproduce the capitalist system. Celebrity is connected to the emergence of the modern 'mass' and to institutions needed to develop to contain that threat – in the eyes of some commentators, such as David Marshall, the major function of celebrity is to defuse the potential for mass power:

> The celebrity as public individual who participates openly as a commodity serves as a powerful type of legitimation of the political economic model of exchange and value – the basis of capital – and extends that model to include the individual.[6]

For Marshall, celebrity is 'the potential of capitalism', liquid, mobile, exchangeable, lacking the anchorage of a material basis. While avoiding Daniel Boorstin's moral outrage against the inauthenticity of celebrities, nevertheless for Marshall they 'represent the disintegration of the distinction between the private and the public', functioning to individualise and hence disempower the collective sphere, as celebrities 'stand in for the people'.[7] More neutrally, Joe Moran distinguishes between, 'aristocratic notions of fame as the setting apart of a natural elite and democratic-capitalist notions of fame as inclusive and meritocratic'.[8] These more recent approaches have the merit of recognising that celebrity has a crucial function, and one which does not *necessarily* translate into cultural impoverishment.

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[6] P. David Marshall, *Celebrity and Power: Fame in Contemporary Culture* (University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis and London, p. 8), p. x
[7] *Ibid*, p. 244.
[8] Joe Moran, *Star Authors :Literary Celebrity in America* (Pluto Press, London; Sterling, VA, 2000), p. 7.

Celebrity, however, has an arguably unequalled capacity to make people angry. Media commentators never tire of complaining bitterly about celebrity too easily bestowed *sans* merit, while it is common for recipients of celebrity-saturated media to fulminate about the whimsical mismatch between talent and reward. Celebrity drags a lot in its wake because it is central to how a society bestows public recognition and reward upon its citizens. It is therefore deeply engaged with the rise of democracy and associated value systems. It can be seen, and has been seen, as a *test* of democracy, or more tendentiously, as a substitute for 'real' democracy. If the celebrity system is deemed a failure in its distribution of public recognition and status, then there is much at stake.

The recent death of the footballer, George Best, draws attention to a particular feature of the shifting significance of modern celebrity, which it shares with traditional heroism, which is its paradoxical capacity to both inflate and destroy. Part of its current meaning is that of the *pharmakon* (in Greek meaning *both* 'remedy' and 'poison'), which so intrigued Derrida as a prime case of undecidability of meaning. Celebrity is *both* reward *and* punishment; it is that price which has to be paid for being touched by the gods; what cures, kills. Debasement, humiliation, abjection are inextricable from the elevation and are a necessary part of public consumption of celebrity – a demand which is so graphically fulfilled by the *I'm a Celebrity* series. We punish 'mere' celebrities by consuming their 'private' lives. 'Heroes' were not devoured in this way, but celebrities are fair game. Pharmakon disallows a stable position, and this helps understand the tone of perplexed outrage which typifies commentary on celebrity, as represented by coverage of George Best's death and the latest *I'm a Celebrity*.

In *The Guardian*, under the headline 'This circus of grief has nothing to do with Best', the paper's editor, Peter Preston, in the most sombre and apocalyptic of tones, treads the familiar path of distinguishing between

real heroes (Tom Finney, Johnny Haynes) and a celebrity who 'starred most indefatigably in his own real-life soap' in an 'increasingly instant wired world'. He concludes:

> Who's next for the treatment? Bruno, Becks, Posh? No worry: Joe [Public] has enough bread to keep him going. Here, with mounting cynicism, is the newest sort of circus. Don't ask: why George Best? Ask, rather, why not? He was a celebrity as well as a tortured human being, and this – alas – seems the latest way to get him out of here.[9]

It is difficult to unravel the twists, turns and inconsistencies in this passionate article, which is paralleled in its intensity and confusion by Mary Riddell's piece in *The Observer*: 'Vote for me, I'm a celebrity', in which we find the familiar apocalyptic tone, the sense of outrage, despair and crisis, which celebrity provokes. Riddell deplores the fact that 'so many issues are steeped in panic', while using the hyperbolic language of panic herself – heroism dead, 'real' politics dead – slain by the celebrity dragon, which has invaded and contaminated political life:– 'Celebrity, starved out of its natural habitat, has shifted into politics .... Sir Christopher Meyer's memoir has marked the emergence of the celebrity politician. .... In the absence of analysis, voter choices are hardly more meaningful than the options of reality TV .... If you really want your vote to count, you might be wise to hit the phone and vote for who gets to eat the fish eyes.' [10]

Given my interests it is particularly suggestive to me that the 'disorder' of meaning here accretes round the figure of George Best, who, I would argue, operates here in a similar way to David Beckham in exposing the insufficiency of this 'keyword' for encompassing the enormous range

[9] 29.11.05
[10] 27.11.05

and disparity of manifestations and functions of public fame in circulation in modern societies.

