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Recapturing Camelot: Nostalgia for the Failed Ideals of Arthurian Legend

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Abstract of the Dissertation

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This dissertation examines nostalgia for the ideals of King Arthur's court as represented in medieval versions of Arthurian legend. Nostalgia has typically been considered a modern phenomenon and has often been disparagingly associated with sentimentality or strict conservatism; however, this project aims to show that nostalgia can be a useful critical framework for understanding medieval approaches to romance, particularly the retellings of familiar tales like the stories of King Arthur and his knights. Using a chronological study of significant medieval Arthurian retellings, I argue that both the ideals themselves and the sense of nostalgia evoked are malleable and dependent on the context of the individual work. However, the stability of the legend's plot, its sustained popularity, both during the Middle Ages and since the nineteenth century, and the consistent engagement with the past in a way that highlights its superiority and invites the reader to long for or even recreate both the abstract values and concrete forms allow us to appreciate how the values themselves evolve and how authors are able to work within the tradition to achieve their own ends. An unavoidable element of the Arthurian myth is its failure: the Round Table fellowship is doomed to collapse. A central concern of this project is how medieval authors navigate the failure of the ideal while preserving nostalgia for it. Some, like the Stanzaic *Morte Arthur*, are unable to reconcile the failure of the Round Table with longing for its values and end in mourning. Others, like the *Queste del Saint Graal*, resort to critique. But the culminating work of medieval Arthurian legend in English, Sir Thomas Malory's *Morte Darthur* balances longing and loss resulting in a work that allows the audience to revel in the bittersweet feeling of nostalgia, take pride in the past glory of both their nation and their knightly institution, and find hope rather than despair for the future of chivalry and the future of England.

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Chapter 1

Introduction: Reading Nostalgically

Leccherie & losengerie & loselis talis; Glotonye & grete oþis, þise arn games nowadays.

Langeland, *Piers Plowman*

Qui patriam quaerit, mortem invenit.

Ramazzini, *De morbis artificum diatriba*

There is a famous moment in Sir Thomas Malory's version of Arthurian legend in which

the action is interrupted for a meditation on love, knighthood, and the decline of chivalry. In

William Caxton's edition, it falls at the very end of Book XVIII, during which Launcelot and

Guinevere have had various misunderstandings. Eugène Vinaver moves this chapter to the

beginning of the next book (his Book IV), which tells the tale of the Knight of the Cart,

Launcelot's rescue of Guinevere from the evil Melyagraunce. Caxton titles the chapter "How

trewe love is likened to sommer." It begins with a vivid and fairly traditional description of

spring and its effect on lovers: they both "spryngith, burgenyth, buddyth, and florysshyth in lusty

dedis" (XVIII.25, Vinaver 1119).[1] In contrast, winter cools the passions and makes lovers

untrue. "Thys ys no wysedome nother no stabylité, but hit ys fyeblenes of nature and grete

disworshyp, whosomever usyth thys" (XVIII.25, Vinaver 1119). There is a lesson in this, as

Malory explains:

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[1] Quotations from Malory's *Morte Darthur* are from *The Works of Sir Thomas Malory*. 3rd ed. Ed. Eugène Vinaver. Revised by P.J.C. Field. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990. Print.

Therefore, lyke as May moneth flowryth and floryshyth in every
mannes gardyne, so in lyke wyse lat every man of worshyp florysh
hys herte in thys worlde: firste unto God, and nexte unto the joy of
them that he promysed hys feythe unto; for there was never
worshypfull man nor worshypfull woman but they loved one bettir
than anothir; and worshyp in armys may never be foyled. But
firste reserve the honoure to God, and secundely thy quarell muste
com of thy lady. And such love I calle vertuouse love.

   But nowadayes men can nat love sevennyght but they muste have all
their desyres. That love may nat endure by reson, for where they bethe
sone accorded and hasty, heete sone keelyth. And ryght so faryth the love
nowadayes, sone hote sone colde. Thys ys no stabylyté. But the olde love
was not so. For men and women coude love togydirs seven yerys, and no
lycoures lustis was betwyxte them, and than was love trouthe and
faythefulnes. And so in lyke wyse was used such love in kynge Arthurs
dayes.

   Wherefore I lykken love nowadayes unto sommer and wynter: for, lyke
as the tone ys colde and the othir ys hote, so faryth love nowadayes. And
therefore all ye that be lovers, calle unto youre remembraunce the monethe
of May, lyke as ded quene Gwenyver, for whom I make here a lytyll
mencion, that whyle she lyved she was a trew lover, and therefor she had a
good ende. (XVIII.25, Vinaver 1119-1120)

Those who quote this passage are generally interested in its seeming, and problematic,

vindication of Guinevere: Malory preemptively absolves her of blame for the tragic ending and

presents her as an example of a true lover, glossing over her unfaithfulness to the king.[2] While

Malory is primarily concerned with lovers in this passage, it should also be noted that he

attributes a knight's prowess in arms to his constancy as a lover, first to God, next to his lady.

He claims the best lovers, and therefore the best knights and ladies, lived "in kynge Arthurs

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[2] For example, Elizabeth Scala argues in "Disarming Lancelot" that Malory tries to explain away the troubling
aspects of Launcelot and Guinevere's relationship through ambiguity, but "Rather than clear up any
misunderstanding…Malory's explanations further confuse the situation" (389). She also points out that this passage
seems a direct contradition of Guinevere's own confession at the end of the *Morte Darthur*: "Thorow thys same man
and me hath all thys warre be wrought, and the deth of the most nobelest knyghtes of the world; for thorow oure
love that we have loved togydir ys my moste noble lorde slayne." Yet it is clear that Malory is intent on defending
Guinevere (and Launcelot) and holding her up as a paragon, partly by suggesting that the failure is in the readers,
"who do not understand 'such love [as was] in kynge Arthurs dayes'" (388).

dayes," and complains that "nowadays" men and women lack steadfastness and faithfulness, two essential qualities of chivalric knights and their ladyloves.

It may seem like a jaded modern or even a postmodern complaint to say that things have gotten bad nowadays: people are rude; students don't read enough; everybody is always so rushed; there is so much more violence; people have no sense of decorum. Nowadays, it seems, are never as good as the halcyon days. In fact, as the passage above demonstrates, the sentiment is hardly new. The word "nowadays," used adverbially to mean "at the present time, in contrast with the past," has its first attested usage, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary,* in Thomas Wimbledon's sermon "Redde racionem villicacionis tue," dated to approximately 1387. Thereafter it appears in the texts of the three most significant writers of the high Middle Ages, Chaucer, Langland, and Gower. "Nowadays" continues to be used frequently in both literature and sermons during the late Middle Ages, and is even used as the name of a vice character in the morality play *Mankynd*. In nearly every citation in both the *OED* and the *Middle English Dictionary*, "nowadays" carries a conservative connotation. It is not a positive or even neutral "contrast with the past"; rather, the implication is that present conditions have deteriorated relative to the past. It nearly always suggests a moral or at least value judgment on the present, as well as an idealization of the past.

The objects of these judgments are as varied as the interests of the authors. Gower mourns the lost ideals of love:

> But now men tellen natheles
> That love is fro the world departed,
> So stant the pes unevene parted
> With hem that liven now adaies (*Confessio Amantis,* Prol. 168-71);
>
> Ther ben yit upon loves Rage
> Full manye of suche nou aday

That taken wher thei take may. (*Confessio Amantis,* VIII.150-52)

Langland laments the deterioration of ethics, especially among the clergy. Here he implies that immorality by noting its consequence: "For god is deef nowadayes and deyneth vs nat to here" (*Piers Plowman,* XI.61). Chaucer finds the intelligence of most of his contemporaries to be no match for alchemists and charlatans:

> Philosophres speken so mystily
> In this craft that men kan nat come therby,
> For any wit that men han now-a-dayes. (*Canterbury Tales,*
>   "Cannon's Yeoman's Tale,"1394-96)

Romances tend to mourn the deterioration of manners, prowess, loyalty, or other values closely associated with chivalry; for example, an English translation by John Bourchier, Lord Berners, of a French *chanson de geste*, *The Boke of Duke Huon of Burdeux,* laments "Now a dayes can not be founde trew frendes as were wont to be" (252). As seen above, Malory laments the decline of faithfulness in love and the overall decline in chivalry that results. Sermons, as might be expected, worry about a perceived loss of piety: "Truliche me merveilez sore þat men dred no mor helle nowe-a-daies tan þei do."[3] Few aspects of life are immune to the charge that they were better in "days gone by" than they are "nowadays."

Though the word "nowadays," used in this sense, comes into common parlance in the fourteenth century, the sentiment is hardly unique to the Middle Ages. Citations in the *OED* entry continue through the 1990s in a similar vein as those quoted above. For example, a 1989 novel by Mary Hocking, *Irrelevant Woman*, is quoted moralizing about childrearing: "Kids are spoiled nowadays. They are brought up to think the world revolves around them." And certainly before the fourteenth century, moralists and curmudgeons alike complained that people in their

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[3] *Three Middle English Sermons from the Worcester Chapter Manuscript F.10,* edited by D. M. Grisdale, page 76.

own day were lacking in any number of ways in comparison with their ancestors or their elders. Even if they did not use the word "nowadays" to make the comparison, the sentiment certainly existed.

On one hand, this way of thinking is in line with certain strains of primitivism, as identified and explicated by Arthur O. Lovejoy and George Boas in *Primitivism and Related Ideas in Antiquity.* Primitivism is dependent on one's view of the nature of history and can come in various forms, depending on whether one sees history as finite, infinite, with or without a teleology, or cyclic. But basically it is the view that things were fundamentally better at some earlier stage in human development. "Better" can be relative: it can mean more rugged and violent or warlike. Often it means somehow closer to nature: perhaps simpler, less corrupted by technology, trade, politics, or society, more in touch with "natural instincts."[4] It can also refer back to Eden or some equivalent original paradise to which mankind has been trying to return since the Fall.

Primitivism, according to Lovejoy and Boas, is rather pessimistic. Those who express primitivistic sentiments are backward looking and tend to regard society, culture, and the human condition at large as in decline. Lovejoy and Boas do identify the "primitivistic reformer" who, suffering from

> a mood of intense dissatisfaction with some or all the
> characteristics of the civilized life of one's own time[,] will
> obviously produce in some minds a hope and an endeavor to put an
> end to them….But when it has been converted into a practical
> program it has necessarily been a program of reform wholly
> through elimination and reversion. The way to improve society is
> not to continue a development already in process, not to add to
> gains which mankind has already won, but to undo the work of

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[4] "Nature" as a term is itself fraught with difficulty because the authors mean different things by it and conceive of being "close to nature" as connoting different attributes (see pages 14-16; 447-456).

history, to scrap off from human life the accretions which have
grown upon it. (16-17)

Therefore, Lovejoy and Boas suggest that even reformers are rather pessimistic and regressive.

They are also more the exception than the rule, and their attempts at reform are rarely successful

at halting the tide of progress for long.

Primitivism, as Lovejoy and Boas demonstrate, is as old as civilization itself: it has had

"enduring roots in human nature ever since the civilizing process began" (7). This is not to

preclude strains of thought that are forward-looking, optimistic, or convinced of the general

progress and improvement of society. Nevertheless, Lovejoy and Boas amply demonstrate that

primitivism is a fundamentally human way of approaching the world, one that has been

expressed in such diverse genres as epic, philosophy, history, and poetry. Indeed, Boas

continues tracing the arc of primitivistic thought in *Primitivism and Related Ideas in the Middle*

Ages. Two subsequent volumes were originally planned, but never completed, which were to

have demonstrated the importance of primitivism to later ages.

Perhaps a more common term in everyday parlance for a backward-looking stance

occasioned by feelings of longing for bygone days is nostalgia. Nostalgia is not the same as

primitivism; for example, rather than stark pessimism, nostalgia suggests wistfulness and

longing, though a negative view of the present can certainly occasion a feeling of nostalgia for

the past. Unlike primitivism, it does not necessarily hark back to an original state, and it is not

contingent upon one's philosophy of history.[5] Like primitivism, however, it generally suggests a

moral or value judgment on the passage of time. It is the feeling that is often expressed in

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[5] Not all who theorize about nostalgia would agree. Christopher Shaw and Malcolm Chase argue that an
understanding of time that is both linear and secular is a necessary condition for nostalgia. My examples
demonstrate that this is not necessarily the case. See *The Imagined Past*, pages 2-3.

contrast to the disdain for or disappointment in "nowadays": Malory, in the passage quoted at the beginning of this chapter, is expressing nostalgia for the "old love" that existed "in kynge Arthurs dayes" and regret that "nowadayes" men have become faithless and lack "stabylyte." He simultaneously makes a value judgment on the present and expresses his wish that men and women of his own time were more like those of the past, the ideal. He desires to revisit that ideal through narrative and recreate it by learning from the narrative. This nostalgic wish is a central aspect of all Arthurian literature.

Nostalgia was originally a medical term, coined in 1688 by Johannes Hofer in his *Dissertatio Medica de Nostalgia, oder Heimwehe*. Hofer, attempting to "convert [an] emotional phenomenon into a medical phenomenon" (Starobinski 84), hit upon this Greek neologism by combining *nostos*, a word often associated with epics, such as the *Odyssey*, and meaning "a return home," with *algia*, denoting pain or longing. Thus "nostalgia" refers to a pathological longing for home. Hofer defines nostalgia as "sympathetic of an affected imagination" (381) and his definition speaks to the intimate connection he and other physicians of the time saw between the imagination and the body—or we might say between psychology and physiology. According to Hofer, nostalgia had real, dangerous physical consequences; untreated, it was almost certainly fatal. The only cure was for the patient to be returned home. Barring that, Hofer recommends various remedies common to his time—bloodletting, purgations, opiates, mercury—but even with these treatments (more likely *because of* these treatments!) the patient is likely to grow worse and eventually succumb to the ailment if he or she cannot be returned home.

Although Hofer draws his case studies from the civilian population—he discusses a student away from home to attend the university and a country girl separated from her family when she is in the hospital due to an accident—the phenomenon he describes was already

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associated with Swiss soldiers serving abroad who seemed to waste away when forced to be gone from home for long and unpredictable periods of time. Some rather ingenious physical causes for the disease were suggested. One doctor, Jean-Jacques Scheuchzer, "was convinced that nostalgia was a question of atmospheric pressure": according to Scheuchzer, when Swiss soldiers, used to higher elevations, are confronted with the heavier atmosphere of the lowlands "their blood circulates with difficulty in their small cutaneous arteries" and "the heart, on receiving less blood becomes depressed and consequently saddened. People lose sleep and appetite; soon they are overcome by a hot or a cold fever which is often fatal" (Starobinski 88). Explanations such as this started to lose favor as the theoretical pendulum swung the other way, and physicians began to consider that the mind might in fact – in the form of neuroses – exert a powerful influence over the body, instead of the other way around.

Romantics[6] were particularly interested in nostalgia and perhaps responsible for its gradual shift in meaning.[7] The concept of nostalgia fit in well with the Romantic interest in melancholy and memory. Kant recognized something the physicians of the eighteenth century did not: "what a person wishes to recover is not so much the actual *place* where he passed his childhood but his youth itself. He is not straining toward something which he can repossess, but

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[6] Medieval studies in general owes a great debt to nineteenth century nostalgia: the romantic fascination with all things medieval, particularly Arthurian legend, resulted in, on the one hand, new versions of Arthurian tales, and on the other the foundation of medieval scholarship as we know it.

[7] A few recent studies have tried to claim nostalgia for the eighteenth and/or nineteenth century, arguing that the nostalgic point of view developed during that time. See for example, *Stranded in the Present* by Peter Fritzsche (2004); *Nostalgia in Transition, 1780-1917* by Linda M. Austin (2007); *A Careful Longing: The Poetics and Problems of Nostalgia* by Aaron Santesso (2006); *Home and Its Dislocations in Nineteenth-Century France*, edited by Suzanne Nash (1993). See also Marcos Piason Natali's "History and the Politics of Nostalgia," where he argues that "nostalgia is a distinctly modern word, an idea dependent on a way of worlding that is distinctive to modernity" (10). Although the word may have been coined in the seventeenth century and taken on its current connotations in the nineteenth, surely the sentiment existed earlier. Indeed, the word "nostalgia" has begun to take on critical force and has been applied to many periods before the nineteenth century –for a recent example of nostalgia's applicability to the Middle Ages, see *The Aesthetics of Nostalgia: Historical Representation in Old English Verse* by Renee R. Trilling (2009).

toward an age which is forever beyond his reach. Back in his native land, he is still unhappy, for he finds that people and things no longer conform to his idea of what they used to be" (Starobinski 94).[8] Native songs are not trapped in the sinews of the brain causing a "sticky serum" to impede digestion, as Hofer would have it (387); rather, songs, certain tastes or smells remind one of childhood, an idealized time that cannot be recaptured.

By the twentieth century, nostalgia had ceased to be a legitimate medical condition, except sporadically in psychiatry (Starobinski 101). Its more poeticized connotations, however, entered common parlance and eventually critical jargon. Today, we rarely think of nostalgia as, specifically, homesickness. Instead nostalgia now suggests *temporal* rather than *spatial* longing. In particular, as Kant recognized, the longing suffered by a nostalgic is more often for childhood than it is for home. But nostalgia is not limited to the individual's past. It can have broader societal manifestations as well.[9] Just as "collective memory"[10] suggests that a society or culture has a shared set of stories and a common past (real and imagined) that are cultivated and passed down by the group, so too collective nostalgia can have a powerful influence on a society's present, ideologically and even propagandistically.[11] It is in this sense that I will be primarily interested in the nostalgic point of view: its relation to history, to collective memory, to the development of nationhood, and finally to ideology.

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[8] Starobinski is paraphrasing Kant's *Anthropologie in pragmatischer Hinsicht*, 1798, I. XXXII.

[9] Natali shows how Kant would have had little patience for this kind of nostalgia since it contradicts his view that society was "unmistakably progressing" not "fall[ing] from an ideal golden age to an imperfect state, as the nostalgic outlook suggests (12). See "History and the Politics of Nostalgia," especially pages 11-13.

[10] The term and the exploration of the phenomenon come from Maurice Halbwachs, *Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire,* 1925 (translated into English as *On Collective Memory* by Lewis A. Coser).

[11] Fred Davis makes the distinction between between collective and private nostalgia in *Yearning for Yesterday*; see page 222; Janelle Wilson talks about public and private nostalgia in *Nostalgia: Sanctuary of Meaning*, page 30-31.

The past that a nostalgic longs for is necessarily idealized and generally imagined: it "has a utopian dimension" (Boym xiv), but that utopianism is superimposed on an imagined past rather than an imagined future. The relation to time is not so simple, however: the longing for the past carries with it a desire to recreate the ideal time in the present or work towards the conceived of ideal in the future. In this way propaganda and ideology are intimately connected with collective nostalgia – the objects of longing reveal a great deal about present beliefs. In *On Longing*, Susan Stewart explains:

> Nostalgia, like any form of narrative is always ideological: the past it seeks has never existed except as narrative, and hence, always absent, that past continually threatens to reproduce itself as a felt lack. Hostile to history and its invisible origins, and yet longing for an impossibly pure context of lived experience at a place of origin, nostalgia wears a distinctly utopian face, a face that turns toward a future-past, a past which has only ideological reality. This point of desire which the nostalgic seeks is in fact the absence that is the very generating mechanism of desire. (23)

How that absence is filled – what the object of nostalgia is for a particular culture, society, class, or community – can tell us a great deal about how its members imagined the best versions of themselves. As Stewart points out, this is done narratively: stories, especially nostalgic stories, are our best source not of "true," factual history, but of the aspirations of the authors and consumers of those stories. Janelle Wilson puts it another way: "What we are nostalgic for reveals what we value, what we deem worthwhile and important" (26). In the case of Arthurian literature, though the nature of the longed-for ideals changes over the course of centuries of retelling, the expression of longing for the ideal as such remains constant. For example, the nature of Arthur's role as ideal king changes, but he is always the best representation of whatever the ideal of kingship is at that moment. The same is true of knights and ladies, who are typically described in the superlative. Therefore, by exploring what is represented as ideal in a particular

text, we can learn, perhaps not what kingship or knighthood was in practice, but what kings and

knights were expected to work towards or what they could be at their best.

In *The Future of Nostalgia*, Svetlana Boym distinguishes two distinct strains of nostalgia:

restorative and reflective. The first "puts emphasis on *nostos* and proposes to rebuild the lost

home and patch up the memory gaps"; the second "dwells in *algia*, in longing and loss, the

imperfect process of remembrance" (41). Boym cautions that the "[t]wo kinds of nostalgia are

not absolute types, but rather tendencies, ways of giving shape to meaning" (41). In the

retellings of Arthurian legend, both are at play, though in slightly different ways. It is therefore

useful to give a brief summary of Boym's distinction between them and suggest how they can be

applied to medieval romance.

