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Disarming *the shout of doom*: Chopra's Alkahest

Nikki Wilson Clasby

Whilst researching for manifestations of the Arthurian “legend” in popular culture, I discovered threads of connection with my interest in art and interdisciplinary study, leading me, somewhat circuitously, through alchemy to the field of psychology, and in particular, “New Age” self-help psychology. Arthurian legend has been referenced, adapted and utilized fairly extensively in this field, with titles ranging from *Crossing to Avalon: A Woman's Midlife Pilgrimage*¹ to *The Return of King Arthur: Completing the Wholeness, Inner Strength, and Self-Knowledge*.² However, based on my research to date, I have found these works have received little acknowledgement by serious scholars of Arthurian studies and, for this reason, I want to investigate why this is so. I have chosen to focus on the work of Deepak Chopra, whose work has sparked as much criticism as it has success. After researching for this paper I felt an overwhelming desire to justify Chopra's place in Arthurian scholarship. His ideas seem to be quite radical on the surface, so radical that as a scholar it would be easy to dismiss Chopra's work as naïve and unworthy of serious attention. Perhaps his work warrants closer inspection, perhaps there is something important at work here, something that is easy to overlook. As scholars we bring professional expectations to the work we investigate. When these expectations are not fulfilled, we are quick to pass judgement. According to Chopra, these attitudes exist at the root of our “mortal wound.”³ In my opinion, we perhaps need to accommodate another way of “seeing” and it is my intention in this paper to find out what Chopra wants us to see, and how he utilizes the Arthur legends to attain that goal.

Deepak Chopra is a distinguished medical doctor. Raised and educated in New Delhi, he graduated from the prestigious All India Institute of Medical Sciences in 1968 and emigrated to the States in 1970 where he became board certified in internal medicine and endocrinology. Chopra, however, is most renowned for his work in alternative medicine. His studies span many disciplines ranging from quantum physics, Vedanta and the Bhagavad-Gita.⁴ He is also an avid practitioner of *Ayurveda*⁵, the traditional system of Indian medicine.

Chopra has written over forty books⁶ on the subject of mind/body healing with titles ranging from *Ageless Body, Timeless Mind: The Quantum Alternative to Growing Old to Synchrodestiny: Harnessing the Infinite Power of Coincidence to Create Miracles*. For this paper I will focus on a group of works published in 1995 that are directly linked to King Arthur: *The Return of Merlin* (novel); *The Way of the Wizard: Twenty Spiritual Lessons for Creating the Life you Want*, based on Chopra's interpretation of Merlin's lessons to Arthur in the Crystal Cave; and *Art of Spiritual Transformation—Alchemy*. “Lessons from the Teachings of Merlin.” (DVD—staged performance/lecture on *The Way*

¹ *Crossing to Avalon: A Woman's Midlife Pilgrimage*. Jean Shinoda Bolen, M.D. Harper Collins: New York, NY, 1994.

² *The Return of King Arthur: Completing the Wholeness, Inner Strength, and Self-Knowledge*. Diana Durham. Penguin: New York, NY, 2004.

³ In *The Way of the Wizard*, Chopra explains, “The mortal wound” as, “Lacking love for yourself, you form an image to cover the void. That is why being shunned or betrayed in love causes such pain, because the gaping wound of your own need gets exposed” (104).

⁴ For a comprehensive, non-technical introduction to quantum physics visit: <http://www.spaceandmotion.com/Physics-Quantum-Theory-Mechanics.htm>; for more information on Vedanta read, “Vedanta and Buddhism: A Comparative Study.” Selected essays edited by Helmut von Glasenapp: <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/authors/vonglasenapp/wheel002.html>. For an English translation of the Bhagavad-Gita, visit: <http://www.bhagavad-gita.org/index-english.html>.

