'YOURS IS THE EARTH AND EVERYTHING THAT'S IN IT': MYTHS AND NARRATIVES OF BRITISHNESS IN THE CONSTRUCTION AND CONSUMPTION OF IRON MAIDEN

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Abstract

In the years following the end of the Second World War, the British Empire declined as a global, hegemonic power. In the years of this decline, British children were still taught stirring tales and myths of British military might and British fair-play. In this paper, I argue that this mythic milieu served as source of inspiration for Iron Maiden's songs from *Iron Maiden* (1980) to *Somewhere in Time* (1986). I show that themes on these albums deliberately reflect and construct this mythic version of Imperial British masculinity. I then explore how the band has continued to play with Britishness globally.

Introduction

In the years following the end of the Second World War, the British Empire declined as a global, hegemonic power. In the years of this decline, from the 1940s to the 1980s, British children were still taught stirring tales and myths of British military might and British fair-play – the poetry of Rudyard Kipling, for example, constructed an elitist myth of British, imperial, white masculinity for public-school boys and the children of the bourgeoisie; while comics such as *Victor* and *Hotspur* taught working-class boys the glory of warfare. In this paper, I will argue that this mythic milieu served as source of inspiration for the lyrical content of Iron Maiden's songs during their 'classic' run of albums from the self-titled debut *Iron Maiden* (1980) to *Somewhere in Time* (1986). Drawing on the work of Anderson (1983) on imagined communities, and the notion of invented traditions taken from the work of Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983), I will show that the themes in some of the songs on these albums deliberately reflect and construct the mythic version of Imperial British masculinity that was taken for granted by the band as they grew up. In the second half of the paper, I will then explore how Iron Maiden's Imperial British masculinity has been consumed globally, and how the band has continued to play with myths and narratives of Britishness.

Theoretical framework

Benedict Anderson (1983) describes a community of meanings when he discusses the 'imagined community'. Anderson's concept explores how a community in the present is defined by myths of the past it creates. In other words, the community makes a biased reading of the past to justify its values in the present, hence legitimizing itself as a coherent community. One can see that the imagined community is also one that is created and defined by symbols, though these symbols are historically contrived. Anderson's thesis explores

how nations are maintained and legitimized through recourse to heroic, mythical pasts, such as the narrative and symbol of the British Empire.

The process that Anderson (1983) calls imagined communities, where historical invention has resulted in a cohesive structure for legitimizing a sense of community in the present, is also a process of reinvention of the past (Jenkins, 1991), inventing traditions that justified the values of the present (Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1983). Imagined communities (Anderson, 1983) use history to justify and legitimize their existence. But they do not deal with the past: rather they work with myths and stories that are historicized. They are dealing with 'invented traditions' (Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1983). In other words, people in the present make use of the past as a place where they can place genesis stories, genealogies of structure (Foucault, 1972), in order to legitimate claims and structures they may use in the present. This is not a conscious, manipulative design. Invented traditions serve a real need in the present, as they are the founding stories of the people who use them (Cohen, 1985; Spracklen, 2013; Spracklen, Lucas and Deeks, 2014). It is clear that these invented traditions are more important in any research than a quest for 'what really happened', as they relate to the discourses that surround the community being studied. In this chapter, then, it is important to look not at the facts of the British Empire, but the myths and symbols of the Empire that informed the invented traditions of the imagined, imaginary community of post-imperial Britain. This, then, is the mythic milieu to which I now turn: the collection of ideas, norms and values around which the band members of Iron Maiden grew up.

The mythic milieu

The British Empire was a socio-cultural and spatial construction of capitalist exploitation of global markets, political relationships between competing Western nation-states and hegemonic control over systems of colonialism (Hobsbawm, 1987, 1992). In the mythic milieu of the British Empire, British boys were taught how to be proper servants of the Imperial project, and to be proper men, through the use of sports and the re-telling of history and politics (Cannadine, 2002; Dawson, 2013; Mangan, 1981). In the country's public schools (erroneously named, as they are private institutions), middle and upper-class elite boys were taught the values of Muscular Christianity alongside the virtues of being officers, subalterns and imperial officials. The rise of the popular media followed the growth in state school education, and lower-class boys and men were taught to cheer on the exploits of the Empire's soldiers, explorers and heroes. At the time of the height of the British Empire, the Houses of Parliament were re-built in Victorian Gothic, with decorations celebrating stories of King Arthur and his knights. The Empire was built on the construction of myths and invented traditions around events with a moral heart: the brave but foolish disaster of the 'Charge of the Light Brigade' in the Crimean War; or the defense of Rorke's Drift against the Zulus in southern Africa (Dawson, 2013; Holmes and Johnson, 2012).