Reflective nostalgics are content with remembering the past, even the past-ness of the

past. They linger "on ruins, the patina of time and history, in the dreams of another place and

another time" (41). Boym explains:

> Reflective nostalgia does not pretend to rebuild the mythical place
> called home; it is 'enamored of distance, not of the referent itself.'
> This type of nostalgic narrative is ironic, inconclusive and
> fragmentary. Nostalgics of [this] type are aware of the gap between
> identity and resemblance; the home is in ruins or, on the contrary,
> has been just renovated and gentrified beyond recognition. This
> defamiliarization and sense of distance drives them to tell their
> story, to narrate the relationship between past, present and
> future….The past is not made in the image of the present or seen as
> foreboding of some present disaster; rather, the past opens up a
> multitude of potentialities, nonteleological possibilities of historic
> development. (50)

Here we might recognize something of what lies behind the creative impulse of those authors retelling Arthurian tales. Lamenting the inferiority of knighthood in their own time, they fulfill their nostalgic desire for the chivalry of old—or rather for an imagined ideal of chivalry— through the act of narrating itself. But if Camelot is the "home" they long for, there is no denying that it is a home in ruins; after all, the death of Arthur and the destruction of the Round Table are inescapable parts of the mythos. Nevertheless many versions revel in the deeds of ancient knights, particularly the romances of Chrétien de Troyes and the long prose treatment of Sir Thomas Malory.

Restorative nostalgia is the more patently ideological of the two types Boym identifies. These nostalgics "do not think of themselves as nostalgic; they believe that their project is about truth. This kind of nostalgia characterizes national and nationalist revivals all over the word, which engage in the antimodern myth-making of history by means of a return to national symbols and myths and occasionally, through swapping conspiracy theories" (41). In its extreme, restorative nostalgia is behind many pernicious movements and conspiracy theories. It plays on cultural identity, reinforces (invented) traditions, and promulgates a "worldview [that] is based on a single transhistorical plot, a Manichaean battle of good and evil and the inevitable scapegoating of the mythical enemy…. 'Home,' imagine extremist conspiracy theory adherents, is forever under siege, requiring defense against the plotting enemy" (43). Boym argues that this mentality, which creates an "us" versus "them" scenario, is at the root of "much of twentieth-century violence, from pogroms to Nazi and Stalinist terror to McCarthy's red scare," all of which "operated in response to conspiracy theories in the name of a restored homeland" (43).

Though ideological, restorative nostalgia is not necessary always so pernicious. It does, however, seek to recreate the past as it was or as it was believed to have been: "Nostalgia is an

ache of temporal distance and displacement. Restorative nostalgia takes care of both of these symptoms. Distance is compensated by intimate experience and the availability of a desired object. Displacement is cured by a return home, preferably a collective one. Never mind if it's not your home; by the time you reach it, you will have already forgotten the difference" (Boym 44-45). We will see how some versions of the story of Arthur, such as the *Queste del Saint Graal*, capitalize on the nostalgic associations of the legend in order to further a particular ideology. More generally, in this type of nostalgia we can recognize the powerful influence romance had over late medieval audiences. For a public moved and fascinated by the stories of adventuring knights, it became fashionable to recreate episodes from chivalric, and especially Arthurian, literature.

Take, for example, the tournament, where knights gathered to joust ceremonially with one another for the sake of honor and sportsmanship. Even today we closely associate knighthood with jousting and tourneying, and many of us have even taken part in collective nostalgia for them: no Renaissance fair is complete without a recreation of a ceremonial joust, where the audience is typically asked to take part by cheering and booing the various knights. You can indulge your nostalgia any time of the year at the restaurant Medieval Times, the entire business model of which revolves around our association of knighthood with tournaments.[12] It turns out, however, that the tournament developed the way it did from the start, at least in part, because of restorative nostalgia. Larry Benson demonstrates, in "The Tournament in the Romances of Chrétien de Troyes and *L'Histoire de Guillaume Le Maréchal*," that tournaments only took on the form we recognize today *after* romances depicted them that way. There had

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[12] Recent interest in modern medievalism has caused such events to receive critical attention for what they say about our interest in and understanding of the medieval past. See, for example, Louise D'Arcens, *Comic Medievalism: Laughing at the Middle Ages*.

been tournaments of a sort before they became an integral part of romantic literature, but they

were "crude bloody affairs, forbidden by the Church and sternly suppressed by any central

authority powerful enough to enforce its ban" (1). They resembled war more than sport:

confused mêlées with two sides fighting one another outright—no single combat here!—with the

object of capturing and ransoming prisoners. They could be bloody affairs, especially since

participants used real, sharpened weapons. In his romances, Chrétien de Troyes, while retaining

some recognizable details from real life tournaments, "purified the sport of many of its most

objectionable elements" (Benson 12), making the object of the tournament honor rather than

booty, having only knights participate, and depicting only bloodless one-on-one combat. As

such, they became "elegant social affairs" (Benson 16), rather than pitched battles, with

established rules and safety measures such as blunted weapons. The effect, for readers who

recognized the degenerated outlines of contemporary tournaments in the orderly and civilized

description of Chrétien and his imitators, was potentially restoratively nostalgic:

> Chrétien's fictional tournaments thus had at least the potentiality of
> affecting his audience's attitude toward real tournaments, for the
> central fiction of Chrétien's fictions is that they are not fiction.
> Like all romancers, Chrétien presents his works as true histories,
> based on ancient sources that he, a mere clerk, has transmitted
> unchanged. His works show, then, that the tournament is not a
> simple sport but an ancient and honorable custom that
> contemporary knights share with the knights of the Round Table.
> To participate in a tournament is to do exactly as Arthur's knights
> had done in chivalry's greatest age. (Benson 17)

As descriptions of tournaments following Chrétien's model became more common in romance,

and eventually so closely associated with knighthood as to be an indispensable *topos* at the

center of the action, rather than on the periphery as they were in Chrétien, actual tournaments

began to take on an air of respectability, becoming an "expression of knightly virtue" (Benson

18), though in practice changing only slowly. Bit by bit kings and knights with Arthurian pretentions would come to see their own amusements as a vulgar and even immoral deterioration of what was once noble and courtly.[13] Eventually they would try to recapture what was thought to be older and better by imitating the tournaments of romance. By the thirteenth century, knights were "self-consciously re-enacting scenes from romance" (Benson 24):

> Chrétien's tournaments had been bloodless and decorous affairs, and now in the early thirteenth century rebated, dulled weapons are in use, much to the disgust of older knights like Jean d'Erlée. Chrétien's tournaments had been orderly, and now elaborate rules are being formulated, so that, as it seemed to another old-fashioned observer, Henri de Laon, one would soon have to be a lawyer to enter a tournament. Most tournaments remained brutal and bloody affairs, and the provisions of the Statute of Arms show that this was the case well into the second half of the thirteenth century; but the signs of change were there and the change was in the direction defined by Chrétien's romances. This first became apparent at the beginning of the thirteenth century, when the virtues Chretien had attributed to his fictional tournaments were associated with real tournaments. The sport began to be regarded as an essential activity of those who aspired to knightly virtue—a position it would occupy down to the time of the great festivals of chivalry that characterized aristocratic life in the later Middle Ages and early Renaissance, when former fabulous story got credit, and Bevis was believed. (Benson 24)

More stylized tournaments were often designated "Round Tables" in explicit imitation of Arthurian romance. Though Matthew Paris, a thirteenth-century historian, makes a distinction

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[13] Johan Huizinga is rather more cynical in his view of the evolution of tournaments, seeing the introduction of an Arthurian "source" for tournaments as a way of dressing up a show of bloodlust, pride, and lust and making acceptable what had been forbidden by the church – in short, a sort of public relations campaign for tourneying: "How could…the cult of the body, of the knightly sports, courtly life, pride and the avidity for office and honor, and the mesmerizing mystery of love, how could these be made noble and elevated after faith had scorned and condemned them?...[O]ne dressed everything in the beautiful light of the old fantastic ideals" (41).

between vulgar tournaments and chivalric Round Tables, the real differences are slight.[14]

Anthony W. Annunziata defines a Round Table thusly:

> [It] was sponsored either by a king or, occasionally, by a very great
> noble, and it combined two features of chivalric ceremony: in the
> field there was a tournament, an opportunity for knights to show
> military prowess, or *fortitudo*, in arms; in the hall there was a feast,
> an opportunity to show regal magnificence, also an expression of
> *fortitudo*. The term "round table" thus signified a combination of
> ritual fighting and feasting sponsored by a king or great lord of
> regal status and usually held in imitation of one of the chief
> festivals of Arthurian romance. Participation was restricted to
> selected guests, who were specifically invited to join the round
> table for the ceremonies involved. (39)

The chief distinctions between a Round Table and a mere tournament, therefore, seem to be the

level of exclusivity and opulence—more pageant than mêlée—and the more explicit modeling on

Arthurian matter. Perhaps the most well known and extravagant of these festivities was that held

by Roger Mortimer at Kenilworth in 1279: a hundred knights and as many ladies attended and a

golden lion was awarded to the best knight. Edward I was a particularly avid patron of Arthurian

reenactments, sponsoring several Round Tables to mark important occasions, including military

victories against Wales and Scotland, and perhaps his second marriage.[15] Nor was the celebration

of Round Tables a uniquely English affair; they were also held all over Europe: Cyprus and

Beirut, both in 1223; Spain in 1269, 1286, and 1290; Bruges in 1300; Paris in 1332—to name

just a few.[16]

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[14] See Ruth Huff Cline, "The Influence of Romances on Tournaments of the Middle Ages," page 206. Matthew
refers specifically to a Round Table held at Wallenden in 1252.

[15] See R.S. Loomis "Edward I, Arthurian Enthusiast" for a fuller account of Edward's interest in Arthur.

[16] See Cline, "The Influence of Romances of Tournaments of the Middle Ages," and Loomis, "Edward I, Arthurian
Enthusiast" and "Chivalric and Dramatic Imitations of Arthurian Romances."

Tournaments, at least, seem to have served a few purposes that modern audiences can identify with or at least recognize: they were useful as training exercises or to keep restless knights both occupied and in fighting form; they acted as a kind of spectator sport, entertainment for the whole court as well as competition for the knights; and in their later form they satisfied a desire for pageantry and ostentation.[17] But other forms of imitating romance are harder to explain because they seem to be mere empty ceremony and rather pointless. That is, except for the fact that they are in imitation of what real life knights believed they were *supposed* to be doing based on the tales of knightly behavior represented in romance, particularly Arthurian romance. The best examples are the *pas d'armes* and the elaborate oaths sworn at great feasts.

A well-known early example of an Arthurian imitator engaging in *pas d'armes* is that of the quixotic Ulrich von Liechtenstein, a knight and *minnesänger*, who in 1240 set off through Styria and Austria seeking adventures and offering to joust whatever knights he happened to meet. According to his no doubt embellished narrative of his adventures, *Frauendienst* (1255), he did this in the character of King Arthur and in honor of his ladylove.[18] Those knights who were able to break three spears in a row against him he admitted to his retinue and they in turn adopted Arthurian *noms de guerre*. This example is notable for the fact that the knights are consciously stylizing themselves as Arthurian characters and are play-acting situations straight out of Arthurian romance: roaming the land seeking adventures, offering to joust random knights, holding a tournament referred to as a "Round Table," and using damsels as messengers.

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[17] Huizinga sees this last as the most important function. He argues that, faced with grim realities, medieval people (particularly aristocrats, who could afford to do so) indulged in ceremony such as the kinds being explored here as a means of escape and a way of fulfilling a "yearn[ing] for a more beautiful life" (30): "If earthly reality is so hopelessly miserable and the denial of the world so difficult, this leaves us to color life with lustrous tones, to live in a dreamland of shining fantasies, and to soften reality in the ecstasy of the ideal" (37-8). Thus men make "an art form of life" (43), in these cases by imitating art in life.

[18] Loomis, in "Chivalric and Dramatic Imitations of Arthurian Romance," includes a useful summary of *Frauendienst*, page 83-4.

Ulrich travelled around seeking his adventures; other knights preferred to announce their intention to hold a *pas d'armes* and wait for challengers to come to them. R.S. Loomis describes one such example:

> In 1389, according to an anonymous life of the Mareschal de Boucicaut, he and Renault de Roye and the Seigneur de Sampy proclaimed throughout England, Spain, Germany, and Italy that they would meet all comers between the twentieth of March and the twentieth of April at St. Ingelvert near Calais. They pitched their tents in a fair plain, and each hung on a great elm before the tents two shields, one of peace and one of war, and above these shields he hung his arms. Each challenger also placed ten spears, five sharp and five blunt, beside the branch on which his shields were suspended. Any knight who wished to joust would approach the tree, sound a horn which hung there, touch with his lance either the shield of peace or the shield of war, and the combat would then take place either with the pointed or the blunt spears. A large and fair pavilion was also provided for the visiting knights to arm or repose in, and there was an abundant supply of excellent wines and food for their entertainment 'comme pour tenir table rounde à tous venans tout le dict temps durant.' Owing to the proximity of Calais many English lords came to the jousting, including John de Holland, half-brother of Richard II, Thomas de Percy, and the Earl of Derby, and we are informed that they had much the worst of it, while the three French challengers were not even wounded in any encounter.[19] ("Chivalric and Dramatic Imitations of Arthurian Romance" 87-8)

According to the life of Marêchal de Boucicaut the only motive for this action—indeed any of his deeds—was "the great desire which he had to be valiant and to acquire honor, he had no other care except to think how he could spend his beautiful youth in chivalrous pursuits."

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[19] This feat of arms is also described by Froissart in his chronicle.

Other *pas d'armes* followed, some with even more elaborate fictions, as in the *Pas de la Belle Pélerine* of 1449.[20] The pretense was that the Belle Pélerine had been rescued from robbers during a pilgrimage by a certain knight who had agreed to be her escort on her travels as soon as he had fulfilled his vow to guard the pass at the Croix de la Pélerine. Knights were therefore invited to joust this knight and thus release him from his vow. Like the *pas d'armes* at St. Ingelvert, swords were hung in trees that challengers would then touch to indicate their choice of arms. There was also a horn to blow to announce a challenge. While the knights in this case did not take on Arthurian names, "they did apparently adopt the heraldry of the Round Table, which was then being codified" (Loomis, "Chivalric and Dramatic Imitations of Arthurian Romance" 89).[21]

Another pseudo-Arthurian *topos* that came to be imitated in real life was the elaborate oath. These are somewhat mysterious, ceremonial affairs with analogues in romance, but rarely an identifiable source. Often the oath was sworn, inexplicably, over some type of fowl. The general aims might be understandable but the specific terms were often impracticable at best. In 1306 at the feast celebrating the knighting of Prince Edward, son of Edward I, "two servitors bore in on a large tray two swans covered with a network of gold. First of all, the King vowed before God and the swans that he would avenge on Robert Bruce the wrong which he had done to God and the church, but after that would bear arms no more against Christian men, but would

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[20] Another well documented and notably elaborate *pas d'armes* was that of the *fontaine des pleurs*, this one following many of the conventions of the ones discussed here, but adding a unicorn for good measure. There are plenty of other, less well-documented examples as well – see Maurice Keen's chapter "Pageantry, Tournies and Solemn Vows" in *Chivalry* (especially page 203). The reader might also be interested to know that fascination with the *pas d'armes* continues: medieval reenactors held a recreation of the *Pas de la Belle Pélerine* in 2009, videos from which are readily available online. See also: http://willscommonplacebook.blogspot.com/2009/07/recreation-of-pas-de-la-belle-pelerine.html

[21] Loomis refers us to Bibl. Nat. fr. 12597 and Brit. Mus. Royal 19 B ix. He also, again, includes a useful summary of the primary sources for the *Pas de la Belle Pélerine*, Matthieu de Coussy and Olivier de la Marche (88).

go to the Holy Land, never to return. Thereafter, Prince Edward vowed that he would not sleep two nights in the same place but would help in the fulfillment of his father's undertaking against the Scots" (Loomis, "Edward I, Arthurian Enthusiast" 122). In Chrétien de Troyes' *Conte del Graal,* Perceval swears a similar oath, never to sleep in the same place two nights in a row until he achieves his quest. Vowing scenes are also important elements in the *Prose Lancelot* and the *Queste del Saint Graal*. The significance of swearing on birds is unclear, but it certainly caught on: vows were taken at various times on pheasants, herons, peacocks, and egrets with a variety of austerities promised until the oath's fulfillment: keeping one eye closed, never eating sitting down, wearing a golden or iron ring on the leg suggesting bondage, refraining from sleeping in a bed, abstaining from certain foods or wine, and so forth.[22]

So serious and nuanced were the attempts to recreate the chivalry of romance (and supposedly history) that a secondary body of literature grew up to instruct knights in how to attain the ideal, including chivalric handbooks, biographies, and reference material, such as the manuscript already mentioned cataloguing Arthurian heraldry. Several chivalric biographies have been cited in passing above as source material for romantic feats of arms. Noteworthy examples of chivalric biography include that of William Marshal, a twelfth-century English knight who made his fortune by his arms, and the fifteenth-century French biographies of Lalain, Boucicaut, du Guesclin, and Bayart, in addition to shorter portraits of worthy real-life knights in Froissart's work.[23] Just as knightly deeds of arms strove to imitate those depicted in romances, so too chivalric biographies consciously styled themselves after their fictional models. The line between fact and fiction is nebulous and difficult to determine when it comes to tales of knightly

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[22] See Johan Huizinga, *The Autumn of the Middle Ages*, pages 97-103 for a fuller description of these examples.

[23] See Richard Barber's chapter "Chivalric Biographies and Handbooks," pages 144-155 in *The Knight and Chivalry*.

adventure: romances present themselves as historical; biographies deliberately romanticize. The "truth" is at best slippery. Fortunately, for our purposes here, it hardly matters. What is important is that real life knights wanted to appear—and were presented by their biographers— as ideal knights in precisely the same ways as knights from romances (who were anyway thought to be "real life" too, simply more ancient and therefore more exemplary). They were engaging in a careful program of restorative nostalgia: adopting the customs and values of what they believed to be a more ancient and pure form of their institution (in this case knighthood) and attempting to recreate it in their own time.

Chivalry handbooks catered to those looking to study the knightly arts; indeed *The Book of the Ordre of Chyvalry* makes a case that just as clerks study the sciences in school, so too those aiming to be knights should study chivalry, learning from both experienced knights and books. The author even suggests that schools of chivalry would be a good way to pass on the ideals of knighthood. The book was originally written in Catalan by Ramón Lull in the late thirteenth century, but was translated into many languages, including an English version commissioned by Caxton some two hundred years later. Manuals such as this one were written on the assumption that chivalry was in decline and needed to be reinvigorated. Authors imply that knights have forgotten or abandoned chivalric ideals and therefore need a handbook to remind them of what it means to be a good knight. Both "the author and his translators, in their different ages, all look back regretfully to a bygone Golden Age of Chivalry," which the editor of Caxton's version, Alfred T. P. Byles, suggests was "the period of the Crusades," but based on Caxton's epilogue, which I will return to, might just as easily—and perhaps more likely, considering knights of the crusades hardly measured up to Lull's ideal—be the legendary times of King Arthur (xxxviii). Lull complains "Butt alle the knyghtes now Iniuryous and prowd, ful

of wychednesse, be not worthy to Chyualrye, but oughten to be reputed for nought" (44.12) and

"The knyghtes Iniuryous and warryours that now ben dysordeyne the ordre of chyualry" (46.2, as

quoted in Byles xxxvii). Sir Gilbert Hay, in his "free paraphrase and expansion" of Lull (Byles

xxxv), likewise criticizes knights of his time, particularly in comparison to their predecessors:

"Thus after mentioning the Crusading knights, who fought in the Holy Land, he adds caustically:

'But full few now dois that.' He thinks that if oppressing the helpless were part of a knight's

duty, more would enter the Order; 'for because that the ordre is founded upon lautee, curtaisy,

liberalitee, lufe and pitee, many of thame that beris the said ordre irkis tharof in the warld that

now is'" (Byles xxxvii). The purpose of the handbook, then, is to combat the decline in the

standards of knighthood by reasserting the ideals, believed to have come from an earlier age, but

in fact based more on romances than reality.