⁵ For an introduction to *Ayurveda*, visit: http://www.holisticonline.com/ayurveda/ayv_home.htm

⁶ Chopra's works: <http://www.randomhouse.com/crown/catalog/results.pperl?authorid=4881>

of the Wizard). Chopra's work revolves around the principle of what he has coined *Quantum Healing*. In an interview with Daniel Redwood for "HealthWorld On-line" 1995⁷, Chopra reveals,

Quantum healing is healing the body/mind from a quantum level. That means from a level which is not manifest at a sensory level. Our bodies ultimately are fields of information, intelligence and energy. Quantum healing involves a shift in the fields of energy information, so as to bring about a correction in an idea that has gone wrong. So quantum healing involves healing one mode of consciousness, mind, to bring about changes in another mode of consciousness, body.

Quantum healing relies heavily on meditation as a vehicle "to experience your own source." This source, Chopra explains, helps you "realize that you are not the patterns and eddies of desire and memory that flow and swirl in your consciousness." He goes on to say,

You are the thinker behind the thought, the observer behind the observation, the flow of attention, the flow of awareness, the unbounded ocean of consciousness. When you have that on the experiential level, you spontaneously realize that you have choices, and that you can exercise these choices, not through some sheer will power but spontaneously.

In the practice of quantum healing then, only thoughts are real. The physical universe is the product of a cosmic consciousness to which the human mind is linked through space and time. Illness and aging are therefore illusions. War and misery are outward reflections of inner turmoil. These philosophies form the core of *The Way of the Wizard: Twenty Spiritual Lessons for Creating the Life you Want*, and in turn, form the basis for Chopra's novel *The Return of Merlin*.

Chopra's "creative" application of quantum physics to mind/body healing has sparked severe criticism from the fields of science and medicine, and it is perhaps why Arthurian scholars are reluctant to engage with his work. One of Chopra's staunchest critics is Michael Shermer PhD, founder of *The Skeptics Society*.⁸ Shermer and Chopra regularly engage ideas in debates through *Skeptic Magazine* on topics such as, "The Value of Skepticism: Is Skepticism a Negative or a Positive for Science and Humanity?" and, "The Great Afterlife Debate."⁹ In 2006, Antonella Gambotto-Burke interviewed Chopra for *Thisisawar.com*.¹⁰ In her article "Laying down the laws" Gambotto-Burke says of Chopra,

He has been accused of hawking "leveraged spirituality". Extremist religious groups despise him for believing that "man makes distinctions, God makes none." His few errors have been cited by many as irrefutable evidence of quackery. Defenders of the Western scientific tradition, disturbed by recent academic surveys showing that those with powerful spiritual beliefs enjoy far superior health, yearn for the opportunity to expose him as a charlatan.

She also carefully points out,

Freud and Jung long ago discerned the connection: the human body literally embodies or enacts the mind's conflicts and tragedies. This knowledge was ignored

⁷ "HealthWorld On-line" <http://www.healthy.net/scr/interview.asp?Id=167>

⁸ <http://www.skeptic.com/>;

⁹ <http://www.skeptic.com/eskeptic/05-09-28.html>; http://www.skeptic.com/reading_room/debates/afterlife.html

¹⁰ *Thisisawar.com* is an "educational resource for those who, however temporarily, feel lost or shaken or broken and in need of light—a tranquil oasis of wisdom in an otherwise manic cyberworld" <http://www.thisisawar.com/AuthorsDeepakInterview.htm>.

in an effort to retain the public's faith in pharmaceutical products and technology, a public faith that was necessary to private profit. Chopra has often spoken of having felt like no more than a “licensed drug pusher” during his medical career, and this frustration and a sense of moral futility caused him to explore alternative healing methods. His attention locked onto the ancient Ayurvedic doctors of India, whose cardinal belief was that as the body is created out of consciousness, consciousness is where healing must begin.