The same conclusions I draw about Beckham also apply to Best, that within the broad category of celebrity there is a very wide spectrum of significance roughly identifiable with perceived (or represented) notions of equation between talent and reward, which are closer to more traditional models of fame, and serve to disrupt the linear narrative espoused by Turner in his *New Keywords* entry. Celebrity must be seen as being constituted symbolically as well as materially, hence my uneasiness with the application of the criterion of 'grounding' to distinguish invalid from valid embodiments of celebrity.

Garry Whannel' s comment on Beckham is relevant here:

> In contrast to the theme of thrift, so dominant in representations of Stanley Matthews, David Beckham exemplifies indulgence in the consumer market. His image has become the dominant icon of British sport representation, yet it is a strangely elusive and anchorless image - a floating signifier that can become attached to a range of discursive elements with equal plausibility.[11]

As has often been observed, Beckham's celebrity status rests upon a potent series of incongruities — provincial parochialism combined with urban chic, traditional yet progressive, effeminately male, blackly white. Sponsors have not been slow to identify the market value of this adaptable iconic form and Beckham is constantly packaged and repackaged to shift a wide array of products. In such circumstances, what matters is not where the real Beckham is - this is as elusive as the real King Arthur - but the uses to which Beckham is put.

[11] Garry Whannel, *Media Sports Star* (Routledge, London, 2002), p. 202.

To return, in concluding my argument, to Turner's *New Keywords* entry; he notes that 'the celebrity erupts into prominence and may disappear just as quickly', and there are certainly an abundance of examples of such transitoriness, but this seems to me to be an oversimplified version of modern celebrity which is nostalgic for a mythical grounding in performance which is belied by contemporary experience. It strikes at the heart of public anxiety over celebrity, however, which colours all debate on the subject, particularly, as we have seen, at the point of death, where fears about the operation of celebrity culture are most acutely felt. What is the value of a celebrity? What reward is proportionate to that value? If rewards are disproportionate in relation to performance, what penalty should be exacted?

There is a glaring insufficiency in Daniel Boorstin's answer to his own question – what is the celebrity famous for – being famous. And yet the cultural pessimists may have good grounds for their dismay at what Turner identifies as 'the new pervasiveness of celebrity' in modern society. As with the culture wars of the mid-twentieth century, judgement depends on perception of the power of the audience to develop the means of resistance to the colonization of culture by the marketplace. Those more recent commentators who react against Boorstin, invariably endow audiences with considerable power to take from celebrity culture what they need and identify positive value in audience relations formed with media celebrities, as a demonstration of the power of the people to determine the scale and duration of popular appeal (you can vote contenders off *X Factor* and end their fame). Turner's keyword definition gives very little weight to this more recent tradition, as his conclusion suggests:-

> Celebrity remains a highly ambiguous concept and its operation is treated with great scepticism. Individual celebrities may overcome

this by convincing their public of their authenticity, but the concept itself is seen by many as representing the triumph of the image over the substance, and of the representation over the real.

My own position is closer to that enunciated by Joe Moran, who argues for more complex version of celebrity:

> The celebrity is not just a product of promotional strategies ... but is part of "the vortex of promotional signs ... a great swirling stream of signifiers whose only meaning in the end is the circulatory process which it anticipates, represents and impels". I want to argue that the intertextuality of celebrity — the fact that it is, as Richard de Cordova points out, a discursive as well as a narrowly economic phenomenon — makes the star a site of considerable ambivalence and contestation.[13]

I would argue that here is no point in defending celebrity against the charge of displacing democracy or driving out the true heroic celebrity. The situation requires more strategic thinking than that. Until and unless market capitalism, with celebrity at its centre, is replaced with something different, the celebrity system must be worked with to best advantage, and this can only be done if the complexity of the system is recognised and the power of these iconic images contested. In the case of Beckham this means acknowledging that firstly his influence cannot be ignored, secondly, that he is best treated as an iconic signifier, thirdly that available within the portfolio of Beckham images of competing masculinities is a relatively enlightened form of modern male heroic available for appropriation. Beckham is a figure, like Arthur, who is of sufficient cultural weight, particularly in the sphere of masculinity, to be worth fighting over, so that a popular, progressive form of male heroic