Caxton appends his view of the state of chivalry to the end of *The Book of the Ordre of*

Chyualry, giving a clear statement of the role books, whether handbooks or romances, can play

in salvaging an institution he sees as in decline. Of course, as a man who made his livelihood

selling books, it is no small wonder he is trying to promote them to people unaccustomed to

owning more than a few volumes, if that. On the other hand, his passionate interest in the

integrity of knighthood—also present in his preface to Malory, though it is even more

pronounced here—seems more genuine than mere self-promotion. It is a stirring passage and

worth quoting at some length:

> [This] book is not requysyte to euery comyn man to haue / but to
> noble gentylmen that by their vertu entende to come & entre in to
> the noble ordre of chyualry / the whiche in these late dayes hath
> ben vsed according to this booke here to fore wreton but forgeten /
> and thexersytees of chyualry / not vsed / honoured / ne excercysed
> / as hit hath ben in auncyent tyme / at whiche tyme the noble actes

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of the knyghtes of Englond that vsed chyualry were renomed
thurgh the vnyuersal world / as for to speke to fore thynearnacion
of Jhesu Cryste where were there euer ony lyke to brenius and
belynus that from the grete Brytayne now called Englond vnto
Rome & ferre beyonde conquered many Royammes and londes /
whos noble actes remayne in thold hystoryes of the Romayns /
And syth the Incarnacion of oure lord / byhold that noble kyng of
Brytayne kyng Arthur with al the noble knyȝtes of the round table /
whos noble actes & noble chyualry of his knyghtes / occupye so
many large volumes / that is a world / or as thing incredible to
byleue / O ye knyghtes of Englond where is the custome and vsage
of noble chyualry that was vsed in tho dayes / what do ye now / but
go to the baynes & playe att dyse And some not wel aduysed vse
not honest and good rule ageyn all ordre of knyghthode / leue this /
leue it and rede the noble volumes of saynt graal of lancelot / of
galaad / of Trystram / of perse forest / of percyual / of gawayn / &
many mo / Ther shall ye see manhode / curtosye & gentylnesse.
(123-4)

Caxton goes on to list a number of real-life knights worthy of emulation, mostly former kings

and a few other men of action. He reasserts his criticism of knights of his own time—"Allas

what doo ye / but slepe & take ease / are ar al disordred fro chyualry" (123)—and wonders how

many knights there really are in the realm who could be ready for battle at a moment's notice.

He urges the king to call regular tournaments for the exercise of his knights and suggests he

distribute this book to his noblemen to remind them of their duty. He concludes by dedicating

the work to the king, Richard III.

It should be noted here that Caxton attributes ancient origins to chivalry, even claiming it

was practiced before the incarnation. Myth, legend, pseudohistory and history are intertwined in

a way typical of medieval writing. But the most emphasis by far is on the examples provided by

the knights of Arthurian legend, whose tales fill so many volumes Caxton seems hardly able to

credit it.[24] Clearly these were men of action, and knights of Caxton's time would do well to leave their idleness and follow the example set by Arthur and his men. The first step in doing so is reading about their adventures in the "noble volumes." The second is to imitate the deeds found therein, like tournaments, which Caxton mentions specifically.

What we see in all these examples, then, is that the strongest statements of the purpose of romance as a model to be imitated come from readers, like Caxton, who nostalgically want to recreate the supposed past glories of chivalry in their present time. The handbooks and chivalric biographies demonstrate the lengths to which this restorative nostalgia was taken, when consumers of romance used romantic conventions as models for life. Both types of nostalgia identified by Boym are evident in Arthurian literature, then: the reflective mode can be seen in the impulse to narrate the legends over and over; the restorative mode in the impulse to imitate those tales in life and the attempt to recreate the lost Golden Age of chivalry that never was.

In the last several decades there has been increasing interest in nostalgia as a critical term. This is perhaps fitting for the advent of a new millennium, since endings and beginnings have a tendency to inspire in us the desire to look back, reflect on the past, wonder how it was we got to where we are, and long for what we remember as simpler times. In our own nostalgia for the past, perhaps, we are becoming more accepting of the nostalgic attitude as a legitimate human response to present anxieties and dissatisfaction, a way of organizing and incorporating our past into our present, and a source of individual and group identity. Previously "nostalgic" was often used pejoratively: to wax nostalgic was to be naïve, to lack a critical perspective on the past,

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[24] It is unclear if Caxton is questioning the amount of writing on Arthur or the truth of the stories. He expresses some doubts about the latter in his preface to Malory, but is argued out of his doubt by some "noble jentylmen" who tell him that "in hym that shold say or thynke that there was never suche a kyng callyd Arthur myght wel be aretted grete folye and blyndenesse, for he sayd that there were many evydences of the contrarye," which he goes on to enumerate (see Vinaver, cxliv).

perhaps even to be anti-progress.[25] Although this sense is still frequently implied, it seems that

we are slowly coming to terms with the importance of the nostalgic gaze. The increased interest

in nostalgia in literary criticism reflects recognition of the importance of human longing and its

influence on the way stories are told: they are generally constructed to awaken a longing in the

audience. Identifying with a character or a situation is itself a kind of longing. In that sense, all

fiction, all stories are to some degree nostalgic. Perhaps that has not always been recognized

because the way the longing is evoked does not always appeal to us: we do not see Achilles first

petulant, later enraged and long for his brand of heroics in our time. In Arthurian legend, we are

perhaps interested in and a little bewildered by knights endlessly traipsing around the

countryside, fighting any other knight who happens by. We do not read about Arthur sacking

Metz and wish we could have been there to take part in the pillaging. But that is precisely how

the stories beg to be read. They are records of the values of their time, praising and condemning

the actions of their heroes as appropriate to inspire their readers to long for their particular brand

of greatness. As Linda Hutcheon points out, "nostalgia is not something you 'perceive' *in* an

object; it is what you 'feel' when two different temporal moments, past and present, come

together for you and, often, carry considerable emotional weight. In both cases, it is the element

of response—of active participation, both intellectual and affective—that makes for the power."

We are unlikely to have the same affective response to twelfth-, thirteenth-, fourteenth- and

fifteenth-century literature as those living at the time. Likewise, we will not have the same

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[25] "Ersatz, vulgar, demeaning, misguided, inauthentic, sacrilegious, retrograde, reactionary, criminal, fraudulent, sinister, morbid" as well as "self-serving, chauvinist, right-wring"—these are just some of the things nostalgics have been accused of, according to David Lowenthal ("Nostalgia Tells It Like It Wasn't" 27). Defenses of nostalgia and overviews of its troubled history as a critical concept have become almost as common as attacks. In addition to Lowenthal's "Nostalgia Tells it Like it Wasn't" and *The Past is a Foreign Country,* see Marcos Piason Natali's "History and the Politics of Nostalgia," Jackson Lears's "Looking Backward: In Defense of Nostalgia," Stuart Tannock's "Nostalgia Critique," and Janelle Wilson, *Nostalgia: Sanctuary of Meaning.* Christopher Lasch is one of the more strident critics of nostalgia: "nostalgia," he says, "undermines the ability to make intelligent use of the past" (*The True and Only Heaven* 82)—see *The True and Only Heaven*, especially chapter 3, "Nostalgia: The Abdication of Memory," pages 82-119, and "The Politics of Nostalgia."

response as an audience who still practiced chivalry would have had at hearing tales of those who represent its ideal manifestation. In this way, nostalgia is not stable. Still, we will be able to detect its presence in the attitude of the authors and in the values they present in their texts.

I understand nostalgia, then, as a kind of longing. There is some bitterness to it, since the nostalgic is aware that what they long for cannot be recovered and because their longing is likely to be occasioned by a sense that their present circumstances are deficient in some way. However, it is not entirely pessimistic or defeatist. There is also sweetness to nostalgic revelry. The nostalgic finds pleasure in remembering and sometimes endeavoring to recreate the past. Those attempts at recreation are, of course, doomed to fall short of the nostalgic's ideal image. This is perhaps why narrative is altogether a more satisfying form of nostalgia than recreation.

What this study aims to do, then, is to investigate as far as possible the evidence that the texts treated here provide for a nostalgic reading. In what ways do they invite their audience to long for what they are representing? What values do they treat nostalgically? Medieval versions of Arthurian legend have something special to offer this kind of study for several reasons. First, they deal with a distant, mythical past and could therefore be freely reinterpreted and reshaped without the burden of actual history to interfere. Conversely, the general outline of the story remains fairly stable, so we can see how different authors work within the established framework to alter subtly its values to suit their aims. The fact that there are so many extant versions of Arthurian tales, written in various genres and across centuries, gives us an opportunity to investigate how the object of nostalgia, in this case chivalry, changes over time; this in turn suggests a great deal about the values and ideals of the society producing and enjoying the tales.

A central aim of this study will be to explore what is at stake ideologically in this nostalgia for chivalry. What a culture finds nostalgic and what those in power sanction as ideals worthy of nostalgia can educate us about the values of that culture. The object of nostalgia in the Arthurian tradition is always the ideals of kingship, knighthood, and chivalry, but the definition of those ideals changes over time as the notions of kingship and the role of knighthood evolve. Because Arthurian legend is "not encumbered with historical facts or religious convictions" (Allen 1), audiences and authors are free to reinterpret and retell the stories as it suits their ideological framework. Therefore, we shall see that Geoffrey of Monmouth, who first gave shape to the legend as we know it, portrays Arthur as primarily a warrior and military leader: such was the role of early kings. In later romances "the king is not one who does, but one who had others do for him" (Allen 7)—reflecting the changing role of kingship. Finally, "In the days when people had great kings before them, Arthur represented what a contemporary king could be, an idealization that was both flattering to the courts and a model for emulation. Today, Arthur represents what kings should or could have been" (Allen 9).

The following chapters, then, will consider the ways in which these texts express nostalgia for certain ideals that are perceived as being in decline, and also how they play a role in creating or perpetuating a particular ideal or ideology. While not interchangeable, these terms as they apply to reading Arthurian literature nostalgically are closely connected. The ideology of chivalry, as a religious, political or social belief system especially as it came to be sanctioned by those in positions of power, is promulgated by the portraits of ideal knights and kings whom readers are exhorted to take as examples. The ideal becomes a tool to spread the ideology. As Helen Fulton notes, "Arthurian literature of all ages and in all forms is effectively a site of ideological struggle, a place where competing viewpoints engage in complex dialectics,

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interrogating contemporary concerns. However far in the past the literature is situated, it inevitably inscribes within itself the anxieties of the present" (1-2). By considering Arthurian texts in roughly chronological order, it will be possible to demonstrate how the legend develops and changes in concert with a developing and changing society, illuminating the "ideological struggle[s]" to which Fulton refers. While it would be foolish to credit chivalric literature with too much influence in realms such as politics and even everyday life, it is already clear from the above that romances did have a profound effect on what we might call the fashion or the ceremonial aspects of noble life. They also profoundly influenced, I hope to show, the idea or conception of knighthood; that is, what it meant to be a knight.

Arthurian texts pose a special challenge that will complicate and, I hope, enrich this study of their nostalgic tone. Despite the very obvious and pervasive nostalgia for the chivalry displayed and the mourning for its decline, the Round Table itself is an utter failure. The fellowship is broken, loyalties are betrayed, and to a man the knights perish, including King Arthur. Each author who takes up Arthurian matter must navigate this paradoxical nature of the Arthurian myth and find a way to preserve the characters as ideals of chivalry when the audience knows that the inevitable end, whether the individual tale narrates the *morte* of Arthur or not, is failure and destruction.

I will begin my investigation of Arthurian texts in chapter two with the chronicle that provides us with the first full portrait of Arthur as the heroic king of the Britons: Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia regum Britanniae*. Geoffrey establishes the plot of Arthur's life story, which in its general outlines remains relatively stable. Geoffrey is also responsible for establishing the nostalgia inherent to the tale that it will never completely shed, even in those versions that question, criticize, or parody the nostalgic outlook. The third chapter will consider

the shift in ideology that is evident in the new and developing genre of romance. Here I will discuss Arthur and his knights as depicted by continental romancers, specifically the earliest and best practitioner, Chrétien de Troyes, who adapts Geoffrey's nostalgia for a romance audience. I will also here consider an early attempt to collect the legends of Arthur and his knights in the prose *Vulgate Cycle*. One volume of that cycle in particular, *La Queste del Saint Graal*, will allow us to consider more directly the ideology of Christian chivalry and how the tales of Arthur could be manipulated to condemn some familiar aspects of secular chivalry, such as courtly love and worldly honor, in favor of a more holy kind of knighthood, represented by Sir Galahad. The authors of the *Queste* and its sequel the *Mort Artu* are not at pains to preserve the idealism of the knights in the face of failure: indeed, the destruction of the Round Table is presented as a judgment on them for their sins. The authors appropriate what was clearly a powerful propaganda tool and adapt it to teach very different lessons: chastity, faith, and withdrawal from the world instead of adventure, honor, fellowship, and love.

The last two chapters will return to English treatments of Arthurian matter. These works, particularly those retelling the end of the Round Table fellowship, attempt to rekindle a longing for the more secularized chivalric ideal that the *Queste* critiqued, though their use of nostalgia is far from simple. Chapter four discusses two very different verse versions of the death of Arthur, the Alliterative *Morte Arthure* and the Stanzaic *Morte Arthur,* and one important Arthurian poem that does not include the *morte*, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. These three texts, all written around the turn of the fifteenth century, demonstrate the different approaches available to writers of Arthurian romance as the story returned home to England. The alliterative poem follows the chronicle tradition of Geoffrey and while it heightens the tragedy of the destruction of the Round Table, it also offers a relatively straightforward nostalgic view of Arthur's kingship. The

stanzaic poem, based on the French *Mort Artu*, is colored by the judgments of the *Vulgate Cycle* authors. The poet appears to be sympathetic to the knights and nostalgic for the days of King Arthur, but the conflicting loyalties that lead to the end of the Round Table fellowship that the author is faced with in his source in the end result in sadness and mourning rather than longing. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is rather subtler: the author engages the nostalgia of the audience only to force us to question the feasibility of the longed-for ideals and confront instead our own fallibility. I will end with a discussion Sir Thomas Malory's great prose compilation of Arthurian tales, *Le Morte Darthur.* Malory is the culmination of medieval Arthurian literature: his version is the one we are most familiar with today, and the one most modern authors writing on Arthur look to. It is an attempt at an encyclopedic, all-encompassing version of the Arthurian mythos. And it is the most successful of all the works discussed here at finding a balance between nostalgia, idealism, and tragedy.

Chapter 2

Geoffrey of Monmouth and the Invention of History

I. The Originality of Geoffrey of Monmouth

Reading recent literary criticism on Geoffrey of Monmouth and his *magnum opus*, *Historia regum Britanniae*, one gets the distinct sense of many different Geoffreys. There is the "Welshman whose object was to secure cultural respectability for his own nation" (Gillingham 100). There is the hater of Anglo-Saxons, of tyranny, of conquerors, and, by extension, of the Normans. On the other hand, there is the would-be social climber and yes-man to the Norman elite, looking for advancement in Norman society by providing "a history in which the new Norman masters of Britain could take pride" (Wright, "Introduction" xix).   There is the politically astute Geoffrey, part prophet, part conciliator, warning his contemporaries of the wages of civil strife and pleading for unity among their leaders. And if we consider genre, there are even more Geoffreys: the inept historian, the rather inventive or imaginative historian, the parodist of historians, the literary artist, the "romance writer masquerading as an historian" (Gransden 202), and even the "invent[or of] Latin prose fiction" (Stein 106)!

It is a testament to the interest and complexity of Geoffrey's work that it sustains and invites such a multiplicity of interpretations and investigations. The fact is, there are very few works like the *Historia regum Britanniae* in the Middle Ages. As J.S.P. Tatlock declares in the first sentence of his important study, *The Legendary History of Britain: Geoffrey of Monmouth's Historia Regum Britanniae and its Early Vernacular Versions*: "Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae* is one of the most influential books ever written, certainly one of the most influential in the middle ages" (3).   Although there are decided influences on the text, such

as Virgil, and several important sources, such as Gildas, Bede, and the *Historia Brittonum* once

attributed to Nennius, the work is by and large original. Of course Geoffrey, who presents his

work as history, makes no such claim to originality. Quite the contrary, he is anxious to provide

a source to legitimize his work, and he does so in the form of a "certain very ancient book

written in the British language" (i.x).[26] In the absence of any such book, however, it seems

likely that this is a rhetorical move on Geoffrey's part, calculated to add *gravitas* to his version

of a slice of history that had been underserved by mainstream historians.[27]   Indeed, the most

interesting parts of the *Historia regum Britanniae* seem to have been invented by Geoffrey

himself, either completely from his own imagination or with inspiration from local legends. In

doing so, Geoffrey not only laid the foundation for the understanding of British history for

several hundred years following his work, but also fundamentally influenced our collective

imagination about early Britain, sparked an entire body of literature, and gave England a hero on

par with Alexander or Charlemagne who, together with his Round Table, would influence the

conception of kingship and knighthood in medieval courts across Europe for centuries to come.

This, of course, is a lot of credit for a work that has occasionally been reviled as inept

history, if not a collection of outright lies. But Geoffrey's invention of history does not

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[26] "quendam Britannici sermonis librum uetustissimum" (18r.2). Quotations from the *Historia regum Britanniae* where they appear in English are from Lewis Thorpe's translation, *History of the Kings of Britain.* Latin text is taken from Neil Wright's edition of the Bern, Burgerbubliothek MS. 568.

[27] As Tatlock, Wright, and others have noted, the invocation of an invented source is far from unusual in medieval literature. Wright, in particular, agues that, if anything, Geoffrey showed "great skill" in the way he "gathered disparate strands" from his many and various sources "and transformed them into a largely unified and seemingly authoritative history of the British people from their origins to the seventh century A.D. This fusion of heterogeneous sources, which is apparent almost everywhere in the *Historia*, completely dispels the fiction that the work is no more than a translation of a single Breton (or Welsh) book" (xviii). Tatlock is rather more blunt: "Needless to say, no experienced medievalist believes a word of his [claim of having a British source]" (422).

undermine the impact his work has had. The extraordinary number of extant manuscripts[28]

which can be found all over Europe is one indication of the immense and virtually immediate

audience the *Historia* found. It was soon translated and adapted into Welsh, French, and even a

purposefully old-fashioned English verse. Certainly many of the attributes and influences

mentioned above are embryonic in the chronicle and only become fully developed in later

romances. But the seed is present in the *Historia regum Britanniae*, which lays out in its entirely

the story of Arthur, basically as it was to remain and with conscious artistry, despite Geoffrey's

humble claims to a "homely style" free of "gaudy flowers of speech" (i.x).[29] It is the starting

point for any study of Arthurian literature, and it will prove an appropriate starting point for this

project, because it is Geoffrey of Monmouth who, in setting down the complete story of King

Arthur, first outlines the ideal nature of the king, his tragic end, and sets the precedent of

adopting a nostalgic tone. It is this nostalgia, I will argue, that makes the tale of Arthur so

compelling and seems to have infected readers and writers down through history.

II. Geoffrey's Purpose

All this is not to say that Geoffrey invented Arthur out of thin air. Much work has been

done investigating Geoffrey's source material and arguing the relative importance of those

sources.[30] A detailed discussion is hardly necessary here. A few observations might suffice.

For starters, as W.R.J. Barron points out:

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[28] Julia Crick lists 215 in *The* Historia regum Britannie *of Geoffrey of Monmouth: Volume IV, Dissemination and Reception in the Later Middle Ages*, pages xi-xvi.

[29] The whole line reads, "Nam si ampullosis dictionibus pagin<a>m illinissem, tedium legentibus ingererem, dum magis in exponendis uerbis quam in historia intelligenda ipsos commorari oporteret" (18r.2).

[30] See Tatlock, *The Legendary History of Britain*, 3-5 and chapter 6; John J. Parry and Robert A. Caldwell, "Geoffrey of Monmouth," especially pages 79-89 in *Arthurian Literature in the Middle Ages*; and Wright, "Geoffrey of Monmouth and Gildas," "Geoffrey of Monmouth and Gildas Revisited" and "Geoffrey of Monmouth and Bede."

> Geoffrey's scholastic education and rhetorical training would have
> given him both materials and method for filling the lacuna in
> British history. As general models for what a dynastic chronicle,
> the history of a race in search of its identity as a nation, should be,
> he had the Old Testament, Livy and other Roman historians; as a
> personal model of charismatic leadership engaged in imperial
> conquest, the career of Alexander the Great, widely disseminated
> in both learned and popular forms (Tatlock 312-20); and, for the
> heroic manner in which such a subject should be treated, Virgil's
> *Aeneid*. ("Dynastic Chronicles" 15)

Combined with that rhetorical training we come upon what seems to have been a broad

knowledge of Welsh tales, gleaned either from the oral tradition or the few available Welsh texts,

such as genealogies, the *Annales Cambriae*, the *mabinogi*, and *Culhwch and Olwen* (or perhaps a

combination of both oral and written sources).[31] He also references sources directly in the text,

though not always accurately.[32] These include a work by the Briton monk Gildas, *De Excidio et*

Conquestu Britanniae, the *Historia Britonum* once attributed to Nennius, and Bede's *Historia*

Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum. Though these works contain certain episodes appropriated by

Geoffrey (for example the *Historia Britonum* contains an account of Brutus and his settlement of

Britain), by and large they serve merely as inspiration or as a starting point for Geoffrey, who

freely expands and changes his source material. Finally, Geoffrey is acutely aware of the work

of his contemporary historians, particularly Henry of Huntingdon and William of Malmesbury.[33]

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[31] Since Geoffrey is generally associated with Monmouth, close to Wales, it is quite possible these tales formed part of his upbringing. Geoffrey himself claims the tales he relates have been "handed joyfully down in oral tradition, just as if they had been committed to writing, by many people who had only their memory to rely on" (i.x) ["a multis populis quasi inscripta iocunde et memoriter predicarent<ur>" (18r.1)].