Gambotto-Burke explains that Chopra’s critics often focus on his extreme wealth as evidence of his “McSpirituality.” She reveals, however, Chopra has not charged for a consultation in years, lives off his book royalties, and channels his wealth into the charity he created for those in need of funds for health problems, and “The Chopra Centre For Well Being.”¹¹

Chopra’s novel *The Return of Merlin* is an allegory of his unique blend of philosophies, written in a storytelling style suitable for reading out loud to a general audience. Although this novel is accessible and easy to read, it is actually a complex and carefully researched pastiche of images and ideas drawn from many “credible” sources. From what I can gather, Chopra draws upon ideas put forward by Emma Jung and Marie Louise Franz in *The Grail Legend*,¹² where Merlin is represented as “the whole man,” or healthy human psyche and is actually the Grail in alchemical symbolism. Susan Cooper’s *The Dark is Rising*¹³ represents Merlin fighting evil forces with the help of young humans, and proposes the notion that people are responsible for their own destinies. Merlin and Arthur leave Cooper’s world when their purpose has been fulfilled. In Chopra’s novel, however, Merlin is restored to the world only when humans have begun to understand the way of the wizard. Chopra also draws upon T.H. White’s concept of Merlin’s ability to live backward in time, and upon Mary Stewart’s conceptions of the Crystal Cave and the role of Merlin as an intermediary between the unperceived divine order and historical eventuality. The plot begins with the siege of Camelot in sixth century England. Mordred—bastard son of Arthur and Morgan le Fay, destroys the castle using “the shout of doom,” a spell traded to him by the witch Sycorax (Shakespeare). Mordred’s army storm the castle killing everyone in sight including Arthur and his knights. The spell is supposed to be used just once, but Mordred, seduced by the power it affords him, abuses it. According to Chopra it is Mordred’s abuse of this spell and consequently the over inflation of his ego that has caused widespread misery throughout the history of mankind. It is in effect mankind’s “mortal wound” and Mordred’s power is fed by human misery.

Merlin watches from his tower, refusing to help. He reveals to his apprentice Melchior that this siege is just an illusion. The siege has happened many times before and is doomed to happen over again with slight variations in outcome depending on interferences from the “outside” world. Merlin tries to explain, for wizards, past, present and future occur simultaneously—time is a complex web, not a human linear invention. Melchior does not understand and the novel orients itself around teaching Melchior this concept. Merlin at this point has come to an enlightenment of his own. Mordred’s real object of hate is not Arthur or Camelot, but Merlin himself. As they are both wizards, they are destined to continue this battle through the ages. Merlin comes to realise that Mordred is a reflection of his own darker self, his alter ego, and that he must surrender to him—step off the cycle of good and evil in order to bring peace to Camelot and free himself from this negative energy to embrace universal love. As Mordred razes Camelot to the ground, Merlin instantly transforms Melchior into a dragonfly’s egg and himself into a rock known as the *alkabest*¹⁴—a universal solvent sought after by alchemists, thought to have the power to dissolve gold, sometimes

¹¹ <http://www.chopra.com/123804.html>

¹² Emma Jung and Marie Louise Franz. *The Grail Legend*, C.G. Jung Institute, 1970.

¹³ Susan Cooper. *The Dark is Rising*, Aladdin Press, 1973. <http://www.thelostland.com/biography.htm>

¹⁴ <http://www.uh.edu/engines/epi1569.htm>

referred to as the philosophers stone¹⁵. The novel then moves into the twentieth century as Melchior hatches into a dragonfly and with the help of the crows, sets off to find Merlin. The twentieth century plot revolves around the murder of an eminent Arthurian scholar, whose body mysteriously vanishes without trace. The resulting investigation calls ordinary people onto a quest through the web of time, illuminated by Merlin's spirit and transformed by Melchior's teachings of Merlin's lessons, drawing together the reincarnated Knights of the round table, Excalibur, Arthur and the Alkahest in order to transform Merlin back to power. Of key interest to me in Chopra's alchemical allegory is the role and significance of Melchior.

Melchior—with whom Chopra strongly identifies, is the messenger between two worlds—the journeyman on a quest to find his master, the alkahest. It is not unreasonable to align him with the Magi—bearing gifts of gold, incense and myrrh from the East to the infant Jesus. Metaphorically speaking, it is Melchior's quest to bring gold in the form of people—transformed by the wizard's way, together—in order to restore Merlin's power. Especially significant for us is Melchior's very human role as an apprentice—one who makes many mistakes. Chopra is inviting his readers not just to absorb a “good” story, but also to become active apprentices themselves.