[13] Moran, *op. cit.*, p. 52.

might be defined and validated. Rather than participate in the understandable revulsion at celebrity culture and its excesses, there is an urgent need to develop a more sophisticated and nuanced analysis of how the broad scale of celebrity operates, as the various terms which are in circulation, such as idol, star, superstar, hero, icon, celebrity, can be seen to have highly permeable and constantly shifting boundaries. 'Celebrity' emerges from such analysis as too compendious and indiscriminate a category, inviting knee-jerk reactions and lazy thinking.

It was bad enough to have taken Beckham seriously, but the real scandal was to have suggested that Beckham 'means'. From Daniel Boorstin onwards the dominant view of celebrities has been that they 'appear to be meaningful but are in fact empty of meaning', creating 'a new category of human emptiness' (Quoted in Dyer, 1998, p. 13). This discourages attempts to link the 'new category' to possible antecedents, an approach to celebrity which recognises both historical continuity and discontinuity. This paper will question the standard view of modern celebrity as rupture between a lost heroic age and a sadly post-heroic modernity, between plenitude and vacuity.

There are certain obvious ways in which Arthur and Beckham can be said to occupy similar spheres, characterised by male bonding in an aggressive, competitive arena with star performers and a team ethos, in which women largely feature as sexualised appendages. Beckham himself can be placed within an Arthurian pattern of signification, as captain of national sport, linked to well-being of the nation, who stands well above fellow players in terms of global reputation. Given an apparent mismatch between deeds and reputation, both have generated debate over fame based on exceptionality, prompting questions about the distinction between achieved and merited fame, suggesting a 'mythical' or mystificatory element to the process. Attempts to demystify Arthur have had limited success, despite controversy over adultery — the same

could be said of Beckham. There seem to be some grounds for questioning the traditional view that 'in the early period, stars were gods and goddesses, heroes, models – embodiments of *ideal* ways of behaving. In the later period, however, stars are identification figures, people like you and me – embodiments of *typical* ways of behaving.' (Dyer, 1998, pp. 21-22) This neat binary oversimplifies the broad and complex category of modern celebrity, within which, this paper argues, it is necessary to recognise difference.

Within Arthurian studies itself Arthur has often been used as a stick with which to beat modernity. Derek Brewer, for example, bemoans the failure of the heroic to survive in Britain once sport became professionalized:

> The knights recognise themselves as good men because they fight well, but also fairly, according to the rules. The natural descendant of this was the concept of 'fair play', an English expression for which there is no equivalent in any other language. It gave birth to the general notion of sportsmanship which in the late nineteenth century and the early years of the First World War was carried into battle to what now seem absurd lengths ... we may well lament its passing now.[14]

This perpetuates a form of elitism which can be traced back to the high Victorian period, when amateur sport, as represented by young gentlemen on the playing fields of the great public schools, was at its peak. Arthur was summoned up then, as now by Brewer, to indict the masses for their lack of a code of honour. Thomas Carlyle, among others, set out to classify true heroism and expose the cheapened democratic

[14] Derek Brewer, 'The Paradoxes of Honour in Malory,' in Alan Lupack ed., *New Directions in Arthurian Studies* (D.S.Brewer, Cambridge, 2002), 33-48 (p. 38).

version, producing a taxonomy of ideal heroic types. P. David Marshall traces this displacement of hero by celebrity as the deplored outcome of democracy:

> The celebrity embodies the ideal type of hero that emerges from the mass audience. For Hazlitt, Carlyle and Emerson, this new power of determining value needs to be connected to (or critically confronted with) historical models of distinctive and important individuals, so that any new form can be truly and authentically validated. The danger of the new celebrity is that it has slipped the yoke of historical validation.[15]

Arthur and his knights would provide the required 'historical validation', anchoring the legitimate heroic, while preventing the development of a diluted heroism shaped by popular acclaim, the commodified hero, the celebrity - the froth of history. This vilification of celebrity as ungrounded fame remains a key feature of contemporary debate on celebrity culture, but rather than being a feared expression of democracy the heavy diet of celebrity in the media is increasingly held responsible for the declining participation in the democratic process.