[32] Wright in "Geoffrey of Monmouth and Gildas" shows that while Geoffrey imports a significant amount of material from Gildas, he only once attributes that material while in other places he cites Gildas as the source for material apparently of his own invention.

[33] There is some compelling argument to be made that Geoffrey is parodying these other historians – see Valerie Flint, "The *Historia regum Britanniae* of Geoffrey of Monmouth: Parody and its Purpose." Certainly he seems to be drawing a line in the sand when, at the end of the *Historia* he "recommends [them]…to say nothing at all about the kings of the Britons" (Thorpe 284, n. I): "reges uero Saxonum Willelmo Malmesberiensi et Henrico Huntendonensi; quos de regibus Britonum tacere iubeo com non habeant librum istum Britannici sermonis" (79v).

While these two sober and respected historians were largely forced to pass over the British in their histories due to lack of knowledge and reliable sources,[34] Geoffrey focuses entirely on the period between the coming of Brutus and the eventual rise of the Anglo-Saxons. Unlike his contemporaries, who by and large saw value in rehashing well-known tales, Geoffrey seems to have recognized an opportunity in this vast historical lacuna. Indeed, as William Leckie has demonstrated, Geoffrey managed to widen considerably, by several hundred years, the traditional understanding of the period of British supremacy, creating a long golden age of British rule in that space.[35] This he embellished at will, fashioning a hero for England on par with Alexander or Charlemagne.

But what exactly was he hoping to accomplish with his inventive version of British history, dedicated to members of the Norman elite and written on the cusp of deep political uncertainty and civil strife? The primary debate surrounding the *Historia* concerns Geoffrey's purpose. There have been several compelling suggestions. The most common belief is that Geoffrey was, for all his interest in the distant past, very much a man of his time, politically astute and motivated – though there is some debate about the nature of these motivations. Two interpretations in particular seem most compelling to me, and will inform my understanding of Geoffrey's establishment of the plot of the Arthurian section as well as its tone. The first concerns Geoffrey's Norman audience and his creation of a suitably ancient and respectable past for them to inherit. The second and related issue is Geoffrey's secular understanding of history.

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[34] Henry of Huntingdon's surprise and delight on first seeing Geoffrey's work in 1139 at the Abbey of Bec—after much frustration on his part at not being able to discover anything about the Britons—is often noted and was conveyed in a letter to his friend Warinus Brito. See Wright, "The Place of Henry of Huntingdon's *Epistola ad Warinum* in the Text-history of Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britannie*: A Preliminary Investigation."

[35] See R. William Leckie, Jr., *The Passage of Dominion,* 55-72.

Both of these aims, which I do not find to be contradictory but rather to be working in concert, are served by the idealism of Geoffrey's treatment of Arthur and its nostalgic underpinnings.

In spite of the fact that the *Historia regum Britanniae* is preoccupied with a twice-conquered people who had been, in recent memory, marginalized by yet another wave of conquerors, it nevertheless seems clear that Geoffrey is writing, at least overtly, for a Norman audience, favoring the interests of his Norman patrons, and "present[ing] the British past not as it was but as his Norman patrons might wish it to have been" (Barron 11).[36] For one thing, Geoffrey seems to have been actively seeking preferment in the form of a church appointment, something he received only a few years before his death when he was consecrated Bishop of Saint Asaph, a rather minor parish he was never able to visit in remote and rebellious North Wales. The primary evidence of his pursuit of preferment, and a clue to his intended audience, can be found in the dedications of his work. The numerous extant manuscripts make this something of a vexed question, since the dedication exists in a number of different forms, but of what Neil Wright calls the "three most important, all of which seem to be the work of Geoffrey himself" one is directed to Robert of Gloucester only, one to both Robert and Waleran of Meulan, and finally one presented to King Stephen and Robert ("Introduction" xii), three of the most powerful Anglo-Normans of the time.

These dedications have further suggested that Geoffrey may have been appealing to political leaders for caution and unity. Geoffrey was writing during troubled political times; the death of William the Conqueror's last son, Henry I, whose heir had died in the sinking of the

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[36] John Gillingham in "The Context and Purposes of Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History of the Kings of Britain*" presents the case against this, arguing instead that Geoffrey is sticking up for Welsh culture at a time of increasing hostility towards the Celts, insisting that "It is against the background of a revival of the classical concept of barbarian, and in consequence the growing fashion for dismissing the Celtic people as barbarians, that we must read Geoffrey's History" (109).

White Ship, left the succession in peril. Henry had named his daughter Matilda as his heir, but it was his nephew Stephen who seized the throne, breaking his oath to accept Matilda as queen. Matilda did not take Stephen's usurpation lightly and with the help of her half brother Robert of Gloucester waged intermittent civil war for the better part of twenty years. Waleran, a rich and powerful landowner, was on the other side of the conflict, a strident supporter of King Stephen's reign, at least at first.[37] Geoffrey, writing sometime between 1135 and 1138[38] before war broke out in earnest, may have joined these enemies in a single dedication as a "powerful, if covert, plea for unity," particularly in light of the fact that the text "abounds in examples of the folly of civil strife and the advantages of concord" (Wright, "Introduction" xv).[39]

Geoffrey seems to have been interested in questions of succession in general: his work catalogues an unbroken line of kings extending over centuries, from Brutus to Cadwallader, and some critics have seen Geoffrey's project in the *Historia regum Britanniae* as both useful and flattering to the Norman elite by providing them with legitimization for their rule, an illustrious line of succession to claim as their own, a home grown hero they could take pride in, and an overall emergent sense of nationhood. Francis Ingledew credits Geoffrey with "provid[ing] the most thorough statement thus far of the basis of 'nation' – king, aristocracy, people" (687). Gordon Hall Gerould caused some waves in the 1920s by suggesting Geoffrey helped the

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[37] Like many of the great magnates during the uncertainty of the Anarchy, Waleran's loyalties shifted, and in 1141, when Stephen was being held captive by the empress, he began supporting Matilda, probably in order to protect his vast holdings in Normandy, which was increasingly under Angevin control.

[38] For the arguments on dating the *Historia*, see Wright, *The Historia regum Britannie of Geoffrey of Monmouth* vol 1, pg xii-xvi.

[39] For a recent, fuller treatment concerning Geoffrey's advocacy of peace and unity, see Paul Dalton, "The Topical Concerns of Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britannie*: History, Prophecy, Peacemaking, and English Identity in the Twelfth Century." See also Leckie *The Passage of Dominion,* especially pages 57-58.

Normans in their campaign to legitimize their rule and establish their divine right[40] by providing

for them the one thing they seemed to be lacking that the French had to boost their dynasty:

"There was not in the background any figure of heroic size such as Charlemagne had come to be

in the imagination of the eleventh century" (45).[41] England needed a world conqueror, and

Geoffrey supplied the lack with a British hero more ancient and having conquered further afield

(including France!) than even Charlemagne—and, interestingly enough, destined to dominate

even French literature. Indeed, Geoffrey "professes to give faithfully a far more ancient and

complete history from the fall of Troy to the seventh Christian century than any other western

people had except the Italians" (Tatlock, *A Legendary History of Britain* 432). In doing so, as

Martin B. Shichtman and Laurie A. Finke argue, Geoffrey "fabricate[s] a myth of origin for a

British monarchy":

> They [the monarchs of Geoffrey's history] create the illusion of an
> unbroken line of succession that culminates in the emergence of
> Arthur out of the social chaos of the Saxon invasions. This
> teleological account of history feeds a nostalgia for an originary
> wholeness, a past from which Geoffrey's patrons could legitimate
> their own rule and consolidate their interests. By establishing
> themselves as British kings instead of Norman overlords, the first
> Norman kings of England were able to counter the fragmentation
> and decentralization that marked feudalism in France and which
> remained an obstacle to the establishment of a centralized
> administrative bureaucracy. (4)

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[40] Gerould shows that this is something that was already underway, with such strategies as promoting ties with
Edward the Confessor (a familial connection forged when Henry wedded the granddaughter of the Anglo-Saxon
king) and encouraging the bid for his canonization as well as the belief in his power to heal with his royal touch –
the latter something the kings of France had been claiming for some time. See "King Arthur and Politics," in
particular pages 40-45.

[41] R.S. Loomis penned a point-by-point rebuttal to Gerould's arguments, "Geoffrey of Monmouth and Arthurian
Origins," in which he disputes any conscious imitation of Charlemagne on Geoffrey's part. Some more recent
critics, however, have followed Gerould's lead. For example, Maureen Fries makes the case that Geoffrey used both
Charlemagne and Alexander the Great for heroic models in shaping Arthur; see "The Arthurian Moment: History
and Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia regum Britannie,*" especially pages 94-98.

By providing a worthy, heroic past connected to the Normans ideologically,[42] physically

(through the land),[43] and even, albeit loosely, through ancestral ties,[44] Geoffrey created a

powerful "social signifier whose function was to smooth over the ideological conflicts created by

the Norman colonization of England and the uneasy and unequal cohabitation of three distinct

cultures—Norman, Saxon, and Celtic" (Shichtman and Finke 4). And if the enduring popularity

of Arthur at virtually all levels of society is any indication, Geoffrey was remarkably successful.

The second theory regarding Geoffrey's purpose credits him with a major innovation in

the composition of history, what Ingledew calls an "ideological refashioning of history" (688).

According to this interpretation, Geoffrey's main objective was to put forward a secular

understanding of history in contradistinction to available histories of the time, which were almost

universally founded on a Christian understanding of time and history. According to Ingledew,

Geoffrey takes advantage of a major historical lacuna to reassess the teleology of the history of

England, replacing a Biblical model with a heroic one—the point of reference becomes the

Trojan War rather than the Fall or the Incarnation; the foundational texts become the Troy

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[42] For similarities between Arthur and William the Conqueror and Norman kings generally, see Fries, "The Arthurian Moment," especially page 94; for more cultural and social similarities, see Thorlac Turville-Petre, *England the Nation: Language, Literature, and National Identity, 1290-1340*, especially pages 81-85.

[43] Tatlock notes, "A splendid picture of events in the island for many many centuries back would also gratify its actual rulers, since patriotism attaches to the land as well as the race" (*A Legendary History of Britain* 427). See also Turville-Petre: "It was to this version of history based on homeland that the Normans chose to attach themselves, rather than to the alternative version emphasizing race that Wace had offered them in his *Roman de Rou*, where he traced the Danish ancestry of the dukes of Normandy. Through this attachment, the Normans holding their lands in England became English, with ancient rights confirmed by English law. The history of the people became entwined with the history of the land, so that identity was defined through legal succession that expressed the providential design working upon the nation's history. The question of the legality of William the Conqueror's claims to call himself 'king of the English' became, by this process, irrelevant. Unperturbed by any awareness of the revisions of history involved, the new English listened to Anglo-Norman romances of 'nos auncestres', Havelock, Waldef, and Guy of Warwick, the heroes of Anglo-Saxon England, and also adopted Anglo-Saxon saints, none more than Edward the Confessor whose cult was promoted by Henry III himself" (6-7).

[44] The Normans can be linked to this line of succession in two ways: first, "As descendants of the Trojans themselves, the Normans could bear the torch of Trojan civilization throughout their empire" (Turville-Petre 81) and, secondly, through Henry's marriage to Matilda, of the house of Wessex.

Book[45] or the *Aeneid* rather than the Bible. Robert Hanning, who in *The Vision of History in Early Britain* puts Geoffrey in context with his source material to investigate their differing methodologies, also finds that "a major change has taken place in the historical imagination of a writer who deliberately removes national history from its traditional context, the history of salvation" (123)—which he does, in part, according to Hanning, by replacing teleology with a cyclical understanding of British history, with "a larger role for human causation," including "a lively interest in psychological motivation" and a supplanting of divine will with the vicissitudes of fortune (126). Hanning assigns these attributes to twelfth-century history generally, though he makes the distinction that Geoffrey "felt impelled to create a work in which the interests of the new historiography of his day could have free play—in which, that is, the innovations in thought and expression of the Anglo-Norman historical vision, isolated from the Christian traditions with which they clashed in the works of William [of Malmesbury], Henry [of Huntingdon], and Orderic [Vitalis], could regulate a complete and self-consistent narrative of the past" (136). Therefore, Hanning views Geoffrey as parodying (in a serious, rather than humorous, way) the histories being written by his contemporaries[46] in a way that innovates and makes viable a new historical methodology and opens the door for romance.[47]

If these two interpretations of Geoffrey's purpose—that he is promoting Norman dynastic claims and that he is secularizing historiography—are correct, by looking at what Geoffrey

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[45] Ingledew does not have a particular text in mind when he talks about the "Troy Book" but rather "the entire corpus of Trojan material which ramifies astonishingly throughout the later-medieval period" and which marks a "return of Virgil" and "a new historical consciousness, intimately associated with an aristocratic and lay cultural environment and at odds with the biblically oriented Augustinian-Orosian paradigm, which instead of claiming birth in Troy, confessed birth in the fall" (666).

[46] For another take on this issue, see Flint, "The *Historia Regum Britanniae* of Geoffrey of Monmouth: Parody and its Purpose: A Suggestion."

[47] See Hanning, pages 173-175.

represents as ideal, in terms of kingship, knighthood, social norms, and government we will be able to understand what kind of ideological work the *Historia regum Britanniae* is doing. More specifically, what kind of behavior is Geoffrey intimating that his patrons embody already or advocating that they imitate going forward? Having answered these questions, we may be able to say something about his methodology and how he accomplishes these aims—on the one hand through the cyclical repetitions of good and bad kings who serve as a series of exemplars and cautionary tales, as others such as Hanning have discussed; on the other hand through the nostalgic representation of the truly ideal Arthur, who provides a stark contrast to those vying for power in Geoffrey's day.

III. Exemplars and Cautionary Tales

First, and perhaps most crucially for a work supporting the establishment of a dynasty, Geoffrey presents an unbroken line of succession that spans centuries and, indeed, is never quite extinguished. There is even hope at the end, when the line does seem to have broken, that "the British people would occupy the island again at some time in the future, once the appointed moment should come," the moment "which Merlin had prophesied to Arthur" (xii.17),[48] leaving open the possibility that the coming of the Normans could be interpreted as the restoration of a Trojan-descended line of kings. Even the hostile treatment of the Welsh in Geoffrey's time does not necessarily undermine this view, given the fact that those British who remained on the island were a sadly deteriorated bunch, with, according to Geoffrey, an "inveterate habit of civil

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[48] This is prophesied to Cadwallader by the voice of an angel ("uox angelica"): "Nolebat enim Deus Britones in <insula> Britannie diutius regnare antequam tempus illud uenisset quod Merlinus Arturo phophetauerat….Dicebat etiam populum Britonum per meritum fidei ipsius insulam in futuro adepturum postquam fatale tempus superueniret" (79r.205).

discord" (xii.19).[49] The Normans could therefore be seen not merely as restoring but also as

reinvigorating the royal line through a new branch, allowing them to represent both ancient

pedigree and new possibilities.

That is not to say that the kings Geoffrey presents are universally good; on the contrary,

both very good as well as very bad kings make up the line of succession. Often the bad kings are

jealous or traitorous brothers who obtain power through unscrupulous or even violent means.[50]

Vortigern is one well-known example of an evil king closely associated with the Arthur tale, who

plotted the death of one king, Constans, and attempted to deprive his brothers Aurelius

Ambrosius and Utherpendragon, also Arthur's father, of the throne.[51] There are other, eerily

similar albeit less developed instances of wretched kingship: take for example Mempricius, the

son of King Maddan, who feuds with his brother Malin over who should inherit the crown in

Book II. Mempricius tricks his brother into meeting with him by feigning a willingness to

compromise; "Mempricius was, however, eaten up with burning treachery and he killed his

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[49] "consuetudinarium discidium in tantum coegerat populum superbum degenerare" (79r.207)

[50] Hanning sees the repeated motif of family members, often brothers, at odds over their inheritance as an example
of Geoffrey's technique of "casting microcosmic incidents into reiterated narrative patterns whereby similar
characters undergo similar crises at various stages of national history" resulting in "serious tension between
individual desires and national welfare" (142). Stephen Knight relates the squabbles directly to various examples of
infighting among Norman princes, particularly William's sons: "the text deals with some of the problems about
uncertain inheritance that worried the powerful in the period….events keep occurring which seem strangely familiar:
threats, values, displacements, euphemisations all interweave in a telling ideological structure, both disturbingly
realistic and consolingly optimistic" (50).

[51] It should be noted, however, that Vortigern is a different kind of usurper in that he is not actually of the royal line,
but momentarily displaces it until the House of Constantine can be restored. It is therefore little wonder that
Vortigern is such an evil and unnatural king—plotting the murder of Constans, lusting after a pagan woman and
favoring the Saxons for her sake, even turning a blind eye to that woman's murder of his worthy son. Yet for all his
bad kingship, he actually heralds the great age of Arthur. According to Hanning, this is an example of Geoffrey's
cyclical understanding of history: as the low points get lower, the high points climb higher. Vortigern's foul deeds
actually set the stage for Arthur's great achievements: "It is not coincidental, for example, that Vortigern's attempt
at cruel murder should result in Merlin's prophecies, and that the massacre at Kaercaradoc, also Vortigern's
responsibility, should inspire Merlin's miraculous transfer of the Giants' Dance from Ireland to Kaercaradoc as a
monument to national heroism. In both cases the destructive desire, far from bringing national collapse, ultimately
exalts the Britons" (152).

brother in the presence of the other delegates." It is no surprise that after a start like that

Mempricius's reign is tyrannous, and he is responsible for the deaths of many good men. He

even, "hated all his own family; and, by main force or by treachery, he did away with anyone

who he feared might succeed him in the kingship. What is more, he deserted his own wife, by

whom he had become the father of a much-admired young man called Ebraucus, and he

abandoned himself to the vice of sodomy, preferring unnatural lust to normal passion." It takes

twenty years for Mempricious to get his comeuppance, but he finally does so. While hunting,

"he became separated from his companions in a certain valley. There he was surrounded by

ravening wolves and eaten up in miserable circumstances" (ii.6).[52] In this brief example of a

ruthless king we can note a few characteristics that Geoffrey associates with bad kingship more

generally. There is an unnaturalness associated with the hatred and betrayal of one's brother. In

fact, it seem to beget ever worse unnatural behavior: once king, Mempricius terrorizes his

people; though a husband and father, he hates his wife and son; his very desires are

"unnatural"—until nature finally turns against him quite literally, and he is devoured by wild

animals.

Ebraucus, who manages to avoid his father's policy of ridding himself of successors to

become king upon Mempricius's death, hardly sounds warm or friendly, especially given his

ferocious attack on Gaul where he succeeds in "slaughtering their menfolk and sacking their

cities" (ii.7), and yet we might take him as representative of a good king. Imperialism is, after

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[52] "Sed teda proditionis inflammatus ipsum inter prolocutors interfecit. Deinde regimen tocius insule nactus tantam tyrannidem in populum exercuit quod fere quemque nobilissimum perimebat. Sed et totam progeniem suam exosus quemcumque sibi in regno posse succedere timebat uel ui uel prodicione opprimebat. Relicta ergo uxore propria ex qua inclitum iuuenem Ebraucum progenuerat sese sodomitane uoluptati dedit, naturalem uenerem non naturali libidini non preferens. Uigesimo tandem regni sui anno dum uenationem faceret, secessit a sociis suis in quondam conuallem ubi a multitudine rabidosorum luporum circundatus miserrime deuoratus est" (25r.26).

all, one of the highest virtues in the *Historia regum Britanniae*,[53] and Ebraucus returns from

Gaul victorious and enriched, and also with the distinction of being the first king to attack that

land since Brutus.[54] Upon returning home, unlike his father who was a destructive force on the

island, Ebraucus constructs new cities; where his father destroyed and abandoned his family,

Ebraucus builds an enormous family network, wedding twenty wives and siring fifty children!

His daughters he marries to the descendants of noble Trojans in Italy; his sons conquer Germany.