In the rich world of metaphor it is interesting to consider the broader possibilities for Melchior. Perhaps Chopra, in keeping with alchemical allegory, had in mind Melchior Cibinensis,¹⁶ an Hungarian alchemical writer active in the first part of the sixteenth century. He is known for the *Processus sub forma missae*, an alchemical mass now dated to around 1525, published in the *Theatrum Chemicum* of 1602.¹⁷

Chopra calls this work a novel, but in my opinion it is more accurate to classify it as an alchemical allegory, an allegory of *The Way of the Wizard*. According to Adam McLean¹⁸, a well-known authority on, and enthusiast for, alchemical texts and symbolism,

Alchemical texts often use elaborate extended allegories as a means of communicating key philosophical points, or to illustrate a particular alchemical process. In these allegorical texts a figure, with which the reader is supposed to identify, goes on a journey in search of wisdom or understanding of the mysteries of alchemy. There, this figure meets various archetypal characters, kings, queens, various alchemical birds and animals, and witnesses a process of transformation. This parallels the use of a series of symbolic illustrations in various alchemical books and manuscripts—these allegories are in essence the working out in text of similar alchemical ideas and processes as are found in the sequences of emblematic symbols.¹⁹

The Return of Merlin fits this description perfectly. Chopra's key philosophical points in these works revolve around the following basic Grail questions: Why am I here? What makes life good or bad? What is the cause of suffering? What happens after I die? The lessons and philosophies form the important content of the work; the Arthurian legend is the vehicle that drives them.

In examining the content of *The Way of the Wizard* it is first important to understand Chopra's reasons for working with wizard imagery—he explains,

In India we still believe wizards exist. In the West a wizard is primarily thought to be a magician who practices alchemy, turning base metal into gold. Alchemy also exists in India, but the word *alchemy* is really a code word. It stands for turning human

¹⁵ http://www.world-mysteries.com/awr_alchemy.htm

¹⁶ <http://www.levity.com/alchemy/mass.html>

¹⁷ <http://www.alchemywebsite.com/theatrchm.html>

¹⁸ <http://www.levity.com/alchemy/adam.html>

¹⁹ <http://www.levity.com/alchemy/allegory.html>

beings into gold, turning our base qualities of fear, ignorance, hatred, and shame into the most precious stuff there is: love and fulfilment. So a teacher who can teach you how to turn yourself into a free, loving person is by definition an alchemist. (3)

Chopra's Merlin "doesn't think. He sees. And that is the key to the miraculous, for whatever you can see in your inner world you will bring into existence in your outer world" (22). This philosophy is fundamental to all of Chopra's work in this series. He believes that "A wizard exists in all of us. This wizard sees and knows everything" (5). Our inner wizard already exists in our hearts, and according to Chopra it is here, in the silence of our hearts that the truth resides. Learning to recognize our inner wizard and act upon his teachings is a quest. And why does mankind need the wizard's way? For Chopra, it is necessary for establishing a new Camelot, "to lift us from the ordinary and the humdrum to the kind of significance that we tend to relegate to myth but is actually right at hand, here and now" (5). Chopra is aligning the way of the wizard with the development of spirituality and this development begins with taking "The Seven Steps of Alchemy." Chopra explains, "Alchemy is about turning things to gold, that perfect, incorruptible substance. In human terms, gold is a symbol for pure spirit. If a person gets beyond all limitation, throws off all fear, and realizes the pure spirit inside, then the seven steps of alchemy have been taken" (9). Chopra equates the search for pure spirit with the quest for the Holy Grail²⁰, "a deep search for the timeless aspect of life that brings what everyone dreams of—pure love, pure joy, pure fulfilment in spirit" (9).