The controversy about damage caused by celebrity surfaced after the England football team's surprise defeat against Northern Ireland in September 2005. Even within a team of famous multi-millionaire players David Beckham was picked out as representing a disruptive strand of celebrity. He is said by another player to be 'in a world of his own', by a journalist to be in a 'self-imposed bubble of celebrity' (*The Observer*, 11.9.05) and by Wayne Rooney to be a 'flash bastard'. Suggestively, an autobiography published at the same time by another England player, Robbie Fowler , uses the identical fault-line to try to distinguish his fame,

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[15] *Celebrity and Power: Fame in Contemporary Culture, op. cit.*, p. 8).

grounded in his working-class roots, from Beckham 'glitz':

> Is it enough to sell your soul for, to make yourself look greedy, or stupid, or both? I think it is hypocritical to be involved in endorsing hundreds of things, getting your picture in the papers and on the TV all the time ... and then complaining about the invasion of your privacy. I was criticized before the World Cup Finals in 2002 for being one of the few members of the England squad who didn't attend that glitzy bash David Beckham threw for charity. I know it was for a great cause, but diamonds and white tails? That's not really me, is it? If I'd paraded there in front of all the press with the missis, how could I have then told them to fuck off when they wanted to snap me on the beach? (*Fowler, My Autobiography*, p. 157)

Fowler, despite an enormous personal fortune from his property portfolio, is anxious throughout his autobiography to maintain a boundary between renting out your image and renting out property. Beckham represents the dark side of celebrity, creating a dangerous fissure within celebrity itself which threatens Fowler's class and gender identity.

Garry Whannel's influential *Media Sports Stars*[16] deploys the same Beckham / Fowler binary in his chapter on 'vortextuality', a critique of the commodification of sport in which an 'anchorless', 'rootless', 'floating', 'decentred', 'melting' Beckham as postmodern villain is contrasted with a 'grounded', 'solid', 'consistent', even 'socialist' Fowler. Beckham's challenge to 'rigid versions of masculinity favoured in English football culture'[17] is stripped of significance as this free-floating signifier ultimately signifies nothing. The triumph of the floating signifier over

[16] *Op. cit.*
[17] *Ibid.*, p. 204.

the grounded sign is said to mark the decline of a certain type of male heroism: 'Bad boys are out of fashion with the corporate world and, in the process, the landscape of heroism becomes somewhat flatter and less exciting.'[18] (215). As a Liverpool fan I am attracted by Liverpool and Manchester United players being designated good and bad celebrity, but there are difficulties with such appeals to authentic ordinariness.

The recent *New Keywords* entry on celebrity it is precisely by testing this authentic / inauthentic fault-line that Graeme Turner has tried to reach a durable definition of celebrity:

> Celebrity remains a highly ambiguous concept and its operation is often treated with great scepticism. Individual celebrities may overcome this by convincing their public of their authenticity, but the concept itself is seen by many as representing the triumph of the image over the substance, and of the representation over the real.[19] (p. 28)

Fowler's autobiography is structured on these very lines, using Beckham as the hollowed out Other by which his own substantial identity is secured. Turner's reference to celebrity as 'a highly ambiguous concept' should, however, alert us to the instability of such a self-serving binary, as Fowler's 'scally' image is as carefully constructed as any celebrity's. Rather than demonising Beckham as the unacceptable face of celebrity this paper will now seek to understand how the Beckham phenomenon works and in so doing to shed some light on the nature of modern celebrity culture. As Arthur may well have not existed but has nevertheless shaped conceptions of the Western male heroic for centuries, he is a valuable model for approaching Beckham as a set of

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[18] *Ibid.*, p. 215.
[19] Tony Bennett, *New Keywords: A Revised Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (Blackwell, Oxford, 2005), p. 28.

images in which there is a complex interaction of the symbolic and the real. By presenting Beckham as an iconic figure by way of Arthurian myth we can seek to avoid judgemental scepticism and to consider the dangers in relinquishing positive Beckham images in favour of less progressive models of what I term the modern male heroic.