In this mythic milieu the work of writers and poets such as Kipling came to be the self-satisfied ethical exemplar for elite white British men. Kipling not only spoke of the white man's burden, he also wrote the poem 'If' in 1895 with its guide to being the right kind of man, which is based on a combination of Muscular Christianity, imperialism and classical Stoicism refracted through the neoclassicism of the age. The poem ends with the following rousing lines:

If you can talk with crowds and keep your virtue,
Or walk with Kings—nor lose the common touch,

If neither foes nor loving friends can hurt you,
If all men count with you, but none too much;
If you can fill the unforgiving minute
With sixty seconds' worth of distance run,
Yours is the Earth and everything that's in it,
And—which is more—you'll be a Man, my son!
(http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/175772, accessed 21 November 2014)

But the Empire, like all empires, could not last (Hobsbawm, 1987). By the end of the First World War, British imperial hegemony was in decline, being out-eclipsed by the rise of the United States of America, Nazi Germany, Japan and the Soviet Union. The Second World War broke the Empire altogether, crippling its economy and confronting the British elites with post-colonial movements abroad and a strong left-wing turn at home (Kynaston, 2010). In the years that followed Britain very quickly lost its pre-eminence on the global stage, and left behind a number of post-colonial nation-states that were created following its retreat. At home patriotism and nationalism continued to be part of everyday popular culture, as well as elite culture (Dawson, 2013). Despite its reliance on the USA and allies in NATO, despite the reduction in the size of the military and the slow decline of industry, the post-imperial Britain of the later twentieth-century continued to assume its imperial significance. The Royal Family maintained its grip (serving as a public symbol of banal, ceremonial, de-politicized post-colonialism while simultaneously remaining at the heart of British government) and the public-school educated elites continued to keep hegemonic control of the State, the media and the top jobs in society (Colley, 1992; Wellings, 2002).

Despite, or perhaps because of migration into the country from former imperial domains and a challenge to the gender order by middle-class women, imperial, white British masculinities and hegemonies shaped both culture and society from the 1950s through to the 1980s (and possibly beyond – see Colley, 1992; Goulbourne, 1991; Knowles, 2008). The mythic milieu continued to operate as if nothing had changed. Instead of telling stories about the latest exploits of the army or navy, the mythic milieu was forced to retreat to a (re)production of stories from the past (Dawson, 2013). This happened as before on two levels. For the ruling-class boys becoming men, public schools and the cultural spaces of the Establishment – rowing clubs, gentleman's clubs, balls, grouse-shooting moors – became places where the old stories and narratives were recycled. Boys in public schools would be cloistered in gothic halls and chapels, saying prayers to the God of the Church of England and remembering the boys whose deaths in the two world wars were immortalized in cold stone. They would play team sports and learn discipline and leadership. And they would read Kipling and the other authors of Empire, alongside the Roman authors of the older empire to which the British aspired (Dawson, 2013; Kynaston, 2010; Reynolds, 2013).

In wider popular culture, boys who wanted to be proper men still found exemplars in the films, books and other literature that circulated. The war that the British had won a few years previously was obviously the source for much of this material. Films such as *The Cruel Sea* (1953) and *The Dambusters* (1955) showed white British men at their heroic and noble best, either as officers or other ranks. In the first film, the exploits of the officers and men of a naval corvette are portrayed struggling against German U-boats. Their ship is torpedoed and most of the men die, but the survivors carry on the fight on new

ships. In the second film, British bravery is shown in the true story of the Lancaster bombers and their crews that take enormous risks and suffer terrible casualties in their attack a series of dams in Germany.