Being a founder of cities, which brings peace, stability, and prosperity, is the mark of a very

good king indeed. While the story of Ebraucus takes up little more than a page and he is just one

fairly forgettable monarch in a string of more than a hundred Geoffrey mentions, still his tale

gives a glimpse of the general values most of the good kings, and all of the best ones, possess:

they are destroyers of cities and conquerors abroad, but builders of cities and constructive forces

at home (literally at home, in Ebraucus' case, with that impressive family); they foster peace and

allow for the beginning of a more refined civilization, which will have its apex in King Arthur's

court and, implicitly, in the contemporary Norman court as well.

Aside from the minor good and bad kings, there are also many kings that barely merit a

mention – often they are named with the length of their reign and perhaps an identifying detail or

two, though on occasion (for example, ii.16) they are not even named. These kings serve to

preserve the continuity of succession. It is an important part of Geoffrey's overall methodology

that he marks the progress of time by the reigns of kings, pausing occasionally to tell an

instructive tale that fits into his overall constellation of themes, chief among them being "strong,

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[53] Tatlock finds the justification and exaltation of imperialism to be one of Geoffrey's main purposes in writing the *Historia* in the first place—see "Geoffrey of Monmouth's Motives for Writing his *Historia*" *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, especially pages 702-703, and *The Legendary History of Britain*, page 426.

[54] "Hic primus post Brutum classem in partes Galliarum duxit et illato prelio affecit prouintias cede uirorum atque urbium oppressione; infinita auri et argenti copia ditatus cum uictoria reuersus est" (25r.27).

legitimate rule and the difficulty of achieving it" (Echard 47) and, as Hanning would have it,

underscoring the repetitive, cyclical nature of history: construction of cities, preservation of the

peace, successful conquest on the exemplary side; destruction, family feuding, breaking of oaths,

and a general inability to keep the peace on the cautionary side.

IV. Geoffrey's Ideal King: The Arthuriad

One king's reign, of course, dominates the *Historia regum Britanniae*: Arthur's story

occupies approximately a fifth of the text and is the thematic climax, with Arthur himself clearly

emerging as the example of kingship *par excellence*. Arthur is distinguished from other kings in

the *Historia* from the start by the magical circumstances surrounding his conception, but it is his

deeds that mark him out as a truly exemplary ruler: the court he holds, his leadership and the way

he interacts with his nobles and advisors, his personal feats of arms, and his stunning record of

conquest. He is, in short, the most accomplished and versatile of all the kings Geoffrey

describes. This representation supports the purpose of Geoffrey's larger work and demonstrates

the values of the text. In inventing this court and attributing these values to Arthur, Geoffrey

creates a locus for the longing and nostalgia of an age. While Arthur's reign ought not to be

separated completely from the ebb and flow of other kings' periods of rule characteristic of

Geoffrey's history overall, it is nevertheless distinctive in its development, if not its message.

This section will therefore look more closely at the values associated with Arthur and how

Geoffrey creates an ideal king worthy of our nostalgia.

More than any other king in the *Historia*, Arthur demonstrates that the history of the

Britons is a civilized one: the current court can be proud to look back to it, see themselves as

inheritors of its dignified customs, and even learn from the chivalrous comportment of the

knights and ladies of Arthur's time. This is emphasized in two important ways: through

ceremonial court occasions and through councils. Having decimated the Saxons, subdued the

Picts and the Scots, and "restored the whole country to its earlier dignity" (ix.9) by rebuilding

churches and cities, Arthur weds Guinevere.[55] Another brief military campaign brings all the

nearby islands under his sway: Ireland, Iceland, Gotland, and the Orkneys. The whole region

thus "in a state of lasting peace" (ix.10),[56] Arthur settles down in Britain for twelve quiet years,

during which he builds an impressive court that is the envy of the world:

> Arthur then began to increase his personal entourage by inviting
> very distinguished men from far-distant kingdoms to join it. In this
> way he developed such a code of courtliness in his household that
> he inspired peoples living far away to imitate him. The result was
> that even the man of noblest birth, once he was roused to rivalry,
> thought nothing at all of himself unless he wore his arms and
> dressed in the same way as Arthur's knights. At last the fame of
> Arthur's generosity and bravery spread to the very ends of the earth;
> and the kings of countries far across the sea trembled at the thought
> that they might be attacked and invaded by him, and so lose control
> of the lands under their dominion. They were so harassed by these
> tormenting anxieties that they re-built their towns and the towers in
> their towns, and then went so far as to construct castles on
> carefully-chosen sites, so that, if invasion should bring Arthur
> against them, they might have a refuge in their time of need.
> (ix.11)[57]

Arthur's court is cosmopolitan and international. It sets the fashion among young noblemen in

clothes and manners, and it is the place they go to test their mettle. Not only are young

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[55] "Denique cum totius patrie statum in pristinam dignitatem reduxisset, duxit uxorem nomine Guenhuuaram ex nobili genere Romanorum editam" (62r.152).

[56] "in firmam pacem" (62v.153)

[57] "Tunc inuitatis probissimis quibusque ex longe positis regnis cepit familiam suam augmentare tantamque facetiam in domo sua habere ita ut emulationem longe manentibus populis ingereret. Unde nobilisssimus quisque incitatus nichili pendebat se nisi sese in induendo sive in arma ferendo ad modum militum Arturi haberet. Denique fama largitatis ac probitatis illius per extremos mundi cardines diuulgata reges transmarinorum regnorum nimius inuadebat timorne inquietatione eius oppressi nations sibi subditas amitterent. Mordacibus ergo curis anxiati urbes atque urbium turres renouabant, oppida in congruis locis edificabant ut, si impetus Arturum in illos duceret, refugium si opus esset haberent" (62v.154).

adventurers inspired, but also whole nations, who, wary of Arthur's increasing might and renown, fortify their own cities—and with good reason: hearing of other nations increasing their defenses for fear of him, "encouraged him [Arthur] to conceive the idea of conquering the whole of Europe" (ix.11).[58]

The really splendid show of courtliness follows Arthur's success in European conquest and demonstrates his generosity, sophistication, and culture. After nine years of war, Arthur has subjugated a huge swath of Europe and has "settled the government of the realm peacefully and legally" (ix.11),[59] as a good king should, and so returns home victorious. To celebrate these victories and as a ceremonial show of power over all the kings he has conquered, Arthur holds a plenary court at Whitsuntide.[60] In this episode, "Geoffrey creates for the first time in the Arthurian legend the medieval monarch as we know him, at the center of a complex, static, and glorious court" (Knight 61). Nine years of war pass in a mere sentence, but Geoffrey lingers on the description of this court for several pages, describing in detail where it is held (Caerleon, significantly "a match for Rome"), who attends (people of note from far and wide), and all the ceremonies that take place, even excusing himself not once but twice for not being able to describe the event in enough detail.[61] Religious, courtly, and heroic ceremony are comingled:

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[58] "extollens sese quia cunctis timori erat totam Europam sibi subdere affectat" (62v.154). But as Echard notes, "Geoffrey is careful to provide Arthur with justification for his desire": "Arthur's military career, like his domestic policy, is considered and legitimate" (46)—and therefore all the more civilized.

[59] "statum regni pace et lege confirmauit" (63v.155)

[60] Knight calls this display the "realization of Norman cultural splendor" (61), likening it to "the splendid 'crown-wearing' occasions that all Norman kings arranged" (60) and arguing that Geoffrey was both modeling the scene after contemporary Norman practice, as well as giving the Norman elite a model of courtly elegance and perfection to imitate.

[61] First it is the "train of accoutrements" that is "such as I find it hard to describe" (ix.12) [mularum et equorum incedebant quantum difficile est describere (64r. 156)]; then, when describing the feast, Geoffrey excuses himself again: "If I were to describe everything, I should make this story far too long" (ix.13) ["Quen si omnino describere pergerem, nimiam prolixitatem historie generarem" (64v.157)]. The inexpressibility topos is of course a well-

the Archbishops place the crown on Arthur's head and there is a mass and much beautiful music, after which the knights and the ladies go their separate ways for the feasting because "the Britons still observed the ancient custom of Troy, the men celebrating festive occasions with their fellow-men and the women eating separately with the other women" (ix.13).[62] Arthur's ceremonial wearing of the crown has religious overtones; the beautiful music conveys an appreciation for art and culture; the dignified feasting, supposedly styled after Trojan custom, has an air of classical sophistication.

In further imitation of classical custom, after the feast the revelers engage in games and contests to demonstrate their might and, in a nod to romance, show off for the ladies who "scorned to give their love to any man who had not proved himself three times in battle. In this way the womenfolk became chaste and more virtuous and for their love the knights were ever more daring" (ix.13).[63] This brief allusion to *fin amor* is, according to Stephen Knight, not only an "indicat[ion of] the radically contemporary nature of Geoffrey's world of Arthur" but also "the most sophisticated part of the whole model of culture which Geoffrey creates. It will be greatly developed in later Arthurian legend as a central part of the cultural mystification by which the essence of military power—the appropriation of property and surplus productivity—is euphemised for those who practice it, and concealed from those who suffer its oppressions" (62). To summarize the point of this courtly interlude, Geoffrey resorts to the superlative, as so many romancers will in subsequent centuries: "Indeed, by this time, Britain had reached such a

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known rhetorical device in medieval literature – see Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, pages 159-162.

[62] "Antiquam nanque consuetudinem Troie seruantes Britones consueuerant mares cum maribus, mulieres cum mulieribus festiuos dies separatim celebrare" (64r.157).

[63] "Facete etiam mulieres consimilia indumenta habentes nullius amorem habere dignabantur nisi tertio in milicia probatus esset. Efficiebantur ergo caste et meliores et milites pro amore illarum probiores" (64v.157).

standard of sophistication that it excelled all other kingdoms in its general affluence, the richness

of its decorations, and the courteous behavior of its inhabitants" (ix.13).[64]   Though the praise is

for the court at large, the implication of the scene overall is inescapable: Arthur is a king to be

reckoned with, sophisticated but also fearsome.

Throughout the *Historia regum Britanniae* generosity is praised as an attribute of a good

king, and Arthur, being the best of kings, is unfailingly generous. Along with courage,

generosity is the first and most important attribute Geoffrey associates with him. He introduces

Arthur in this way: "Arthur was a young man only fifteen years old; but he was of outstanding

courage and generosity, and his inborn goodness gave him such grace that he was loved by

almost all the people" (ix.1).[65] His first official act as king is to distribute "gifts freely to

everyone"—so freely, in fact, that he runs out of goods. Not to worry: "the man to whom open-

handedness and bravery both come naturally may indeed find himself momentarily in need, but

poverty will never harass him for long" (ix.1).[66] All Arthur must do is put his courage in service

of his generosity while at the same time making a savvy political move: he will simply harry the

Saxons and kill two birds with one stone: eliminate a threat to his kingdom while simultaneously

enriching his coffers and increasing his ability to be generous with his followers in order to

secure their love and loyalty. Thereafter, Arthur ends everything he does—battles, conquests,

and the plenary court—by distributing wealth and positions among his faithful followers. He

even distributes church positions in a display of secular royal authority over religious hierarchy

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[64] "Ad tantum etenim statum dignitatis Britannia tunc reducta erat quod co<pi>a diuiciarum, luxu ornamentorum, facecia incolarum cetera regna excellebat" (64v.157).

[65] "Erat autem Arturus .xv. annorum iuuenis, inaudite uirtutis atque largitatis. In quo tantam gratiam innata bonitas prestiterat ut a cunctis fere populis amaretur" (60r.143).

[66] "Insignibus itaque regiis iniciatus solitum morem seruans largitati indulsit. Confluebat ad eum tanta multitudo militum ut ei quod dispensaret deficeret. Sic cui naturalis inest largitio cum probitate, licet ad tempus indigeat, nullatenus tamen continua paupertas ei nocebit" (60r.143)

that may have pleased Geoffrey's royal patrons, but almost certainly would have made church officials nervous. Indeed, it is precisely at this moment of display, when Arthur has all his subjects surrounding him for a rich and regal festival and is further securing their loyalty through his munificence, that Rome, typically associated with imperial power, wealth, and prestige, but here looking merely petulant, intrudes in the form of messengers bearing a letter from Lucius scolding Britain and demanding tribute. Though important to Geoffrey's conception of Arthur as ideal king, it is not, perhaps, very surprising to note Arthur's generosity, as this is a value associated with kingship long before the *Historia*. What is more significant, I would argue, is the comparison Geoffrey sets up here and elsewhere between Arthur's court and classical civilizations, particularly Rome. Geoffrey goes to great lengths to demonstrate again and again that Arthur's court is the new center of power and prestige in what amounts to a *translatio imperii*, a shift of power and prestige from Rome to the court of Arthur that will become a common strain in Arthurian literature.[67]

The arrival of the messengers allows for a display of yet another courtly and civilized virtue of King Arthur: his willingness to seek and follow the advice of his council. As we will see below, Arthur is no slouch on the battlefield: he can be an impetuous, bloodthirsty, and skilled fighter. But just as often, as here, we see Arthur acting in a measured, calculated, dignified way. At the moment of his triumph and great show of power, Arthur is insulted by these messengers who suggest that he is little more than a rebellious, upstart thrall who owes tribute to a greater leader. Though Arthur is hardly willing to submit to that without a fight, he tone is nevertheless surprisingly calm and even diplomatic. He is, perhaps, confident that his

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[67] Famously, Chrétien de Troyes talks more explicitly about the translation of culture, particularly chivalry, from Greece to Rome and ultimately to France in his prologue to *Cligès*.

men, whom he has so generously rewarded, will follow his will no matter what. Still, his speech

is as much a highly rhetorical argument as it is a rallying cry. He addresses his council thus:

> You who have been my companions in good times and in bad, you
> of whose fortitude both in giving advice and in waging war I have
> had ample proof in the past, give me now your closest attention,
> every one of you, and in your wisdom tell me what you consider
> we should do on receiving such a letter as this. Anything which
> has been planned with great care by man in his wisdom is realized
> the more easily when the time for action arrives. It follows that we
> shall be able to bear this attack of Lucius with great equanimity if
> we have first of all worked out with one accord how we are best to
> resist him. (ix.16)[68]

He stresses the importance of planning, unity, and wisdom in their reaction to Lucius' challenge,

and then goes on to present his own reply to the demands, turning the emperor's logic on its

head: "If the Roman decrees that tribute ought to be paid him by Britain simply because Julius

Caesar and other Roman leaders conquered this country years ago, then I decree in the same way

that Rome ought to give me tribute, in that my ancestors once captured that city" (ix.16),[69]

referring to Belinus and Brennius, Constantine, and Maximianus, whose reigns Geoffrey has

outlined earlier in the *Historia regum Britanniae*. Each man on Arthur's council is allowed his

say, and it is not surprising that they all heartily agree with their king and even flatter his

"highly-skilled wisdom" and "Ciceronian eloquence" (ix.17),[70] as King Hoel calls it, given that

they are all much indebted to Arthur, they admire him as a king, and they themselves are

paragons of loyalty and bravery. What is important to note is the value that Geoffrey seems to

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[68] "'Consocii' inquit, 'prosperitatis et aduersitatis, quorum probitates hactenus et in dandis consiliis et in miliciis agendis expertus sum, adhibete nunc unanimiter sensus uestros et sapienter preuidere que super talibus mandatis nobis agend<a> esse noueritis. Quicquid enim a sapientia diligenter preuidetur, cum ad actum accedit, facilius taleratur. Facilius ergo inquietationem Lucii tolerare poterimus si communi studio premeditati fuerimus quibus modis eam debilitare institerimus'" (65r.159).

[69] "Nam si quia Iulius Cesar ceterique Romani reges Britanniam olim subiugauerunt uectigal nunc debere sibi ex illa reddi decernit, similiter ego censeo quod Romani tributum dare debent quia antecessores mei eam antiquitus obtinuerunt" (65v.159)

[70] "sapientis animi effectum," "tua deliberatio Tulliano" (65v.160)

be ascribing to these characteristics of the king – his openness to council, his rhetorical skill, his wisdom, and his ability to inspire unwavering loyalty in his men. This is no barbarian king on the edges of the civilized world.

For all the emphasis Geoffrey places on Arthur's sophistication and how civilized his kingship and court are, he does not neglect Arthur's heroic side. Indeed, Arthur is spectacularly heroic, skilled in arms and a savvy leader of men. In this way, Geoffrey joins the values of classical learning and elegant deportment with those of the warrior kings of epic. Unlike the later romances of Chrétien and those influenced by him, in which Arthur is exclusively the head of an elaborate court and his role is generally limited to that of affable host and tournament adjudicator, in the *Historia regum Britanniae* Arthur takes an active part in the fighting of battles and even takes on a daring and heroic quest, very much in a romance vein. In his first war against the Saxons, Arthur demonstrates that he can be both strategic as a leader and ruthlessly bold as a fighter.   For example, he willingly follows the advice of his retainers to give up the siege of York as too dangerous and instead takes counsel in London with his men and the clergy where it is decided that King Hoel should be sent to for reinforcements. Later, back on the offensive and having chased the Saxons into a wood, the Britons find their attack impeded by trees that give the enemy cover. Arthur cleverly and decisively orders the trees to be cut down and their trunks used to hem in the Saxons, allowing them no avenue of escape. The stratagem works, and the starving Saxons forfeit all their wealth in exchange for being allowed to keep their lives and leave Britain. Arthur demonstrates mercy and justice when he allows them to go without further harm.

But the ever-duplicitous Saxons return, giving Arthur, now infuriated and astonished at such brazen oath-breaking, a chance to demonstrate his skill in battle, something he does only at

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key dramatic moments: here, against Frollo in Gaul, and against the giant of Mont Saint Michel. He is involved in the other battles, but it is at these particular moments that his bravery, skill, and ferociousness are on full display. The first of these heroic interludes is the only one to include a ritualistic arming scene, common in both epic and romance. His armor is made from the finest materials, "worthy of so great a king" (ix.4), artfully wrought, with the most important and valuable items having names: he has a helmet made of gold, "with a crest carved in the shape of a dragon"; on his shield, called Pidwen, "there was painted a likeness of the Blessed Mary, Mother of God, which forced him to be thinking perpetually of her," anticipating Gawain's more detailed pentangle shield in *Gawain and the Green Knight*; for weapons, he carries a "peerless sword, called Caliburn, which was forged in the Isle of Avalon" and a "spear called Ron," which was "long, broad in the blade and thirsty for slaughter" (ix.4).[71] To be sure, this is no shield of Achilles or anything quite so grand; nevertheless it is the only arming scene of its kind in the *Historia*, and it marks Arthur out as a hero-king of special stature.[72] Furthermore, Arthur's performance in battle lives up to his hero's dress. Geoffrey says that Arthur was indignant ("indignatus est") when he saw that the Saxons were being successful. Lewis Thorpe translates

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[71] The full passage concerning Arthur's arms reads: "Ipse uero Arturus lorica tanto regi digna indutus auream galeam simulachro draconis insculptam capiti adaptat: humeris quoque suis clipeum uocabulo Priduuen in quo imago sancte Marie Dei genetricis impicta ipsum in memoriam ipsius sepissime reuocabat. Accintus ergo Caliburno gladio optimo et in insula Auallonis fabricato lancea dextram suam decorat que nomine Ron uocabatur. Hec erat ardua lataque lancea, cladibus apta" (61r.147).

[72] Helmut Nickel discusses the importance of arming scenes in chivalric literature for providing verisimilitude: it was "essential that they should not stray too far from known reality, either contemporary or as remembered from bygone days" (3). While most romances, such as those of Chrétien de Troyes, tend to describe armor of the time in which they were written, interestingly Geoffrey did not do so. Nickel points out that this description is "not at all that of Geoffrey's own time, the first half of the twelfth century, when knights wore mail shirts, helmets without any crests, and 'Norman' shields of an elongated almond-shape" (4). In fact, the earliest documented English helmet crest is a dragon, which therefore seems to be in imitation of the literature, rather than the other way around. Furthermore, Geoffrey's descriptions match objects found at Sutton Hoo, the seventh-century barrow, though, "Circumstantial and stylistic evidence shows that these excavated armor elements must have been heirlooms from a considerably earlier period, probably c. AD 500, insofar as they are 'barbarized' versions of equipment for high-ranking officers of the Late Roman army" (4). This is quite remarkable, as we generally consider one of the failures of medieval people's imagination to be that they dressed and imagined people of the past like themselves. Here Geoffrey arms Arthur in apparently period-appropriate equipment with imperial connections.

the passage as "Arthur went berserk," calling to mind the Old Norse heroes who would work themselves into a destructive battle frenzy. Thorpe's license here seems justified by what follows: "He drew his sword Caliburn, called upon the name of the Blessed Virgin, and rushed forward at full speed into the thickest ranks of the enemy. Every man whom he struck, calling upon God as he did so, he killed at a single blow. He did not slacken his onslaught until he had dispatched four hundred and seventy men with his sword Caliburn" (ix.4).[73] In doing so, not only does Arthur kill a great many enemy soldiers, but he also inspires his own troops, who begin "dealing death on every side" (ix.4).[74] The Saxons are crushed, and Arthur turns his attention to the Scots and the Picts, only ceasing the slaughter when the bishops of the North beg for mercy on their hands and knees, which Arthur grants, demonstrating his power and kingliness in this show of Christian mercy as much as he did in his show of might.