It may be helpful at this juncture to test out the theory that the Beckham celebrity form is best understood as a mutation into iconicity, with a powerful representative function strongly linked to belief, a process suggested by Philip Grundle in his study of Sophia Loren:[20] 'Sophia Loren is no mere showbusiness personality; rather she is something much more enduring and significant, a figure of unusual importance in Italian popular culture .... timeless symbol of her country's spirit.' The icon has throughout history been the object of both fear and awe based on its (magical) power as a locus of belief. For Protestant Reformers, of course, the danger of the distracting allure of the visible icon was such that they had to be stripped from places of worship. Although celebrity is exciting because of its provisionality, it is the opposite case with the icon, a term bestowed when provisionality has subsided or disappeared.[21] The term 'icon' is the most carefully policed within the spectrum of celebrity forms because it implies conviction based on emotional investment and adulatory emulation. The following response to the Rebecca Loos allegations about Beckham's private life are helpful in illustrating the nature of such iconic status:

> Beckham's appeal was that he could be what we wanted him to be .... he has become a cipher for everyone who looks at him ... a blank canvas on which others could project their own image of Beckham,

[20] Stephen Gundle, 'Sophia Loren, Italian Icon', in Lucy Fischer and Marcia Landy eds, *Stars, The Film Reader*, Routledge, London, 2004, p. 77.
[21] 'Iconic status is always conferred in retrospect, and constantly reinscribed in accordance with dominant discursive patterns of specific moments.' (Whannel, *op. cit.*, p. 56).

which he would never contradict. So the allegations of infidelity, if proved accurate ... are not only a tragedy for him and his family – but for all of us .... In a fragmented culture, where we listen to different records and watch different programmes, there are few shared experiences left, and Beckham was one of them .... With him revealed as an alleged philanderer, he has become just another celebrity to argue about, no longer an icon to believe in. Is it too early to suggest that we will never believe in anything the way we agreed about David Beckham?[22]

This again suggests the need to break up the broad category of celebrity to take account of significant differences. The fact that Beckham survived such allegations unscathed suggests that he is something of a special case, the almost oxymoronic 'living icon' is - as captured in Marshall's insightful comment that, 'The iconic quality of any icon is also the zenith of a career. What the icon represents is the possibility that the celebrity has actually entered the language of the culture and can exist whether the celebrity continues to "perform" or dies.' (17) If Beckham has crossed a line which few other celebrities have crossed, this has to do with the nature of his particular iconic status, which will now be addressed in relation to Arthurian legend, rather than the more obvious context of sport.

My focus will be on the flexibility of the Arthurian image and its susceptibility to appropriation across different periods of history. Writing in *The Observer* (17.7.04) Ronald Hutton illustrates such flexibility of Arthurian male heroism from Arthur through to Beckham and its availability for a range of contrasting purposes:

The resonances of Arthurian heroes are so many that they can be

[22] Sarfraz Mandoor, 'Beckham, Sex and Big Business', *Asia Times* 17.4.04.

> fitted to a range of modern figures, adapting as societies change. At the opening of the 20th century any young soldier heading off to fight for his country abroad could be compared to one of the Round Table's knights: Lawrence of Arabia took with him into the desert a gun, a knife and a book of Arthurian tales. Churchill, squaring up to Hitler, was regarded as an Arthur returned from the shadows to save his nation. Two decades later it was the courtly and debonair J. F. Kennedy who took on the mantle. In the present age it is a Beckham or a Rooney, voyaging away to do battle for national honour, according to a code of rules, who wears it with pride.

There is an adaptable Arthurian male heroic 'slot' which always remains available to be filled by whoever wears the mantle of once and future king and restarts the cycle (curiously hinted at by the video of the sleeping Beckham by Sam Taylor-Wood commissioned by the National Portrait Gallery). Hutton's comment invite consideration of what form an Arthurian male heroic in contemporary Britain might take.

For our purposes it is interesting to note that a dominant strand of Arthurian legend is associated with racial purity, hyper-aggressive masculinity and social hierarchy, which surfaces in the 2004 Bruckheimer blockbuster movie, in which there is minimal recourse to a more feminised strand of Arthurian chivalry, characterised, according to Caxton, by a blend of 'prowesse, hardynesse, humanyte, love, curtesye, and vary gentylnesse'.[23] Just as with Arthur so with Beckham controversy persists over what sort of masculinity he represents. Certainly, following his move to Real Madrid in 2002, pressure has been brought to bear to reshape him in accord with the Spanish male ideal of 'furia' and 'cojones'. Thus, while the British media agonised over the

[23] See Elizabeth S. Sklar and Donald L. Hoffman eds, *King Arthur in Popular Culture* (McFarland and Company, Jefferson, North Carolina and London, 2002), p. 25.