This period saw a huge rise in the number of comics that told true stories of 'men at war', as well as fictional accounts of soldiers or others set in real places and real events in the war. These comics such as *Victor*, *The Hornet* and *Hotspur* were overtly tagged 'for boys', and included other warfare and other stories of men (such as the 'tough of the track' Alf Tupper in Victor, a working-class runner who ate chips and took pleasure in racing 'toffs'), but the main focus of the stories was the mythic mileu of white, imperial British masculinity: showing working-class boys how others like them fight brave and fair (see Figure One); or showing them example of good practice from the officer classes, such as the fighter pilots of the Battle of Britain (see Figure Two).

Figure 1: *Victor*, published by DC Thomson (© DC Thomson & Co. Ltd. 2015. Used By Kind Permission of DC Thomson & Co. Ltd)

Figure 2: Derring-do in the Battle of Britain, from *The Hornet* comic, DC Thomson 1967 (© DC Thomson & Co. Ltd. 2015. Used By Kind Permission of DC Thomson & Co. Ltd)
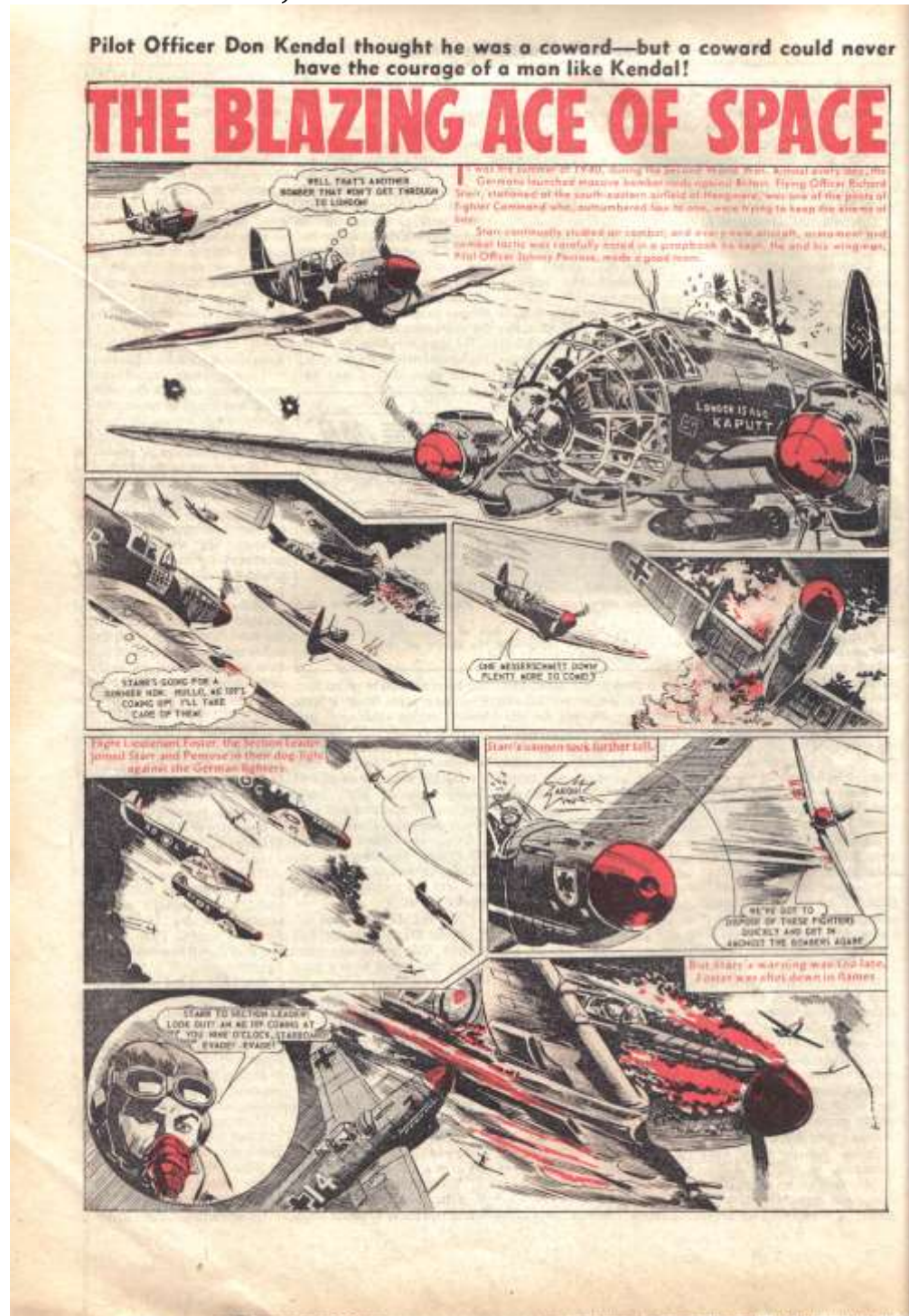
The key lesson from the first set of examples was that soldier should never surrender and should always fight, stand their ground and take the fight back to the enemies of the British Empire, no matter how difficult the odds. The key lesson from the second set of examples was to keep one's head, trust those around one and stay calm in the face of adversity, and one can make a contri-