The seven steps of alchemy trace the development of the ego from birth to its subsequent envelopment and suffocation of spirit. "The ego as the wizard sees it, offers no possibility of fulfilment at all. It is controlling and loveless. As the ego grows, it smothers the spirit with layers of wealth, power, self image" (155). According to Chopra, "The work of the ego is what makes you alone, sealing you into a world where no one else can enter" (48). (Perhaps this is why Chopra transformed Merlin into the Alkahest—a symbol of Merlin's surrender to his alter ego, Mordred.) As we get older we develop interesting ways of denying the power of our egos. A typical stage in this development is what Chopra terms "the birth of the giver." By giving to others the ego can rid its self of insecurities and enjoy the pleasure of creativity that giving brings. Many of us get stuck at this stage and it is not until a desire is born to seek out new experiences that old ego issues can be set aside, "a person becomes eager for spiritual experiences, sensing a source of love and fulfilment that even the most intense love of another person cannot deliver. A thirst arises to see the face of God, to live in the light, to explore the silence of pure awareness" (157). Chopra says, "This is the stage of alchemy that draws the spirit to you, and it is the stage for which mortals find themselves least prepared" (158). Once the spirit has been acknowledged, one can witness the "birth of the seer." And according to Chopra, "The birth of the seer spells the end of [the] ego, the end of all outward identification," (162) the end of a long struggle with the self, which in turn allows desires to be fulfilled naturally and effortlessly. The final step of alchemy is pure spirit, "when it dawns the seer finds that what seems to be total joy and fulfilment can still expand" (165). In the face of God, the seer realizes this is not the end of the quest, but the beginning. Now the quest begins, not with the innocence of a baby, but with complete knowledge. At this point, Chopra explains, "the concept of birth and death will cease. You will be a cell in the body of the universe, and this cosmic body will be as intimate to you as your own body is to you now. This is the closest I can come to how a wizard feels, for *wizard* is just another word for the seventh stage" (165).

The Way of the Wizard illustrates the seven steps of alchemy with twenty lessons based on Chopra's interpretation of Arthur's childhood with Merlin. Chopra begins with Merlin's lesson to Arthur; illustrates it with a scene from the Crystal Cave; interprets the meaning of the lesson and ends with how to apply this lesson to our own lives. For example, Lesson 16:

²⁰ "As a baby you were pure enough to seize the Grail but too ignorant to know of its existence. As an adult you know the goal, but you have already closed the way to find it. The introduction of free will is what caused you to lose the Grail, yet it is also the means by which you will recapture it in the end" (*The Way of the Wizard* 150).

Beyond waking, dreaming, and sleeping, there are infinite realms of consciousness.
 A wizard exists simultaneously in all times.
 A wizard sees infinite versions of every event.
 The straight lines of time are actually threads of a web extending to infinity. (109)

Arthur wonders why Merlin's robe is embroidered with moons and stars. Merlin takes Arthur to a hilltop and asks him what he sees. Arthur tells him that he sees the forest stretching out to the horizon. Merlin wants to know what Arthur thinks is beyond the horizon and Arthur explains that at the edge of the world there is the sky, the sun, and beyond that, the stars and infinity. Merlin tells Arthur to turn around and asks the questions again—Arthur gives the same answers. Merlin takes Arthur to a stream deep in the forest, and again asks Arthur how far he can see. Arthur can only see to the next bend in the stream, but Merlin points out that the stream flows to the sea and asks Arthur what happens next—Arthur is quick to give his previous answers. Lastly, Merlin takes Arthur back to the crystal cave and repeats the question. Although the cave is dim and Arthur can barely see the walls, he has mastered the concept enough to tell Merlin he knows that beyond the walls of the cave lay the horizon, the sun, and the universe. Merlin replies, "Then mark well, no matter where you go, the same infinity extends in all directions. You are the center of the universe, no matter where you go" (110).