possible demise of Beckham the family man, the Spanish equivalent manifested a total indifference to his marital fidelity or lack of it. Posh was expected to stay in the background like the wives of the other players, whereas a virile and penetrative Becks was inspiring a new imperial golden age of Spain:

> 'It's Beckham, he's changed the course of Spanish history – we're on the map now in the US and in Asia. Thanks to him we Spaniards have achieved what we never achieved with Philip the Second. As long as Beckham is with Real Madrid, the sun won't set on the empire.' (Interview with Chenco Arias)[24]

Such a 'landscape of heroism' has the excitement that Whannel desires, and avoids the cultural blandness decreed by the market, as described by Toby Miller:

> And this seems to be the last requirement of global capitalism: cultural differences disappear, to be replaced by a universal, circumspect human nature that knows its place in the order of things. Is this how we want our heroes to be?[25]

In answering such a question, it could be argued that the flexible Beckham image, at its worst, encompasses the twin evils of modern male heroism depressingly catalogued by Miller as 'displac[ing] vicious patriarchal nationalism with insidious commodity fetishism'.[26] Norman Denzin has persuasively argued that once Jordan 'became a sign of

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[24] Jimmy Burns, *When Beckham Went to Spain: Power, Stardom and Real Madrid* (Michael Joseph, London, 2004), p. 67. Other recent books on his move to Spain are Phil Ball, *An Englishman Abroad: Beckham's Spanish Adventure* (Ebury Press, London, 2004); Alex Leith, *El Becks: A Season in the Sun* (Vision Sports Publishing, London, 2004); John Carlin, *White Angels: Beckham, Madrid and the New Football* (Bloomsbury, London, 2004).
[25] *Ibid.*, p. 11.
[26] Toby Miller, 'Competing Allegories,' in Randy Martin and Toby Miller eds, *SportCult* (University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis and London, 1999), 14-38 (29).

himself' this flexible modern hero became safely defused for mass consumption, appealing across race, class and colour. Neither a grounded Robbie Fowler nor a free-floating Beckham resolves this dilemma, but in arguing that an understanding of how the male heroic has been contested terrain, constantly fought over across the centuries, might help us understand how a particular type of iconic celebrity functions in our own age, and how such iconic figures need to be continued to be fought over.

While acknowledging that the milieu which both Beckham and Arthur inhabit is characterised by male displays of violent aggression and extreme forms of competition, this paper argues that what draws Arthur and Beckham together is that neither are contained by such hyper-masculinity, though either can be appropriated to serve such ends. Arthur has long been the object of appropriation for opposing political positions. As Arthur Mathis observes, during WWII:

> [B] oth the right-wing extremists who sympathised with the rise of totalitarianism and the moderates and leftists who fought to defeat the Axis powers used elements of Arthuriana to advance their causes.[27]

A recent study of medieval masculinity helpfully identifies a softened encoding of the Arthurian male heroic:

> Arthur gives the rules as: 'never to do outrage or murder, and always do flee treason, and to give mercy to him asks mercy ... and always to succour ladies, damsels, and gentlewomen and widows, and never to rape them, upon pain of death.'[28]

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[27] Andrew Mathis, *The King Arthur Myth in Modern American Literature* (McFarland and Company, Jefferson, North Carolina and London, 2002), p. 2.
[28] Ruth Mazo Karras, *From Boys to Men: Formations of Masculinity in Late Medieval Europe* (University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, 2003), pp. 38-9.

This code of ethical restraint has been a vital ingredient in the successful transmission of the Arthurian male heroic, and notably it exercised significant influence on the development of the modern institution of sport in the nineteenth century. Derek Pearsall's comment on Arthur might be helpful in understanding his relevance for contemporary celebrity culture:

> The nature of his existence as what is supplied is what has made him so malleably contemporary. He is a vacuum waiting to be filled with signification, a floating signifier.[29]

Compare Garry Whannel's comment on Beckham:

> In contrast to the theme of thrift, so dominant in representations of Stanley Matthews, David Beckham exemplifies indulgence in the consumer market. His image has become the dominant icon of British sport representation, yet it is a strangely elusive and anchorless image - a floating signifier that can become attached to a range of discursive elements with equal plausibility.[30]

Arthur, like Beckham, though more uneasily, represents both hetero- and homosexual relations, the admired object of both male and female gaze. As Patricia Ingham notes, '*Morte Arthure* allows Arthur a flexible, homoerotic masculinity', as his companions 'castigate his "womanly" excess ("To wepe als a woman ... it is no witt holden"), while he embraces Gawain's body.[31] The exaggerated need for homosocial bonding between a fellowship of knights and a fellowship of athletes is manifest, as is the corresponding need for exaggerated acts of male aggression on the field

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[29] Pearsall, p. 6

[30] Garry Whannel, *Media Sports Stars, op. cit.*, p. 202.