bution to saving the Empire. In both of these the fact of British Empire's goodness is taken without question: the British are the right side, the Germans and the enemies of the Empire are on the wrong side. These examples are both ideal types of behavior clearly associated with the mythic milieu, the ethics of Muscular Christianity and its ancient Roman precedents. They also prefigure the themes of Iron Maiden.

Iron Maiden's imperial British masculinity

Iron Maiden's first two albums are products of a working-class masculinity enthused with a love of horror. On *Iron Maiden* (1980) there is the anthem to individualism and anti-authoritarianism 'Running Free', and the misogynistic 'Charlotte the Harlot', while on *Killers* (1981) listeners are offered 'Murders in the Rue Morgue'. More sophisticated influences have to await the arrival of Bruce Dickinson as lead singer, whose arrival on the album *The Number of the Beast* (1982) coincides with main songwriter Steve Harris writing the epic 'Run to the Hills', a story of white Americans taking Native American land, and Native American attacks on white Americans. In this song, there are hints of both the working-class Britishness of reading comics and watching 'Westerns', and a reification of the notion of conflict.

Iron Maiden's first explicit narrative of imperial British masculinity is found on *Piece of Mind* (1983) in the form of three songs: 'Where Eagles Dare', 'Die with Your Boots On' and more obviously 'The Trooper'. 'Where Eagles Dare' takes its name and plot from the film of the same name, which tells the story of Allied soldiers fighting the Nazis and being heroically brave against the odds. 'Die with Your Boots On' is rather oblique in its themes but the title and chorus phrase refers to the idea that one needs to stand up and fight for what one believes to be true. 'The Trooper' echoes the masculine sentiment of both songs, but focuses squarely on the Charge of the Light Brigade. The message is that dying foolishly for the cause of Empire is okay so long as one dies without crying. The cynicism of the Victorian poem by Tennyson is lost to the notion that what counts is one's duty to fight the enemy, even if the song claims "no one wins" the fight. The single of 'The Trooper' was released with a cover featuring Eddie dressed as soldier of the Victorian British Empire, grimly holding onto a British (Union) flag. This song is clearly a product of the mythic milieu in which Harris (songwriter) and Dickinson (singer) grew up.

If the song 'The Trooper' is the most important single that encapsulates the ways in which Iron Maiden drew upon imperial British masculinity, the fifth album *Powerslave* (1984) is the most important album that belongs to the mythic milieu. The album's cover (and related marketing and touring material) has an ancient Egyptian theme, an act of Othering orientalism through the use of exotic, British/western ideas of Egypt (Said, 1978). The album cover claims ownership of this foreign land, which was a key possession of the British Empire. The orientalism continues with some of the musical themes on the song 'Powerslave'. Lyrically, there are two songs that continue the construction of the symbolic boundaries of the imagined community of imperial British masculinity: 'Aces High', 'Two Minutes to Midnight' and 'Rime of the Ancient Mariner'. The former takes its name and theme from a film of the same name, and tells the story of a fighter pilot (an 'ace' is a fighter pilot who has shot down a number of enemy planes in combat) scrambling to attack enemy bombers. The lyrics could have been about any fighter pilot in any war, but the final verse makes it clear that this is the second world war, and quite probably the Battle Britain, as the enemy 'bandits' are 'Me-109s' (planes flown by the Germans in the second world war) and the hero of the song identifies with

'Spitfires' (planes flown by the British in the second world war, and famously associated with Britain and the battle of Britain) that are facing the enemy. The cover artwork for 'Aces High' reaffirms this: the enemy plane is German, possibly a Me-109, there is definitely a British Spitfire in the sky, the ground below looks like London and Eddie is flying a plane that has British camouflage coloring.