In "Understanding the Lesson," Chopra explains that a wizard believes in an eternal present where "all events occur simultaneously, and every place is the same point surrounded by infinity [...]. In seeing time this way, as subjective and creative, the wizard can weave his own version of events into the web [of time] and thus alter past or future" (110). By living in an eternal present a wizard is free from the burden of memory. He is free to allow the future to create the present—this is the concept of living backwards in time, or, this is what constitutes living in a "multiverse."²¹ Living with this lesson means learning to regard time as an intricate web of threads—not a single straight line. A wizard sits at the centre "what creates the illusion of past, present, and future is just the focus of your attention. Your mind is the knife that cuts the continuum of space and time into neat slices of linear experience. When you can use this power consciously, you will be a wizard" (115). Merlin tells Arthur his cloak is embroidered with stars and moons to remind him of this valuable lesson.

The concept of an eternal present forms the foundation of the Gothic genre, for it is at this very axis of time and space that dreams, swoons and sensory deprivation chambers, provide potential for the "fantastic" to become "real." Mikhail Bakhtin explains this literary device with his theoretical model of the chronotope. To use his example of the castle, "here the graphically visible markers of historical time as well as of biographical and everyday time are concentrated and condensed: at the same time they are intertwined with each other in the tightest possible fashion, fused into unitary markers of the epoch."²² In other words, the complex web of time as described by Chopra. When past, present and future exist simultaneously, history, in the realm of this "multiverse" is rendered defunct. Perhaps this explains why Chopra does not cite any references for his work—if we accept that the concept of history has been redefined in this manner, and if we, as Chopra tells us, are all connected in the cosmic consciousness of the universe, questions of authority and authorship should naturally fade into insignificance. Perhaps this absence of scholarly citation is a deliberate attempt by Chopra to preserve a future free from contaminated "egos" of the past in his reconstruction of a new Camelot.

²¹ Multiverse theory: <http://www.astronomy.pomona.edu/Projects/moderncosmo/Sean's%20multiverse.html>

²² Mikhail Bakhtin, from *The Dialogic Imagination*. "Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel. Notes toward a Historical Poetics." *The Narrative Reader*. Ed. Martin McQuillan. New York: Routledge, 2000.

It is important to mention at this point that the concept of history as we experience it today, is relatively new. Consider this quote from William H. McNeill's *Mythistory and Other Essays*.²³ On the concept of history he says,

Getting at the sources and staying close to them seemed a sure way to truth a century ago when academic departments of history were set up. Industrious transcription of dead men's opinions therefore became the hallmark of historical scholarship. It still provides a convenient substitute for thought, despite historical quantifiers and other methodological innovators. Yet an infinitude of new sources, each of them revealing new details, does not automatically increase the stock of historical truth. More data may merely diminish the intelligibility of the past, and, carried to an extreme, the multiplication of facts reduces historical study to triviality. (34)

What is truth anyway? For Chopra, truth is pure spirit; according to McNeill, modern historians have us believe that truth lies within the documents, however, McNeill points out,

All truths are general. All truths abstract from the available assortment of data simply by using words, which in their very nature generalize so as to bring order to the incessantly fluctuating flow of messages in and messages out that constitutes human consciousness. Total reproduction of experience is impossible and undesirable. It would merely perpetuate the confusion we seek to escape. Historiography that aspires to get closer and closer to the documents—all the documents and nothing but the documents—is merely moving closer and closer to incoherence, chaos, and meaninglessness. (18)

In light of Chopra's principles it seems natural to conclude that McNeil has a valid point—focusing on the past in so much detail, without an accurate context could indeed lead to chaos—losing the significance of the bigger picture in the process. But why do scholars feel bound or obliged to treat history in this fashion? McNeil suggests, “Consciousness of a common past, after all, is a powerful supplement to other ways of defining who ‘we are’” (11). This obsession over defining who we are, according to Chopra “is the only question worth asking and the only one never answered,” (*The Way of the Wizard*, 35) McNeill warns, “If historians persist in dodging the important questions of our age, others are sure to step into the breach by offering the necessary mythical answers to human needs” (37). By “others” McNeill must be referring to writers like Chopra. Although he does not comment on whether these “others” are valuable or not in the bigger picture, he is clearly distinguishing them from the scholarly circle.