Arthur's demonstration of boldness against the Saxons is particularly important because it shows him at the head of the army, leading his men to glory. In that sense it is an ideological testament to the role of a king as head of the army, not simply in terms of planning strategy and issuing orders, but also in leading the men into battle and acting as an example of military prowess. On two other occasions Arthur also demonstrates his courage and might, but he does so in single combat, thereby increasing his mystique as king. Against the Roman tribune Frollo, Arthur wages single combat for Gaul (ix.11). It is no easy contest, but eventually Arthur gains the upper hand and gruesomely cuts Frollo's head in half—lengthwise. In this episode Arthur demonstrates his willingness to spare his men a potentially bloody battle, even one they are sure

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[73] "Abstracto ergo Caliburno gladio nomen sancte Marie proclamat et sese cito impetus infra densas hostium acies immisit. Quemcumque attingebat Deum inuocando solo ictu perimebat. Nec requieuit impetum suum facere donec quadringentos septuaginta uiros solo Caliburno gladio peremit" (61r-v.147).

[74] "Quod uidentes Britones densatis turmis illum sequntur stragem undique facientes" (61v.147).

to win since Frollo's army is grossly outmatched, by risking his own person in single combat. In addition, by doing so Arthur succeeds in increasing his personal prestige, as well as his overall reputation as a powerful king able to expand his territory, efficiently manage his military resources, and defeat an impressive foe in order to bring a swift end to the battle, save many lives, and simultaneously demonstrate his own battle prowess.

While the fight with Frollo is still very much within the military context—it is witnessed by both armies, its purpose is to decide the ongoing battle—the fight with the giant of Mont Saint Michel is a personal quest, more in keeping with romance than chronicle. The quest is first suggested in a dream open to multiple interpretations, but which Arthur's men take to mean that he shall defeat a giant. Arthur himself thinks the dream relates to himself and the Emperor and his conflict with Rome, though it could also portend the fight to come with Mordred. All three come to pass, so the point is moot. Suffice it to say that on the eve of a personal adventure, Arthur has had a portentous dream, marking the quest out for him in particular, in keeping with both romance and epic conventions. The quest is furthermore personally motivated by the familial connection between Arthur and the young lady who has been abducted to satisfy the lusts of the giant: Helena is the niece of Duke Hoel, King Arthur's own nephew.

Arthur decides to undertake the quest secretly, though Geoffrey insists his motives are still informed by his role as king: "Being a man of such outstanding courage, he had no need to lead a whole army against monsters of this sort. Not only was he himself strong enough to destroy them, but by doing so he wanted to inspire his men" (x.3).[75] He takes with him only his seneschal Kay and his cup-bearer Bedevere. Geoffrey goes to great lengths to build up the

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[75] "Tanta nanque uirtute preualendo negligebat contra talia monstra exercitum ducere cum et suos hoc modo inanimaret et solus ad illa destruenda sufficeret" (66v.165).

suspense of the encounter. First "the news was brought to Arthur" (x.3)[76] that there was a

malicious giant in the area who had snatched Helena, which inspires Arthur to undertake the

quest in the first place. A more detailed and sinister description of the monster is provided by

the young lady's nurse, whom Bedevere comes upon when seeking the monster's hideout and

who provides the particulars of his foul crimes. In these descriptions and the ones that follow,

the giant's monstrosity is stressed: he is called inhuman, foul, and bestial, and when they

discover him, he is covered in blood, gnawing on bones like an animal. Even the way he fights

is likened to that of an animal: "Just as a boar hurls itself at the huntsman, despite the latter's

boar-spear, so the giant rushed against the King's sword" (x.4).[77] As in the fight with Frollo,

Arthur plunges his sword into his foe's head and is victorious. He laughs, pleased with his

achievement, and takes the giant's head as a trophy in order to reap fully the glory of his quest.

The glory comes from the physical trophy of this slain giant but also from a moment of story-

telling, in which Arthur recalls another giant he defeated who also threatened to emasculate

kings, in this case not by stealing and raping their women but by taking their most visible sign of

manhood—their beards—and wearing them as a coat. Arthur's encounter with the giant of Mont

Saint Michel is thus habitualized: killing giants is apparently a matter of course for this great

king. The aftermath of the adventure stresses that Arthur did not sneak off in the night to fight

the giant out of any fear of failure, but to orchestrate the moment of triumph that ensues:

returning to camp at dawn to the astonished looks and praises of the men, the mystical nature of

his person and his kingship cemented. At this moment it seems as if Arthur cannot possibly fail

in any martial exploit that he undertakes. And technically, Arthur does not ever fail on the field.

The campaign against Lucius is a success, and he is on the point of marching on Rome when

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[76] "nunciatur Arturo" (66v.165)

[77] "uelut aper per uenabulum in uenatorem, ita irruit per gladium in regum" (67r.165).

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news of Mordred's treachery at home forces him to return to England. Even then, when the tale

of Arthur is so clearly coming to its tragic end, he still crushes Mordred's coup.

The view of ideal kingship that emerges from Geoffrey's depiction of Arthur is therefore

nuanced and complex: Arthur is above all versatile, a striking combination of the learning and

sophistication of classical times with the fearsome fighting ability of heroic warrior kings. This

versatility is particularly suited to the time. Geoffrey is writing at a moment of great political

uncertainty and change, when the notion of a king as a conqueror and head of an army, like

William, was still very much in evidence and an important part of a king's role, while at the

same time a new kind of government, deriving its power from a court, administered not by

warriors or knightly lords, but by an army of secular clerics and "new men" was emerging.

Arthur effectively straddles these two conceptions of kingship. He is as capable of inspiring his

men on the battlefield with his words as he is with his deeds. In the battle with Lucius, for

example, he first lets his men take the lead but when things begin to go badly he rushes in to the

rescue, shouting rousing words about liberty and glory before "dash[ing] straight at the enemy"

and "forcing them to vomit forth their souls with their life-blood" (x.11)—in one of the

Historia's more evocative description of battle.[78] As admirable as Arthur's courage is in its own

right, as we have seen before in his other feats of arms, what is most important is the impact that

seeing his great deeds has on his men: "When the Britons saw their King fighting in this way,

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[78] The whole passage, including the rousing speech and description of Arthur in action, reads: " 'Quid facitis, uiri?
Ut quid muliebres permittitis illesos abire? Ne abscedat ullus uiuus! Mementote dexterarum uestrarum que tot preliis
exercitate terdena regna potestati mee subdiderunt. Mementote auorum uestrorum quos Romani dum fortiores erant
tributarios fecerunt. Mementote libertatis uestre quam semiuiri isti et uobis demere debiliores affectant. Ne abeat
ullus uiuus, ne abeat! Quid facitis?' Hec et plura alia uociferando irruebat in hostes, prosternebat, cedebat, et
cuicumque obuiabat aut ipsum aut ipsius equum uno ictu interficiebat. Diffugiebant ergo ipsum uelut belue ferocem
leonem quem seua fames instimulat ad deuorandum quicquid casus subuectat. Arma sua nichil eis proficiebant quin
Caliburnus dextra tam uirtuosi Regis uibratus cogeret ipsos animas eructare cum sanguine" (71r-71v.174)

they became more bold" (x.11).[79] In addition to a fighter and leader of men on the battlefield,

we have seen how Arthur is also a strategist, politician, dispenser of justice, and head of state

who can preside over a lavish court, dispense gifts to his men, and judiciously listen to their

counsel, all of which suggests the need at the time for a king to be at once head of court (a

largely cultural role), head of state (political), and head of his armies (martial).

V. Kingship during the Anarchy: Arthur as Twelfth-Century Exemplar

In his representation of Arthur, Geoffrey makes a political statement about the nature of

good kingship. The two rivals for the throne at the time he was writing, Stephen and Matilda,

fall far short of this ideal. Whereas Henry I had been adept at managing powerful noblemen—

keeping those powers in check when necessary, raising up so-called "new men," beholden to him

for the favors they enjoyed, and so forth[80]—neither Stephen nor Matilda had much talent for

winning or keeping friends; indeed, they all too frequently estranged valuable allies.[81]

Obviously, some shifts in loyalty were motivated by self-interest: magnates attempting to

preserve their holdings and positions of influence as the tide turned one way or the other, as we

saw earlier with Waleran of Meulan, for example. But the personalities of both of the claimants

appear to have been at the root of a number of defections as well.

For example, the Empress Matilda's personal failings sabotaged the closest moment she

came to being crowned queen. Her campaign was going well in 1141: Stephen was captured at

Lincoln in February; his brother Henry, Bishop of Winchester and papal legate, who had

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[79] "UIso igitur rege suo in hunc modum decertare Britones maiorem audatiam capessunt" (71v.174).

[80] For examples of Henry's deft maneuvering of his followers, see R.W. Southern "The Place of Henry I in English History."

[81] R.H.C. Davis includes a handy chart in *King Stephen 1135-1154* to keep track of the frequently shifting loyalties, marking the "Principal Participants in the Civil War 1136-5" against the leader they supported in any given year (Appendix II, page 145).

facilitated Stephen's usurpation of the crown in the first place, had come over to Matilda's side and recognized her as Lady of the English, hoping to find her friendlier to church interests; and she was marching towards London in order to be consecrated at Westminster. She was able to purchase the short-lived loyalty of Geoffrey de Mandeville, whose support was necessary for winning over the Londoners, as he was castellan of the Tower of London. But she soon lost the loyalty of both these men. She rejected Henry's advice that Stephen's son Eustace be allowed to inherit the Honour of Boulogne and she insisted on her own right to invest bishops without the consent of the Church. "All chroniclers agree that in her hour of victory [Empress Matilda] displayed an intolerable pride and willfulness, refusing to take advice even from her oldest and noblest supporters" (Davis 61). Furthermore, she alienated Londoners, whose support she had yet to secure, by demanding a large sum of money, "presumably as a tallage" (Davis 61). The Londoners responded by supporting Stephen's queen, and driving the empress out with such suddenness that, the story goes, she had to leave her pre-coronation feast half-eaten on the table (King 6). According to Marjorie Chibnall, probably the historian most sympathetic to Matilda, she "had shown at the height of her power that she had neither the political judgment nor the understanding of men to enable her to act wisely in a crisis" (115).

The ever-opportunistic Geoffrey de Mandeville, recognizing that the empress was unlikely to be able to make good on the promises she had made him, switched loyalties again to support Queen Matilda, Stephen's wife, in her campaign against the empress. What happened next provides us with some evidence of Stephen's character. Stephen was released by his enemies in a prisoner exchange for Robert of Gloucester. For almost two years he treated Geoffrey as a trusted advisor, never letting on that he was holding a deep grudge for the way Geoffrey had treated his family, in particular for holding his daughter-in-law hostage in the

Tower. As soon as Geoffrey's support seemed expendable to the king, he pounced. He had

Geoffrey arrested at court, without him ever suspecting a thing, and forced him to surrender all

his castles. According to R.H.C. Davis, although in the short term Stephen's revenge appeared

"neatly managed," it had in the long term "unfortunate consequences since the arrest was, as

Henry of Huntingdon put it, 'more in accord with the wickedness of the earl than with the law of

nations, and more in accord with necessity than honest-dealing'. It was a sly trick rather than a

kingly act, and served to emphasize the strand of shiftiness in Stephen's character" (82). As

soon as he was released, the infuriated Geoffrey led a vicious rebellion against Stephen, so

notorious it is likely what inspired the author of the *Peterborough Chronicle* to make that now-

famous lament about the condition of the country during the civil war and to conclude "that

Christ and his saints slept."[82]

We might excuse Stephen's behavior in the treatment of Geoffrey as understandable,

given Geoffrey's conduct, but Stephen began to make a habit out of it, a policy, Davis argues,

that would prove disastrous for Stephen. When Ranulf, Earl of Chester, abandoned the

empress's cause and joined Stephen's ranks he was at first welcomed and showered with favor.

But the other earls encouraged doubts, and soon Stephen resorted to his "special technique of the

contrived quarrel at court leading to a disingenuously sudden arrest" (Davis 94) and the

forfeiture of castles and lands. This smacked of underhandedness, after all "Ranulf had been

arrested while he was in the king's peace and protection, and in contravention of the oath which

the king had sworn to him at Stamford" (Davis 95).   While Stephen's duplicity may have given

him "the military initiative and some cheap successes," in the long run it also "discouraged

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[82] For a fuller look at the description of the period in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* and its link to Geoffrey de Mandeville, see Davis, 83 and John Horace Round, *Geoffrey de Mandeville: A Study of the Anarchy* especially page 214.

further defections from the empress's party, and ruined all hopes of persuading his opponents to

abandon the struggle" (Davis 95). Like Geoffrey de Mandeville, Ranulf began a campaign of

revolt as soon as he was released.

Though clearly not gifted at managing men, both Matilda and Stephen were capable of

demonstrating bravery. Matilda was naturally held back by her sex from participating in the

battles themselves, though she certainly knew danger, particularly during the sieges of

Winchester and Oxford.[83] Her escape from Oxford in 1142, in particular, became the stuff of

legend:

> William of Malmesbury says that she escaped by a side door and
> walked all the way to Abingdon, from there going by horse to the
> castle of Wallingford, which was under the control of one of her
> supporters, Brian fitz Count. In the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*…we
> have the additional information that she was let down from the
> tower by ropes. But how then did she effect her escape? The *Gesta
> Stephani* supplies the information that 'the ground was white with
> an extremely heavy fall of snow and there was a thick crust of ice
> on the water.' Henry of Huntingdon supplied a further refinement,
> that for camouflage the empress was 'wrapped in a white cloak,
> [and so] deceived the eyes of the besiegers, dazzled by the
> reflection of the snow.' (King 5)

Still, their modern biographers can never muster more than lukewarm praise for either side: John

T. Appleby ends his study, *The Troubled Reign of King Stephen*, by concluding, "Stephen, in

spite of every advantage of birth, education, and the example of his uncle, simply was not a big

enough man to be king of England in 1135. Neither was anyone else" (207)—basically, Stephen

was the best they could do in a pinch. Davis is similarly qualified in his summation of King

Stephen, whom he calls "a man of great activity but little judgment" (127). He fleshes out our

picture of Stephen thus:

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[83] See Chibnall, page 96-97, for more on Matilda's role in military matters.

He had come to the throne at a time when civil war was almost
inevitable, and the need was for a king of heroic proportions.
Stephen was no hero. Although he was an excellent warrior and
showed enterprise and speed in the beginning of campaigns and
sieges, he too often failed to complete them; and though he seemed
cheerful and gay, beneath the surface he was mistrustful and sly.
He was basically small-minded, and as a result he did not inspire
the devotion which his grandfather or uncle had inspired; even his
panegyrist, the author of the *Gesta Stephani*, found him colourless.
(127)

He is generally credited with good intentions, but rarely the good sense, political acumen, or

follow-through to bring them about. Similarly, the Empress Matilda is generally considered to

have been haughty, imperious, and paradoxically too much of a woman to be ruler, but too

manly for comfort.[84]

In contrast to these tragically inadequate historical figures, Geoffrey of Monmouth

presents us with the depiction of King Arthur discussed above: courageous, decisive, honest,

courtly, and just. His bravery and political acumen stand in sharp contrast to the traits of both

royals. Of course, many of the examples I have given of Stephen's and Matilda's actions

occurred after Geoffrey wrote the *Historia*; still, they speak to the character of the two potential

rulers of England. Geoffrey could not have known what the outcome of civil war would be or

even that it would drag on for nineteen long years; but it seems likely he had an inkling of the

trouble to come and the character of those who would struggle for control, but be ill-equipped to

direct the complex forces at work. Moreover, from the start there were serious questions about

the legitimacy of either one to take the throne: Stephen had clearly sworn an oath before God to

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[84] This is the central problem Chibnall addresses in her full-length study of Matilda – see, for example, pages 62-63.
H.A. Cronne's chapter "The King and the Empress" in *The Reign of Stephen* outlines Cronne's impressions of both
Stephen and Matilda (with attention decidedly skewed towards Stephen). He does not treat either too kindly:
Stephen is too stupid and unimpressive to be a bad king exactly—he was easily deceived, unstable, impulsive,
lacked self-confidence, and occasionally affable to a fault; Matilda is characterized as contemptuous, arrogant, and
tactless, though beautiful and possessing a steady nerve (67-112).

support Matilda's succession; Matilda was a woman, married to a foreign count, and members of Stephen's camp questioned the legitimacy of her parents' marriage and therefore her birth.[85] In contrast, Arthur's legitimacy is insisted upon:[86] not only is he the rightful heir of the dead King Uther, he is also supported by the people, anointed by the Archbishop Dubricius, and proves time and again that he is temperamentally suited to his role. Is it any wonder, then, that Geoffrey's twelfth-century readers should long for the stable, admirable kingship of Arthur?

VI. Longing in the Face of Loss

With Britain on the brink of civil war in his own time, Geoffrey presents a vision of kingship calculated to inspire readers with longing. The *Historia* can be read as a sort of warning about and a demonstration of the dangers of civil strife, particularly between royal family members squabbling over power.[87] In addition to that warning, Geoffrey provides a blueprint for the kind of leader capable of avoiding such a fate, presents a nation that comes together behind a strong leader, and demonstrates that such a nation is capable of true greatness, of overcoming its enemies and even of conquering new lands. Tragically, this hope Geoffrey provides in the image of Arthur is only temporary. Even with a very great king, such as he, history comes full circle, and strife reasserts itself. The long golden age, and its optimism, is

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[85] Henry's first wife, Matilda of Scotland had been in a convent, therefore there was some question about her eligibility for marriage. Matilda insisted she had never taken vows as a nun and was there only for her schooling. Archbishop Anselm was consulted and he and a council of bishops approved of the marriage. Still, these "murmurs" were enough for Stephen's lawyers to introduce doubt into the Lateran Council taking up the issue of succession in 1139. See Chibnall, pages 75-76 and 86-87.

[86] See Helen Fulton, "History and Myth: Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae*," page 51.

[87] For example, Leckie argues, "The *Historia regum Britanniae* is first and foremost a didactic work offering a block of history in light of which subsequent events were to be interpreted. The problems of royal succession, partition, and civil strife which plague the Britons resemble nothing so much as the difficulties of Geoffrey's own day." Furthermore, "there can be little doubt that for Geoffrey the crucial importance of unified rule was an inescapable lesson of both British and Anglo-Norman history" and that that lesson is emphasized by the frequent "depict[ions of] the awful consequences of discord and division" (57).

subsumed into Geoffrey's generally more pessimistic worldview. Siân Echard argues that the

Arthurian section of the *Historia regum Britanniae* is "a suspension of the work's relentless

chronology" that "seems designed to obviate or suspend" the pessimism that the work overall

encourages (48-49): "For pages, instead of paragraphs, we are allowed to dwell on the strengths

of a king and the glory he brings to his people" (49). But this respite, this hope is calculated,

according to Echard's reading, to make the impact of the return to pessimism and failure that

much more forceful: "Geoffrey's manipulation of narrative momentum and audience reaction

hammers home his grim vision of the nature of the historical process much more effectively than

would direct statement" (49): "While the result of the (temporary) removal of the Arthuriad from

the process of history is for a time simply entertaining, the final effect is quite devastating, as this

best of worlds, apparently apart from the world, succumbs to the same forces which seem to lurk

everywhere in British history" (51).

But to charge Geoffrey with such fatalism and with spending so much space in his

narrative getting our hopes up only to be able to dash them that much more effectively is, it

seems to me, a profoundly cynical reading of the *Historia*, reducing the entire Arthurian section

to an elaborate and rather cruel con. It undervalues the nostalgia and longing with which

Geoffrey presents Arthur, as well as the real hope the greatness of Arthur's reign provides for the

future of Britain. Merlin prophesies that "The Boar," clearly representing Arthur, "shall be

extolled in the mouths of its peoples, and its deeds will be as meat and drink to those who tell

tales" (vii.3).[88] It does not matter that the peace and prosperity of Arthur's reign cannot last; the

fact that it occurred at all provides us with a story to tell and retell, remember and long for. It

hardly matters whether Arthur's life story is the stuff of fact or fiction—its existence as a

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[88] "In ore populorum celebrabitur et actus eius cibus erit narrantibus" (49v.112).

narrative of the past to be retold into the future gives it the status of collective history for an emerging nation to look to with collective nostalgia. In this prophecy, if in none other, Merlin— or rather, Geoffrey—is eerily prescient. He seems to have recognized that he was tapping into a need for a certain kind of tale and that he was providing a hero worthy of legend, worthy of the longing of the nation. His own version was ultimately so successful in inspiring nostalgia that not only did the *Historia regum Britanniae* become one of the most copied and disseminated manuscripts of the twelfth century, but it also had a lasting and profound influence on both history and literature for centuries. Geoffrey's version provides the framework of the life of Arthur that remained basically intact across centuries of reinvention and retelling. His idealized history inspires and feeds nostalgia—so profoundly, in fact, that we have never tired to this day of revisiting this golden age, as often now on the screen as on the page. Far from resulting in pessimism, it is the central paradox of Arthurian legend that the tragic end of its hero rather heightens the sense of nostalgia than destroys it.