'Two Minutes to Midnight' is a actually a warning about the threat of total annihilation in a nuclear war of some kind (the two minutes to midnight being the status of the metaphorical doomsday clock), but its contempt of the instrumental ethics of modern wars might be read as a desire for the time when men could be honorable warriors. 'Rime of the Ancient Mariner' is based on the poem of the same name by Coleridge, and its imperial masculine theme is about the expectation that men become men through adventure and exploration, whether on the high seas or in the cold northern latitudes.

The sixth album, *Somewhere in Time* (1986), has two songs that might fit the mythic milieu. 'The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Runner' refers to the story and film of the same name, which strongly critiques the post-imperial status of Britain and its schooling system. Here, it seems, Harris does include the possibility that the runner might not behave right and win, but this only appears at the end of the song, once we have been told the value of running and winning. 'Alexander the Great' is more surely from the mythic mileu, drawing on the idea of glory, military adventure and Empire that inspired the founders of the British Empire (Cannadine, 2002; Mangan, 1981).

Iron Maiden's continuing and evolving Britishness on the global stage

Despite this embrace of a narrow and exclusive Britishness in much of their imagery, symbols and lyrics, Iron Maiden have transcended their British roots to become a global brand for Britain, and a global brand in heavy metal (Bayer, 2009; Gregory, 2013; Puri, 2015; Wallach, Berger and Greene, 2011; Weinstein, 1991). The success of the albums between *Number of the Beast* and *Somewhere in Time* was a combination of talent, luck and strong management. The band's individual musicians and songwriters (especially Harris) are talented artists who understand the power of heavy metal and the desires of the metal audience. They were lucky in the early 1980s to ride a wave of interest in British heavy metal (the New Wave of British Heavy Metal [NWOBHM]) that made heavy metal as a genre a mainstream concern in Europe and America (Weinstein, 1991). And their management team, led by Rod Smallwood, was and is very careful to allow the Iron Maiden product and brand to be promoted carefully. Although the band lost audiences and record sales when the mainstream of rock music started to reject heavy metal in the 1990s, and the band lost Dickinson following guitarist Adrian Smith, Smallwood and Harris steered Iron Maiden's professional career steadily onwards. They continued to spread the word of Iron Maiden into new markets, and by the new century Dickinson and Smith were back and Iron Maiden were recognized as being world leaders in the metal music industry (Puri, 2015). They have become the one metal band that everybody who listens to rock and pop music knows about.

Iron Maiden's masculinity and ethos of individual pride is something that gives them a quasi-universal appeal in countries across the global South, especially among young, urban middle-classes seeking to reject local traditions for things associated with modernity and Western/European liberal values (Wal-

lach, Berger and Greene, 2011). The stories about warriors, standing against the odds, fighting and dying for a cause, strike deep inside male fans everywhere (Snell, 2014), but the particular version of imperial British masculinity that is been presented creates contestations for meaning for the band. Dickinson, for instance, waves a Union flag whenever the band play 'The Trooper' live. Most fans and critics are happy to cheer the British flag as a harmless piece of showmanship, but the glorification of the flag can be seen as a normalization or sanitization of the imperial power relationships it represented in places such as India, where the band has a large following (Unni, 2014). That fanbase is a result of the post-imperial relationships between the two countries, but also the imbalance of cultural power - in metal, as in history, Britannia rules (Reynolds, 2013). That is, British and American bands dominate the mainstream of heavy metal, and are the first to reach new markets. Iron Maiden flies in with its private jets and its professional PR teams, but Indian bands find it almost impossible to build careers by travelling the other way. The British Empire was a tragedy for India and countries like it, yet India owes its modern culture to its imperial encounter. Post-colonial theorists might view the acceptance of the waving of the flag as another form of colonization, whitewashing away the horrors of genocide and starvation (Brah, 1996).