[31] Patricia Clare Ingham, *Sovereign Fantasies: Arthurian Romance and the Making of Britain* (University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, 2001), p. 103.

of play. The pages of Arthurian romance are littered with occasions of close male bonding, and more recent scholarship has prepared modern readers to expect knightly masculinity to be more wide ranging than the traditional image of rampant, damsel rescuing heterosexuality would suggest.

From this perspective both Arthur and Beckham are both postmodern textual beings; Beckham's notorious Christ and King images can be read in any number of ways, postmodern irony being one of them. Arthur functions as a 'floating signifier' in the way he operates across and between key binaries of Christian and pagan, local/national and international/global, masculine and feminine, natural and supernatural, high culture and popular culture. Beckham's stands at the intersection of uniform globalisation and individualised difference; there is nothing quite like him. As has often been observed, Beckham's celebrity status rests upon a potent series of incongruities – provincial parochialism combined with urban chic, nostalgic yet progressive, effeminately male, blackly white.

Garry Whannel concludes his lengthy discussion of Beckham rather wistfully, regretting that Beckham's celebrity is no longer dependent upon his sporting achievements, but this conclusion is somewhat at odds with his positive appraisal of Beckham's softened masculinity:

> Dress him as Christ and it really doesn't matter, because he's not 'real'. In this vortextual media event, consumption is the new democracy, style the new cultural capital. The performative talent of David Beckham and Victoria Adams provided the potential for their commodification. Now that they are so thoroughly 'well known for being well known', their abilities as footballer and singer appear strangely, and rather sadly, decentred.[32]

The narrative of decline is clearly marked: Performer, Commodity Celebrity. But you could invert this hierarchy and argue that it matters all that much more how Beckham is 'dressed', and this is because he is not 'real'. As an icon, how he appears is much more significant. Arthur is notoriously 'not real' but this absence of historical legitimacy has only served to increase the potency of his celebrity (a similar point could be made about Shakespeare, whose celebrity is in inverse proportion to the amount of available biographical detail). These are the icons, and it is the meaning attached to these figures which has to be fought over with the greatest effort as long as the celebrity system prevails.

Has celebrity seen off heroism, as Daniel Boorstin famously argued?

> The celebrity is a person known for his well-knownness ... The hero was distinguished by his achievement; the celebrity by his image or trademark. The hero created himself; the celebrity is created by the media. The hero is a big man [sic]; the celebrity is a big name.[33]

It has been the main thrust of this paper to challenge this seminal definition, which is, in effect, an attack on popular culture and a restatement of the elitist Carlylean position. I see no point in despairing about celebrity as the opposite of 'true' heroism - the left cannot afford the luxury of so doing – or in giving up on the most powerful celebrity figures, such as Beckham. If we are 'in the realm of symbols that gain and lose value like commodities on the stock market,'[34] iconoclasm is not the most effective way forward while the capitalist system itself prevails. Contestation and appropriation is more likely to succeed than iconoclasm.

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[32] *Op.cit.*, p. 212.
[33] *The Image ; or, What Happened to the American Dream* (London : Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1961) p.12.
[34] *Marshall,* op. cit., p. 6.

That there is no 'essence' of Beckham is shown by the changes since Whannel's piece, which have been brought about by specific historical changes - such as Beckham's move to Real, where image demands are different than in the UK, and also by Beckham responding to other changes (decline in Posh's celebrity status and his own ageing). Beckham's growing wealth and independence (of club, of wife, of country?) also feed into his changing image - no longer dominated by Ferguson or Posh or Eriksson).

To return to our beginning, in a sense, Beckham *is* 'in his own world'. He is no 'ordinary celebrity' but is best understood as an icon, operating in ways which draw him closer to Arthurian myth than to Robbie Fowler (despite Fowler being known on Merseyside as 'God!). But this is not to do with being more or less 'grounded' in reality – all celebrity is mediated and constructed – rather it is a recognition that within the overarching 'keyword' celebrity some signifiers function in a different way to others. Becks needs to point this out to his mates in the team before the crucial next two World Cup qualifying matches!