Geoffrey did not, of course, call his work nostalgic—the word did not yet exist. Furthermore, he was concerned with constructing a narrative, not writing a commentary. Nevertheless, nostalgia is a structuring impulse, particularly of the Arthurian section, in the elaborate construction of the ideal king and in the passing of his court into history. Furthermore, Geoffrey's brand of nostalgia is optimistic. There is a sense of melancholy at the ending of such a glorious reign and the presumed death of an ideal king. Indeed, the ending and death are necessary for there to be nostalgia at all, since nostalgia depends on the object of longing being definitively in the past. But there is also a note of hope that the greatness of Britain may one day be restored.

Geoffrey does everything he can to soften the blow of Mordred's betrayal of Arthur and Arthur's demise. Unlike the protagonists of many later versions, his Arthur bears no blame for the destruction of his court. Indeed, he is at his most glorious, most admirable, marching on Rome, when news of Mordred's treachery reaches him. That treachery is apparently motivated only by Mordred's desire for power, which has corrupted him in Arthur's absence. He is so far corrupted, in fact, that he not only usurps the crown but also incestuously and adulterously lives with the queen, invites the pagan Saxons back to Britain to fight on his side, and even makes alliances with the long-time sworn enemies of Britain, the Scots, Picts, and Irish. Together, these actions show the depth of Mordred's depravity and disloyalty, not only to his king, but also to his country.

As a narrator, Geoffrey denies responsibility for the direction the tale of King Arthur takes at the moment he shifts to describing his demise. He refuses to tell us the circumstances of Guinevere's liaison with Mordred, excusing himself to Robert of Gloucester: "About this particular matter, most noble Duke, Geoffrey of Monmouth prefers to say nothing" (xi.1). As for the battle between Mordred and Arthur, he invokes his mysterious source once again—the only other time he mentions it aside from the dedication and the *explicit*: "He will, however, in his own poor style and without wasting words, describe the battle which our most famous King fought against his nephew, once he had returned to Britain after his victory; for that he found in the British treatise already referred to. He heard it, too, from Walter of Oxford, a man most learned in all branches of history" (xi.1).[89] This invocation of his source in effect absolves Geoffrey of responsibility for the end of the golden age. It is a sort of apology; Geoffrey is, in

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[89] "Nec hoc quidem, consul auguste, Galfidus Monemutensis tacebit sed, ut in prefato Britannico sermone inuenit et a Gwaltero Oxenefordensi in multis histories peritissimo uiro audiuit, uili licet stilo breuiter propalabit que prelia inclitus ille rex post uictoriam istam in Britanniam reuersus cum nepote suo commiserit" (72r.177)

effect, reminding us that he must follow the tale as he found it in his source. Even if we do not

accept that Geoffrey had such a source, reminding us of it here has the same effect rhetorically.

Geoffrey professes to be as reluctant to narrate as his audience is to hear of the disastrous end of

Arthur.

This reluctance can be seen in the description of the battle as well. For all that Mordred

employs Britain's most hated enemies to fight for his cause, the final battle is still presented as

part of a civil war, with countrymen pitted against one another. For Geoffrey, "It is heartrending

to describe what slaughter was inflicted on both sides, how the dying groaned, and how great

was the fury of those attacking. Everywhere men were receiving wounds themselves or

inflicting them, dying or dealing out death" (xi.2).[90] Indeed, he shies away from describing

Arthur's death; it is almost an afterthought. No one is shown delivering the fateful stroke. At

the end of a list of the men killed in battle we are told, "Arthur himself, our renowned King, was

mortally wounded and carried off to the Isle of Avalon, so that his wounds might be attended to"

(xi.2),[91] leaving his condition ambiguous—Arthur is apparently mortally wounded, yet he is

taken away to have his wound healed—and keeping open the popularly held belief that Arthur

will return at a moment of need. Since Geoffrey must narrate the end of Arthur's reign in order

to continue with his history of the British people, he gives him the noblest death possible, in the

midst of battle, such as a warrior might wish, but tinged too with the mysticism that has always

surrounded the king. Furthermore, his death comes only once he has secured victory, though

fighting rages on and results in his apparent death.

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[90] "Fiunt ilico in utrisque partibus tante strages, tanti morientium gemitus, tanti inuadentium furores quantos et dolorosum et laboriosum est describere" (72v.178).

[91] "Set et inclitus ille rex Arturus letaliter uulneratus est; qui illinc ad sananda uulnera sua in insulam Auallonis" (73r.178)

The death of Arthur signals the beginning of the decline of the British, though they manage to hang on through the reigns of several more kings before abandoning Britain altogether to the rule of the Saxons. Cadwallader is the last British king, and by this time the island itself seems to be rejecting British rule: there is infighting, followed by a famine and plague so severe the people are forced to abandon their land, leaving it open to their longtime enemies. After recovering his strength, Cadwallader prepares to reclaim his land when he hears an "Angelic Voice," which

> spoke to him in a peal of thunder and told him to stop. God did not wish the Britons to rule in Britain any more, until the moment should come which Merlin had prophesied to Arthur.[92] The voice ordered Cadwallader to go to Rome and visit Pope Sergius. There he should do penance and he would be numbered among the blessed. What is more, the Voice added that, as a reward for its faithfulness, the British people would occupy the island again at some time in the future, once the appointed moment should come. This, however, could not be before the relics which once belonged to the Britons had been taken over again and they had transported them from Rome to Britain. Only when they had on show again the relics of all their other saints, which had been hidden away because of the pagan invasion, would they reoccupy their lost kingdom. (xii.17)[93]

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[92] As Thorpe notes, since Merlin never meets Arthur and in fact his last appearance in the tale is at Arthur's conception, this is not possible. Geoffrey seems to be referring to the Prophecies of Merlin (282). The mention of Arthur at this moment, however, is significant in that it makes clear that when the British people do return it will be with the kind of glorious reign associated with Arthur and his court. Geoffrey does not quite promise that Arthur himself will return, "a belief which prevailed among the Cornish and Bretons as early as 1113" (Loomis, "The Legend of Arthur's Suvival" 64), and which was noted in other histories and legends as a belief strongly held by common folk. (Apparently, "anyone who proclaimed in Armorica that Arthur was dead like other men would be lucky to escape being crushed by the stones of his hearers"! See Loomis, "The Oral Diffusion of the Arthurian Legend," page 54.)

[93] " uox angelica dum classem pararet ut ceptis suis desisteret. Nolebat enim Deus Britones in <insula> Britannie diutius regnare antequam tempus illud uenisset quod Merlinus Arturo phophetauerat. Precepit etiam illi ut Romam ad Sergium papam iret ubi peracta penitentia inter sanctos annumeraretur. Dicebat etiam populum Britonum per meritum fidei ipsius insulam in futuro adepturum postquam fatale tempus superueniret. Nec id tamen prius futurum quam Britones reliquiis eius potiti illas ex Roma in Britanniam asportarent. Tunc demum reuelatis etiam caeterorum sanctorum reliquiis quae propter paganorum inuasionem abscondite fuerant amissum regnum recuperarent" (74r.205).

The intervention of the Voice of God is rather startling considering the generally secular bent of

Geoffrey's work. But it serves to absolve the Britons of abandoning their land to that "odious

race" (xii.16),[94] the Saxons, and it reasserts hope and the possibility of rekindling the greatness

of Arthur's reign, thus mitigating the pessimism attributed to Geoffrey's conception of history by

Echard. Falling back on the sacred also introduces a note of faith and sentiment to the end of

British rule that is in keeping with the nostalgia of the Arthurian section. British rule, though

cyclical within the body of the *Historia*, turns out to have a teleology not entirely dissimilar to

Christian models of history, complete with a messianic figure (Arthur) and an optimistic hope for

future redemption.

VII. Conclusion: Geoffrey of Monmouth and the Invention of History

Geoffrey presents the moment in which he sits down to compose his history as a

realization of an absence. He seeks to reflect on and revel in the glorious past of his nation, but

finds no available text with which to indulge his curiosity and longing:

> Whenever I have chanced to think about the history of the kings of
> Britain, on those occasions when I have been turning over a great
> many such matters in my mind, it has seemed a remarkable thing
> to me that, apart from such mention of them as Gildas and Bede
> had each made in a brilliant book on the subject, I have not been
> able to discover anything at all on the kings who lived here before
> the Incarnation of Christ, or indeed about Arthur and all the others
> who followed the Incarnation. Yet the deeds of these men were
> such that they deserved to be praised for all time. (i.1)[95]

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[94] "nefandus populus" (78v.204)

[95] Cum mecum multa et de multis sepius animo reuoluens in hystoriam regum Britannie inciderem, in mirum contuli quod infra mentionem quam de eis Gildas et Beda luculento tractatu fecerant nichil de regibus qui ante incarnationem Christi inhabitauerant, nichil etiam de Arturo ceterisque compluribus qui post incarnationem successerunt repperissem, cum et gesta eorum digna eternitate laudis constarent" (18r.1)

Having established that there is this gap in the available histories, Geoffrey seeks to fill it, taking whatever scraps of oral and written history he can find and embellishing them into a comprehensive narrative that covers everything from the foundation of Britain by a Trojan war hero to the vicissitudes of early British rulers. He takes a minor Welsh folk figure and aggrandizes him into a heroic and cultured king to rival Alexander and Charlemagne. And he succeeds in presenting this king in such a way that not only does he inspire admiration, but he makes us want to experience his adventures again and again, and to follow his example: this is the essence of nostalgia.

Though he may have invented much of his tale wholesale, in presenting it as history, indeed going to great pains to insist on it as history, Geoffrey provides a compelling origin story for his nation, and actually participates in constructing the notion of that nation *qua* nation. According to Turville-Petre, "The form that a nation takes is justified by the history of its territory, people, and institutions, so that writing history is fundamental to the establishment of national identity" (71). In filling this historical gap and satisfying a need for ancient heroism, Geoffrey creates a British mythos that is so compelling to readers that it remains not only the standard historical narrative until the sixteenth (or even seventeenth) century (Hanning 174), but also becomes the example *par excellence* of British government, culture, society, kingship, and knighthood at their best and the model for generations of princes and knights to strive to imitate.

Furthermore, not only is Geoffrey the founder of the Arthurian tradition in its plot details (if I can apply a literary term to this pseudo-history), he creates the nostalgia indelibly associated with it. This attitude is distinct from primitivism, common in backward-looking ancient texts, and which is fundamentally pessimistic. It is a form of longing rooted in loss and melancholy, but nevertheless optimistic. It envisions the past as great, ideal even, and also long gone, but it

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revels in revisiting that past through narrative and is even willing to hold onto hope of its return. It combines the sense of loss and longing with admiration and even delight. This attitude created by Geoffrey and modified by those who followed in his footsteps is, I believe, fundamental to what has made Arthurian legend a staple of Western literature.

Chapter 3

From Reflective to Restorative Nostalgia: Chrétien de Troyes' Romances and the *Vulgate Queste del Saint Graal*

I. Reflective Nostalgia and the Impression of History in Chrétien de Troyes' Arthurian Romances

Geoffrey of Monmouth's version of history certainly caught on: in short order the *Historia regum Britanniae* was translated, most famously into Anglo-Norman French by Wace, whose version was in turn translated into English by Laȝamon, and copies made their way around Europe.[96] It became the standard account of what had been (and remains to this day) a dark age of British history.[97] But, as important and influential as Geoffrey's model of Arthur as a civilized hero-king was, another version of the Arthurian court was produced in the twelfth century that would have an enormous impact on literary history and, I will argue, on the very conception of knighthood.[98] The Arthurian romances of Chrétien de Troyes share with Geoffrey of Monmouth a sense of nostalgia or a longing to visit the idealized past of King Arthur's court through narrative; however, Chrétien's sense of Arthurian setting and the distance he creates between his readers and the time of Arthur are crucial to understanding the way the audience is invited to relate to the tales and the characters. The result is a much more contemplative style of

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[96] See Julia Crick, *The Historia Regum Britannie of Geoffrey of Monmouth IV: Dissemination and Reception in the Later Middle Ages* for a detailed study of the circulation of the *Historia.* She identifies manuscripts connected to the Low Countries, Champagne, as well as other areas of France, Germany, Italy, Normandy and Britain (210-215). She also lists all 215 extant manuscripts of the *Historia regum Britanniae* and their present location (xi-xvi).

[97] Alan Lane gives a useful overview of the collapse of Roman institutions and the paucity of information about sub-Roman civilization in "The End of Roman Britain and the Coming of the Saxons," including recent scholarship on the issue. The standard work on the period is Leslie Alcock's *Arthur's Britain: History and Archaeology AD 367-634,* though Lane details the ways more recent scholars have updated Alcock's work.

[98] Geoffrey's version will reemerge, particularly in insular versions of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, where the two traditions (chronicle and romance) will compete, only to be joined together by Malory, a subject to be discussed in greater detail in chapters four and five below.

nostalgia, dependent on distance, complicated by occasional failures, marked by irony, and occasionally left fragmentary and incomplete. These characteristics, which in Chrétien's hands result in the beautiful and sometimes haunting aesthetic of romance, will have important consequences for the trajectory of Arthuriana in the later Middle Ages. In particular, continuators of Chrétien and prose compilers, like the authors of the so-called *Vulgate Cycle* (sometimes called the *Lancelot-Grail Cycle*), come to interpret the disconnection between the knights' idealism and their failures in a way that is more forcefully moralizing, with a more explicitly Christian message. In the *Vulgate Cycle*, ideals become narrowed and harder to live up to, with more at stake. Under the heavy-handed ideology of the *Queste del Saint Graal*, the nostalgic reading is threatened. What we might expect to be the apex of the Arthurian court— the achievement of the Grail Quest—turns out to be its nadir: the majority of the knights are failures, adventures – the *raison d'etre* of the Round Table—are ended, and the court proceeds headlong into destruction when it collapses in *La Mort le roi Artu*, with the blame squarely on Arthur and his worldly knights.

In order to analyze Chrétien's particular use of nostalgia, it will be helpful to take a moment to recall the distinction Svetlana Boym draws between two nostalgic tendencies in *The Future of Nostalgia*: restorative and reflective. These labels are useful for talking about the evolution of Arthurian tales, their effect on the reader, and how the authors engage with the nostalgia imbedded in the story since its inception. According to Boym, restorative nostalgics seek to deny the distance between the past and the present by attempting to recreate or restore the perceived ideal. Reflective nostalgics, on the other hand, are content to muse on the past, recognizing its distance and its "pastness." Both Geoffrey and Chrétien fall into this second category, though in different ways due at least in part to their differing genres. Geoffrey is

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clearly writing a history, though his inventiveness cannot be denied.[99] Still, the setting is the real

world and, purportedly, the actual past. One might point to Geoffrey's interest in place names,

geography, ethnography, and other such concrete details as ways in which Geoffrey takes pains

to locate his work in the historical realm. His project is to seek origins, provide examples of the

best and worst kings, and create a heroic past worthy of his patrons and audience. He suggests

present potential by reveling in past greatness. Therefore, his brand of reflective nostalgia is

correspondingly historical: it fleshes out a full and complete history, listing every ruler from

Brutus to Cadwallader; it focuses almost exclusively on politics; and it provides exemplars the

audience can look to with longing, but it does so without advocating a re-creation of the past.

Chrétien de Troyes' works are also reflectively nostalgic, but in a way that comes to be

associated with romance. Perhaps the most distinctive change in romantic retellings of (pseudo-)

historical material is one of motivation: in history (and epic) deeds are motivated primarily by

political concerns: by loyalty to one's king and by the need to protect the state or the community

against outside forces that threaten it. Romance lacks this motivating force. As Erich Auerbach

puts it in the classic treatment of this characteristic lack of external motivation, "The Knight Sets

Forth" in *Mimesis*: "Here [in romance] the feudal ethos serves no political function; it serves no

practical reality at all; it has become absolute" (134). As another critic puts it, "honor and glory

are not only the result but in many cases the purpose of exploits; the knight has ceased to be

simply the instrument and has become the end" (Lacy 2). To do great deeds is itself the purpose

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[99]Although he acknowledges some "blurring" between fiction and history in the Middle Ages, D.H. Green argues
that there is a clear distinction between them, as well as between faulty or bad history and fiction. For Green there is
no question that Geoffrey is writing history: "It may…be a fabrication or deception, but there is no sign that he
intended his work to be seen through or that he invited its recipients to be complicit with him in any kind of fictional
contract. To be effective, propaganda has to be believed as true; no propagandist can afford the counter-productive
luxury of winking openly at those whose interests he serves, implying that they know as well as he that he does not
present the factual truth. In view of this we may take Geoffrey's work, as most of his contemporaries did, as
(fabricated or imperfect) history, but not, as is occasionally the case in scholarship, as fiction in the technical sense
with which we are concerned" (170). I treat the questions of fiction versus history in greater detail below.

of knighthood in romance. If feats of arms have any point beyond themselves it is for a knight to

prove himself worthy of his beloved. Wace, whose *Roman de Brut* is a sort of way station

between history and romance, signals this change when he interpolates a passage into the

discussion of Arthur's advisors over what to do about the Roman ambassadors who have come to

demand tribute. When Cador of Cornwall extols the virtues of fighting, just as he had in the

Historia regum Britanniae, Gawain chimes in: "Peace is good after war and the land is the better

and lovelier for it. Jokes are excellent and so are love affairs. It's for love and their beloved that

knights do knightly deeds" (10767-72).[100] As Laura Ashe emphasizes, "Wace says not that

ladies love those who are successful" – which is as far as Geoffrey goes – "but that men seek out

success in order to please ladies" ("The Birth of Romance"). This release of character and action

from traditional motivating forces allows the knights to exist in a purely ideal space, resulting in

a sense of nostalgia that is based largely on aesthetics—more concerned with the manners,

rituals, appearance, reputation, and social forms than political or social realities—lending a

feeling of otherworldliness to the romances and allowing Chrétien to evoke the past as a

nebulous "long ago," rather than a fully realized historical space. Finally, it leaves Chrétien free

to introduce a new object of nostalgia: *fin amour*.

The categories of history and fiction are, of course, notoriously slippery in the Middle

Ages—and if we wish to discuss romance, rather than fiction more broadly, there are even more

difficulties, since the term was neither fixed nor theorized.[101] Though generally considered to be

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[100] "Bone est la pais emprés la guerre,/Plus bele e mieldre en est la terre;/Mult sunt bones les gaberies/E bones sunt les drueries/Pur amistié e pur amies/Funt chervaliers chevaleries" (both the translation above and the Anglo-Norman French here are taken from Judith Weiss's edition of Wace's *Roman de Brut*, page 270-1).

[101] "French *romanz* meant at first any work translated from Latin into a Romance vernacular, and came only later to denote a work of narrative literature, including not only romance, but several other genres" (Green 27). Green notes that *romanz* was used to refer to all sorts of translations, from religious works to bestiaries to philosophy. In

of different—opposite, even—narrative categories, both Geoffrey and Chrétien assert truth and

claim to be addressing the (actual) past and both frequently deal with the fabulous. There was not

much theoretical attention given to genre in the twelfth century, yet there does seem to have been

a general appreciation of the difference between history and fiction. "The High Middle Ages,"

according to Peter Ainsworth, "were not ignorant of the fundamental distinction, so familiar to

us, between historical and fictional account" (387). The most recent account of history's place in

the trivium would have been Isidore of Seville's seventh century *Etymologiae,* which categorizes

history as a subset of grammar. Isidore distinguishes between *fabula*, *historia*, and *argumenta*:

"*Historia* are things which really have been done; *argumenta* are those thing[s] which in fact

have not been done, but could be done; *fabulae* are things which neither have been nor could be

done, since they are contrary to nature."[102] Deborah Mauskopf Deliyannis notes, "After Isidore,

theoretical writing about history ceases" (4). She leaves us with this (rather tentative) definition

of medieval history writing in her introduction to *Historiography in the Middle Ages*: "The focus

on 'truth' as a characteristic of history-writing, based on the definitions of Cicero, Isidore, Bede,

and other authorities, did form part of the definition understood by most historians throughout

the Middle Ages….But historical truth itself was not necessarily understood in the same way by

every author" (4-5). Similarly, Ainsworth insists that while there was some fluidity between

notions of history and of fiction, there was still an underlying understanding of the difference

between history and fiction and even a distinction between the underlying facts (*res gestae*) and

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addition, a variety of terms were applied to what we now generally consider romances, including *conte, estoire, oevre,* and *livre* (n. 61, p 206).