It is not just former countries of the British Empire, where there is a shared culture and language (and an unequal power relationship between the North and South) to help the band, where Iron Maiden have huge followings. Iron Maiden's success in South America can be traced to the soft power held by the British Empire in these countries. Although these countries found independence from Spain and Portugal, these countries were part of the British Empire's economic sphere of interest. British engineers built railways, British teachers taught in schools, and British capitalists built factories and brought soccer to the locals. In the 1980s and 1990s, as these countries found new democratic public spheres and a generation grew up disenchanted with the Cold War dichotomies, previous embraces of British culture came to be re-valued and re-appreciated (Reynolds, 2013). Iron Maiden, by being uncompromising in their Britishness, and with their love of soccer, were able to take advantage of this and build their presence as the definitive NWOBHM band. A similar cultural appreciation of Britishness (and Iron Maiden) occurs in other countries that were never part of the British Empire, such as Japan (Iwashita, 2006). Fans of Iron Maiden, then, are consuming both a universal masculinity and a form of Britishness.

This consumption is literally at work in the leisure spaces of gigs and music shops around the world, where fans purchase t-shirts and patches emblazoned with the artwork for 'The Trooper' and 'Aces High'. It can now be consumed in any leisure space (subject to local licensing laws) with the creation of the beer branded 'The Trooper' by Robinson's Brewery in the UK. This beer is what Americans would probably call a craft beer, tough it is in a traditional British bitter style. It is not an authentic British real-ale when it is bought in a bottle form, but it is real-ale when served in a bar that has the beer kept in a British beer cellar and served via a real-ale pump system (Spracklen, Kenyon and Laurencic, 2013). The bottled version of this British beer has become an enormous success for its brewers and for the band, selling to Iron Maiden fans around the world. By drinking it, fans are legitimizing post-colonial hegemonic power relationships, as well as buying into the mythic milieu of a white, imperial Britain. They are also toasting the ubiquity of the band and the ways in which this particular, narrow form of imperial British masculinity has become the last symbol for an army and navy now too small to protect one country, let along invade and control dozens (Reynolds, 2013).

Conclusions

Anthony Smith (2013) argues that traditions and their role in defining nation-hood cannot be described as inventions, and suggests that fabrication and manipulation are not the primary means through which the construction of tradition takes place. In particular, there is concern in Smith's work, in his critique of Anderson, that nations and nationalisms are more than just a psychological invention or mythological concept. In response, I would argue that although the discourse in this chapter uses terms such as 'invention', 'imagined' and 'imaginary', this does not imply that the external is dismissed in place of a community or historical story that someone just made up in their head while sitting in front of a fire. What Hobsbawm, Anderson and Cohen are saying is that discourse, symbols, perceived realities, shared understandings, and hegemonic ideologies are far more persuasive in both defining history and identity - what actually happened, who we actually are, become meaningless questions, because we cannot answer them without recourse to these imaginings. Secondly, by speaking of imagination, we are not saying these ideas and perceptions are wrong, or false. Rather, for the people doing the imagining, it is the reality they use to shape their everyday life (Cohen, 1985). Paraphrasing Marx, this implies the very shape of identity and history is realized through constructing meaning and understanding – but the construction of national identity and community is limited to those who have the hegemonic power to shape it (Gramsci, 1971).

Iron Maiden, then, play a key role in the reproduction and maintenance of a particular imagined and imaginary community: the symbolic community bounded by the British Empire, which produces in its turn exclusive versions of hegemonic masculinity, whiteness and belonging (Spracklen, Lucas and Deeks, 2014). Carrying the British flag, flying around the world, selling beer emblazoned with Eddie in the guise of The Trooper, Iron Maiden do their best to do their duty for the honor of the country and empire in the stiffed-lip manner of the officers and men of the Light Brigade. They have been raised in the ways of the mythic milieu, and serve its hegemonic interest, whether they are conscious of that fact or not.

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