Is it fair to classify Chopra as “other” in this context? Is his attitude to history, scholarship and medicine really that radical? In the twenty-first century, perhaps our cultural memory has been destroyed by an over-reliance on pharmaceutical drugs; however, Chopra's ideas and philosophies seem to be very much in keeping with medieval practice. The concept of spiritual healing is an ancient art. The idea of combining medicine with philosophy has long been associated with Roger Bacon (1214-1294) and his contemporaries. In *Arthurian Myths and Alchemy*,²⁴ Johnathan Hughes says, “In the fifteenth century attention was focused in an unprecedented way on the falling prestige of English kings and the sick state of the institution of monarchy itself” (47). Consider this passage in relation to the idea of the king's “two bodies”—Hughes reveals,

Roger Bacon had advocated a holistic approach to medicine in which the physician acted as a philosopher, teaching the patient to adopt a lifestyle (details of which were

²³ William H. McNeill. *Mythistory and Other Essays*. Chicago U.P: London, 1986.

²⁴ Johnathan Hughes. *Arthurian Myths and Alchemy*. Sutton: UK, 2002.

provided in his *Opus maius* and his glosses to the *Secreta secretorum*) by which he could achieve a state of balance that would result in equilibrium of the four humours and potency. Bacon paralleled this with the alchemist's quest for the harmony between the humours which would produce the quintessence, the philosopher's stone, described in *De erroribus medicarum* as the ultimate medicine rendering all others unnecessary. (49)

Bacon's philosophies were to play an important role in the healing of Henry of Windsor—the Fisher King (Henry VI, 1421-1471)²⁵. The phlegmatic king was plagued by ill health and bouts of severe depression and by 1456 Hughes writes, “the king's condition was publicly acknowledged to the extent that there was a concerted attempt to cure him through alchemy” (49). At this time there was considerable interest in Bacon's work by court physicians such as Cokkys and Gilbert Kymer that, according to Hughes, sparked “a Baconian medical revolution, placing alchemical science and mythology at the heart of political debate that took place at the onset of the Wars of the Roses” (49). Cokkys' translations of Bacon's glosses to the *Secreta secretorum*²⁶ “demonstrated that the balance of the king's humours was intimately connected with the health and well-being of the monarch and of his realm [...] if a king were of a choleric complexion he would be naturally inclined to pride, anger and war; his councillors and kingdom would follow in his path and neighbouring kingdoms would also be disturbed” (50). Hughes goes on to say that “[Bacon] defined the duty of the physician in *Opus maius* as regulating the daily regimen, controlling food, drink, exercise and sleep to postpone the aging process so that the patient could approach the age reached by the prophets [...] Bacon was preoccupied with a search for the medicine that could postpone this aging process, a secret he believed the ancients possessed” (50). Chopra, too, is fascinated with the aging process. Tied in with the concept of living backward in time and allowing the future to dictate the present, Chopra is also interested in biological aging. In the interview with Daniel Redwood for “HealthWorld On-line” 1995, Chopra says,

The research that interests me most is the research on Panchakarma, which is the procedure for removing toxins from the body, and how it affects biological aging. And of course the research on the herbal preparations, which yield very interesting and previously unthought-of ways of healing. Herbs don't usually work the way pharmaceutical compounds do, binding to receptor sites. They seem to be evoking and amplifying the body's own healing processes. They are much more gentle. That means they probably take longer. It's a much more gentle, a much more holistic, and a much more complete effect.²⁷

Chopra, like Roger Bacon, is also interested in healing a king in order to heal a kingdom, however, Chopra does not conform to the confines of royalty—his practice is for the ordinary everyday subject—healing for the entire realm, deflecting the responsibility for the health of the nation onto all who occupy it, not just the king. Does this attitude seem like New Age fuzzy mysticism or a practical common sense approach to living? Chopra's work lies at the heart of the twenty-first century obsession with health, wellness and the quest for spiritual awareness beyond the scope of organized religion.

While for some, the fuzzy mysticism of New Age thinking may seem a little “out there”, especially for the “serious” scholar, I would like to proffer a gentle reminder that Arthurian

²⁵ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Henry_VI_of_England

²⁶ *Secreta secretorum* <http://www.colourcountry.net/secretum/>

²⁷ Panchakarma: <http://www.chopra.com/127594.html>

QuickTime™ and a
TIFF (Uncompressed) decompressor
are needed to see this picture.

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TIFF (Uncompressed) decompressor
are needed to see this picture.

scholarship is also built upon “fuzzy” foundations. As McNeill points out, “Myth lies at the basis of human society. This is mankind’s substitute for instinct. It is the unique and characteristic human way of acting together. Myths are based on faith more than fact. Their truth is usually proven only by the action they provoke” (23). Like Arthurian scholarship, however, the historical arc of New Age thinking can be traced back over the last century with a serious degree of scholarly application. In *Cults and Cosmic Consciousness: Religious Vision in the American 1960’s*,²⁸ Camille Paglia traces the path of enlightenment from the work of Mary Baker Eddy²⁹ (1821-1910)—who published *Science and Health* in 1875 and immediately went on to found Christian Science; and simultaneously the work of Helena Blavatsky³⁰ (1831-91) founder of the Theosophical Society, whose centre is established in Madras India. Blavatsky renewed interest in ancient Sanskrit religious texts—translated and disseminated them around the world providing the raw material for the western practice of yoga and healing. The arc moves through the introduction of Hinduism to America by Swami Vivekananda³¹ at the World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago 1893, through the 1901 publication *Cosmic Consciousness: A Study in the Evolution of the Human Mind* by Richard Maurice Bucke³² who attempted to fuse Asian and Western religion by juxtaposing figures like Buddha, Jesus, Dante, William Blake, and Walt Whitman. The arc continues through Jung’s theory of the collective unconscious³³ (partly derived from the *samskaras*), through the synthesis of LSD-25 from rye fungus in 1938 by Dr. Albert Hofmann³⁴, and the founding of the Church of Scientology by L. Ron Hubbard³⁵—the main shaper of New Age thought in 1954. Climaxing with the spiritual awakening of the 60’s and its failure to fulfil that promise due to over-reliance on drugs—confusing spiritual revelation with delusion, the aftermath of this “spiritual awakening” was counteracted by the rise of radical evangelism, bringing us to the self-centred, capitalistic nineties, where New Ageism became a huge commercial success. Paglia argues, because New Ageism is “unstructured and decentralized, it has been underestimated as a force competing with mainline religions. The New Age movement deserves respect for its attunement to nature and its search for meaning at a time when neither nature nor meaning is valued in discourse in the humanities” (97).

Chopra attempts to pick up the pieces left by those radical 60s explorers of inner space, dusts off the scandal, heals drug damaged minds and over inflated egos, to offer us a cleaner, safer, more responsible “armchair crusade,” stripped of the complications of morality and status. An opportunity for us all to become healers, an opportunity to find our own inner grail that costs only the commitment to being silent long enough to embark upon a solo journey, united with fellow travellers in the familiar legends of king Arthur and Merlin. Through *The Way of the Wizard*, Chopra provides an opportunity for all of us to engage in world healing, shifting and dividing responsibility from world leaders to individuals. His message seems to be that hope for building a new Camelot begins with the ordinary person, we do not need to wait for the return of a mythical king to “save us,” the power of this myth is already embedded within our hearts, we just need to learn how to access that power. Despite the negative criticism surrounding Chopra, in attempting to embrace centuries of knowledge, whether it is myth, legend or history, to provide a blueprint for building a new healthy society, his quest is indeed a noble one. He is both an alchemist and a futurist—or is he a real wizard?

²⁸ Camille Paglia. *Cults and Cosmic Consciousness: Religious Vision in the American 1960’s*. Arion 10.3 Winter 2003.

²⁹ <http://marybakereddy.wwwhubs.com/>

³⁰ Helena Blavatsky: <http://www.blavatskyarchives.com/>

³¹ Swami Vivekananda: <http://www.ramakrishna.org/sv.htm>

³³ <http://www.hofmann.org/>

³⁵ L. Ron Hubbard: <http://www.scientologyreligion.org/pg014.html>