[102] "Nam historiae sunt res verae quae factae sunt; argumenta sunt quae etsi facta non sunt, fieri tamen possunt; fabulae vero sunt quae nec factae sunt nec fieri possunt, quia contra naturam sunt." Isidore of Seville, *Etymologiae* I.44.5, ed. W.M. Lindsay, as quoted in Deborah Mauskopf Deliyannis's introduction to *Historiography in the Middle Ages,* page 3. Deliyannis points out that Isidore's taxonomy is "based on the classical tradition, inherited from (pseudo)Cicero, in the *Ad Herennium* and *De inventione*: history was a genre of prose writing, one of the three main parts of *narratio,* alongside *fabula* and *argumentum*" (n 6, pg 3).

the historian's account (*historia rerum gestarum*), "even if these occasionally contained magic

spells, fantasies and ghostly apparitions" (389). Dealing more specifically with the shift in genre

from Geoffrey to Chrétien, and arguing for "revolutionary innovation" (24) on Chrétien's part in

inventing something wholly new, D.H. Green does acknowledge that Latin chronicles like

Geoffrey's have "a place" in a discussion of fiction and fictionality in the twelfth century, but

stresses that they are not themselves fictions through and through; there is something

fundamentally different going on when one comes to Chrétien's works. For Green, that

something different is, in part, "the complicity between author and audience in fictionality" (13).

The traditional wisdom is that romances, including Chrétien's and indeed following his

example, are, by nature, *ahistorical*, i.e. that a lack of historicity is part of what makes a work a

romance. They take place in once-upon-a-time, fairy tale time, rather than historical time. As

John Finlayson puts it, "The *romance* is contemporaneous in its manners, dress, and architecture,

but totally outside of time and place in its actions. It may superficially contemporize, but it is not

concerned to actualize" ("Definitions" 59). Green goes even further: he speaks of the

"emancipation of the romance from history,"[103] arguing that the *matière de Bretagne* in

particular is "characterized by a process of dehistoricisation in its presentation of a folktale

world, divorced from real time and space and removed from history" (177). Robert W. Hanning

claims, "At no point in a romance of Chrétien de Troyes...can we speak of an historical level"

(175). All these critics have likely been influenced by Auerbach's reading of Chrétien in

Mimesis, in which he finds that courtly romances are not especially mimetic at all: "The courtly

romance is not reality shaped and set forth by art, but an escape into fable and fairy tale" (138).

Examples of the marvelous or of characters' visits to otherworldly settings—such as Gorre in

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[103] Here Green is paraphrasing F. Wolfzettel's "Probleme der Geschichtskonstrucktion im arthurischen Roman,"
page 345.

Lancelot or even Galloway in *Perceval*—serve as illustrations of Chrétien's unmooring from real-world historical concerns.[104]

Just because fiction is not fact, however, does not mean it is a collection of lies either. Fiction can convey its own sort of truth, universal truth, a characteristic associated with it since Aristotle's *Poetics.*[105] Furthermore, just because fiction is not history does not mean that it cannot deal with historical events: "Although rhetorical theory distinguishes between history and fiction, historical details may still be included in fictional works, a fact acknowledged by modern as well as by earlier theory" (Green 5). Chrétien, as we shall see, engages a historical understanding of Arthur, thereby evoking the nostalgia concomitant with the tale, but reimagines him and his court in a fairy-tale setting, allowing him to retool the object of longing to suit his own aims. By ignoring political concerns and the petty details of real life, Chrétien is able to present an absolute ideal of knighthood.[106]

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[104] Some scholars have argued for Chrétien's realism, often identifing particular episodes– the sweatshop encountered by Yvain at *Pesme Aventure* is perhaps the most common – as examples of Chrétien's engagement with the real world. Others contend that uncommon episodes like these are more the exceptions that prove the general rule of fantastical settings and situations. David Matthews gives a brief overview of the criticism of the *Pesme Aventure* episode, especially as related to realism in "Reading the Woman Reading: Culture and Commodity in Chrétien's Pesme Aventure Episode" (especially pages 113-16), though he largely rejects the realism of the passage and even the underlying assumptions about mimesis critics on both side of the issue make: "If there is is a mirror here, it is a blind one, its reflection partial. It is through such evasions and mystifications that medieval romance deals with its historical context" (118). Karl Uitti calls *Yvain* the most "realistic" of Chrétien's romances (86), while Jean Frappier claims that in *Yvain* Chrétien "manages in a compelling way to fuse the fabulous and the real" (116). Both have in mind, at least partly, the *Pesme Aventure* episode.

[105] Of course, it was Plato's attacks on fiction that were more familiar in the Middle Ages; Aristotle's *Poetics* was not available until the thirteenth century and so his views could only have been known through other classical authors who shared them, such as Ovid. For the relation of Aristotle, Plato, Ovid, and classical rhetoric to the present discussion of history and fiction, see Green pages 1-4.

[106] See Erich Auerbach, "A Knight Sets Forth" in *Mimesis,* especially pages 136-7: The attraction of romance "is due especially to two characteristics which distinguish it: it is absolute, raised above all earthly contingencies, and it gives those who submit to its dictates the feeling that they belong to a community of the elect, a circle of solidarity (the term comes from Hellmut Ritter, the Orientalist) set apart from the common herd. The ethics of feudalism, the ideal conception of the perfect knight, thus attained a very considerable and very long-lived influence."

Nostalgia, in its backward-looking stance, is based on an implied distinction between the past and the present. But it is not necessary that the conception of the past be based on reality or history, in the sense of documented, factual accounts. Nostalgia is by nature not only idealizing but even downright inventive. Reflective nostalgia in particular highlights the distance between the present and the past; distance is the very source of longing. This is evident in Chrétien's romances: the Arthurian world seems imaginary, illusory, ephemeral, but it is both positively past as well as definitely longed for. It is even distinctly othered—the world of Arthur and his court is clearly not our world or even Chrétien's world, however much it may sometimes look like it, as in the case of the *Pesme Aventure* episode in which women are forced to work in a realistic-sounding sweatshop. But it is not wholly a fairy-tale world either. The setting of Chrétien's romances at Arthur's court is a *de facto* mark of historicization: Arthur was, as far as twelfth-century readers were concerned, a real and heroic king who had lived in the distant past and who had had real and heroic knights in his retinue. If less was known about those knights, it simply meant there was considerable opportunity for storytelling, but that did not take away from the place of Arthur's court in history. Arthur's court becomes, in part, a marker of time and place in the romances: "il est moins un agent dans le récit qu'une sorte d'indice d'historicité….Il fixe un temps et un lieu. Il prouve que *cela fut*" ("He is less an agent in the tale than a sort of indicator of historicity…He fixes a time and a place…He proves it happened" Zumthor 76). The dress, the values, the "furniture" might be twelfth-century—as indeed they were in the *romans d'antiquité*—the episodes and marvels may be fairy tale-like, the tale itself may be fictional, but the setting is Arthurian, and therefore in the past.

Furthermore, Chrétien's romances can be neatly intercalated within the existing historiographical tradition. Geoffrey of Monmouth leaves a gap of twelve years of peaceful rule

between the subjugation of Britain and its surrounding territories and the conquest of Europe (ix, 11), but for that chronicler of wars and conquests they were of little interest except as an illustration of Arthur's greatness as a ruler. Wace opens up this narrative space a bit more when he notes the marvels that occurred at Arthur's court during the long peaceful time before the Roman campaign, though he prefers not to relate them lest they undermine his seriousness as a historian:

> In this time of great peace I speak of—I do not know if you have
> heard of it—the wondrous events appeared and the adventures
> were sought out which, whether for love of his generosity, or for
> fear of his bravery, are so often told about Arthur that they have
> become the stuff of fiction: not all lies, not all truth, neither total
> folly nor total wisdom. The raconteurs have told so many yarns,
> the story-tellers so many stories, to embellish their tales that they
> have made it all appear fiction. (9785-98)[107]

Chrétien seems to have taken this lacuna and exploited it, filling the years of peace with adventures he is free to invent, much like Geoffrey before him filled a gap in the historical record with the glory of Arthur's reign in the first place.[108] Indeed, part of the allure of the Arthurian

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[107] "Que pur amur de sa largesce,
Que pur poür de sa prüesce,
En cele grant pais ke jo di,
Ne sai si vus l'avez oi,
Furent les merveilles pruvees
E les aventures truvees
Ki d'Artur sunt tant recuntees
Ke a fable sunt aturnees:
Ne tut mençunge, ne tut veir,
Ne tut folie ne tut saveir.
Tant unt li cunteür cunté
E li fableür tant flablé
Pur lur cuntes enbeleter,
Que tut unt fait fable sembler" (see Weiss, page 246-7).

[108] See Green, *The Beginnings of Romance*, especially pages 177-8 and 187-93 for more about twelfth-century authors (particularly Geoffrey, Wace, and Chrétien) manipulating historical and narrative gaps, particularly in the move from history to fictionalization. See also Ad Putter, "Finding Time for Romance": "The opening left by Geoffrey of Monmouth and Wace enabled Chrétien to create an autonomous realm of fiction where, freed from the constraints of history, he could address the concerns that occupied him and his audience" (5). At least one scribe (of Paris, Bibliothéque Nationale, MS f. fr. 1450) recognized the implicit connection between Chrétien's romances and Arthur's years of peace as mentioned in the chronicles and interpolated the former into the latter – Putter, pages 4-5;

subject for Chrétien (as for Geoffrey) was likely its lack of fixity at this point in history: unlike

the ancient tales of Rome or Troy, Arthurian legend allowed for malleability and invention while

staying within the confines of the historical outline, as provided by Geoffrey and Wace.[109] By

choosing Arthur's court for the setting of his romances and neatly expanding a recognized gap in

the life of the king, Chrétien evokes the past in broad strokes, lacking the detail and specificity of

a historian while still giving the impression of long ago.

Thus far I have been discussing the relationship Chrétien's romances have to history in

abstract terms, claiming that while Chrétien is not writing history but rather fiction, he still

evokes the historical past. Now I would like to address more concretely how the romances

convey the impression of chronological distance so we may in turn appreciate the place of

nostalgia in this new approach to the legend that Chrétien developed. In addition to the choice of

Arthur's court as the setting for his romances, Chrétien uses two strategies in particular to create

the feeling of "pastness," specifically a sense of the past that emphasizes its distance and

difference: marvels and customs. Rather than dismissing marvelous elements as not relevant to

the question of historicity, I would like to suggest that, in fact, they are very much a part of

Chrétien's method of representing the gap between his own time and Arthurian time. Historians

and ethnographers have long depicted marvelous species and races of near-humans in order to

convey the strangeness and distance of far-away lands, a tradition of both history and travel

writing stretching from Herodotus's account of giant gold-digging ants through the blemmyae of

the *Wonders of the East* to the Ethiopians of *Mandeville's Travels* who have one enormous foot,

useful for both swift travel as well as shade. In a similar way Chrétien depicts incredible

Levilson Reis "*Clergie,* Clerkly *Studium*, and the Medieval Literary History of Chrétien de Troyes' Romances," especially pages 689-91.

[109] It seems more likely that Chrétien knew Wace's version than Geoffrey's. See Green, pages 198-9.

adventures to heighten the glory of his heroes and increase the sense of difference between the present of his audience and the past of his subjects. Marvels and magic abound: rings with special properties, like the one that makes Yvain invisible; giants who often seek to defile young women, like Harpin of the Mountain whom Yvain defeats; beds that test their occupants, like the Marvelous Bed in *Le Conte du Graal*; the fountain in *Yvain*; the Grail Castle, and so forth. Finlayson reminds us that people in the Middle Ages—even rational, educated ones—believed in the reality of magic and marvels: "The marvellous, for medieval man, is as real a part of his universe as God, the destruction of Troy, and the operations of Destiny. Its fascination lies partly in the fact that although not part of most ordinary lives, its occurrence in the past and elsewhere in the present are amply documented by learned people" ("The Marvellous" 374). Therefore their inclusion is not only an indication of the romance world's special properties—more interesting and amazing than everyday life—but it also results in a sort of defamiliarization that heightens our sense of longing for this mysterious and incredible past. The heroes themselves are not unduly amazed.[110] Instead, they are spurred into action, seeing marvels as harbingers of adventures. They indicate a test that will give the knight a chance to prove his honor, and he is never deterred by the dire warnings he hears about his all-but-certain death.

Take, for example, the marvel that sets *Yvain* in motion, the adventure of the Fountain of Barenton in the Forest of Broceliande, which provides the opportunity for a number of Arthur's knights to test themselves—first Calogrenant, to his shame, then Yvain, to his glory, and finally Kay, to his embarrassment. Calogrenant's originally finds the fountain when wandering seeking adventures, as knights are wont to do in romances. He takes the "right" (*destre*) path and is

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[110] See Lucienne Carasso-Bulow, *The Merveilleux in Chrétien de Troyes*: "Chrétien's characters casually accept the *merveilleux* without questioning its existence" (16).

suddenly transported to Brittany. The setting seems specific and therefore potentially realistic or historical—Maxwell S. Luria points out that some contemporaries even went looking for the fountain (564)—but it is strictly "the enchanted landscape of fairy tale" (Auerbach 130). Moreover, "the indications of time are as reminiscent of fairy tale as the indications of place" (Auerbach 130). Calogrenant and later Yvain travel from Britain to Brittany in a day without crossing the sea. They make their way through a thorny, mysterious forest only to be welcomed at a splendid castle that appears as if from nowhere to cater to their needs in the most courtly way imaginable.[111] As Auerbach notes, the time between Calogrenant and Yvain's adventures is seven years, itself a "fairly tale number" (130). Furthermore, in that time nothing whatever seems to have changed: Yvain finds everything just as Calogrenant has described it, only more amazing.

Things become even more incredible when Calogrenant leaves the castle. He encounters an enormous *vilain*, the caretaker of a herd of terrifying bulls, who is described in beastly terms and who indicates the way to a magical fountain and warns of its dangers. The spring itself is the most marvelous of all the things Calogrenant has described: cold, but boiling, shaded by a magnificent tress and adjacent to a chapel. There is a slab of emerald studded with rubies and a golden basin hanging from the tree. With the basin Calogrenant pours water from the fountain onto the stone in accordance with the custom and unleashes a great tempest followed by a serene calm and the beautiful music of birds who envelop the tree. Then the test: a knight appears to

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[111] According to Auerbach, "All the numerous castles and palaces, the battles and adventures, of the courly romances—especially of the Breton cycle—are things of fairyland: each time they appear before us as though sprung from the ground; their geographical relation to the known world, their sociological and economic foundations, remain unexplained. Even their ethical or symbolic significance can rarely be ascertained with anything approaching certainty" (130); "It is a world specifically created and designed to give the knight opportunity to prove himself. The scene of Calogrenant's departure shows this most clearly. He rides on all day and encounters nothing but the castle prepared to receive him. Nothing is said about all the practical conditions and circumstances necessary to render the experience of such a castle in absolute solitude both possible and compatible with ordinary experience….In the courtly romance the functional, the historically real aspects of class are passed over" (136).

defend the spring and soon defeats Calogrenant in hard combat (though he is later defeated by Yvain).

The whole episode seems vaguely symbolic, but its point, what it stands for, is never quite clear or obvious.[112] The details are tantalizing—enough so to make Wace, who sheepishly admits he should have known better, search for the fountain.[113] They suggest the possibility of adventure, of proving oneself, of magic. But they are, Auerbach frequently insists, absolute. They exist to show the refinement, elegance, manners, and prowess of a single class, to raise that class above petty realities, rather than engage in any sort of political or historical realism. "The fairy-tale atmosphere is the true element of the courtly romance, which after all is not only interested in portraying external living conditions in the feudal society of the closing years of the twelfth century but also and especially in expressing its ideal" (Auerbach 133)

The case is similar with the many customs that motivate the adventures of Chrétien's romances. Some are evil customs that must be abolished, like the Joy of the Court in *Erec and Enide*. Others are noble customs that must be upheld, though perhaps their abuse must be corrected, as in the custom of the Sparrowhawk in *Yvain*. Still others are noble in themselves but potentially dangerous to the seemingly fragile social order, such as the custom of the white hart that begins *Erec et Enide*, which Gawain warns Arthur against pursuing lest it lead to squabbling

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[112] See Auerbach, pages 130-131 on the imprecision of symbolism in romance. Critics have tried, of course, to work out symbolic schemas—Maxwell S. Luria in "The Storm-Making Spring and the Meaning of Chrétien's 'Yvain,'" for example, argues that the fountain scenes in *Yvain* are symbolic of the sacrament of baptism—but these generally remain open to debate.

[113] Luria quotes the relevant passage from the *Roman de Rou*, which reads, in part: "I went thither [to Brittany] on purpose to see these marvels, but I found none. I went like a fool, and so I came back; I sought after folly, and hold myself a fool for my pains" (572).

among the knights.[114] Regardless of the inherent worth of the customs, their purpose is to highlight the continuity of the court of King Arthur with an even more distant past, to underscore the worth of the knights who abolish evil costumes and fulfill noble ones, and finally to heighten in the audience a longing to uphold tradition.[115] Donald Maddox points out that the customs that are abolished tend to be "of a more recent, usually known origin, and arbitrarily enforced," whereas the customs that endure "are said to be 'old,' immemorial, and 'invariable'" (36). This demonstrates a reverence for the old and the established, suggesting that what is new is inferior, decadent, or suspicious. This is exactly the attitude of the nostalgic. In his praise of long-held customs and his critique of newly established ones, Chrétien provides a model for understanding Arthurian romance at large.

Taken together, the adventures of Chrétien de Troyes' romances, composed of both customs and marvels (and frequently the customs *are* marvels[116]), exert their power through reflective nostalgia. They contribute a sense of distance—evoking the distant past or even something altogether outside of time and place as we know them—and they inspire awe, wonder, and longing. Chrétien does not explicitly advocate imitation the way we will see that later restoratively nostalgic romances do, but he does suggest that there is something deficient in the present in comparison with the past that his romances represent at its ideal stage: love, and therefore chivalry. Occasionally Chrétien articulates this directly. In the opening lines of *Yvain,* he meditates on the decline of love and chivalry "nowadays" (*or*):

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[114] In *The Arthurian Romances of Chrétien de Troyes* Donald Maddox identifies a slightly different taxonomy of customs, building on Erich Köhler's "Le Rôle de la coutume dans les romans de Chrétien de Troyes": those that must be observed, those whose abuse the knight corrects, and those that are abolished (35-6).

[115] Maddox discusses the role of customs in Chrétien in depth in *The Arthurian Romances of Chrétien de Troyes*. He argues that customs are largely problematic and indicative of larger crises in the Arthurian court.

[116] Indeed, the example of a marvel used above, the adventure of the fountain in *Yvain*, is also called a custom by the churl.

After the meal, throughout the halls, the knights gathered where they were called by the ladies, damsels and maidens. Some related anecdotes; others spoke of love, of the torments and sorrows and of the great blessings that often come to the members of its order, which at that time was powerful and thriving. Nowadays, however, it has few adherents, since almost all have abandoned love, leaving it much debased. For those who used to love had a reputation for courtliness, integrity, generosity and honour; but now love is made a laughing-stock, because people who feel nothing of it lie by claiming to love; and they make a deceitful mockery of it when they boast of it without having the right. But let us leave those still alive to speak of those who once were! For, in my view, a courtly man who is dead is still worth more than a living churl. Therefore I am pleased to relate something worth hearing concerning the king who was of such repute that he is spoken of near and far; and I agree with the people of Britain that his name will live on forever. (8-41)[117]

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[117] "Aprés mangier, parmi ces sales
cil chevalier s'atropelerent,
la ou dames les apelerent
ou dameiseles ou puceles.
Li un recontoient noveles,
li autre parloient d'Amors,
des angoisses et des dolors
et des granz biens qu'orent sovant
li deciple de son covant,
qui lors estoit molt dolz et buens;
mes or i a molt po des suens,
qu'a bien pres l'ont ja tuit lessiee;
s'an est Amors molt abessiee,
car cil qui soloient amer
se feisoient cortois clamer
et preu et large et enorable;
or est Amors tornee a fable
por ce que cil qui rien n'en santent
dïent qu'il aiment, mes il mantent.
et cil fable et mançonge an font
qui s'an vantent et droit n'i ont.
Mes or parlons de cez qui furent,
si leissons cez qui ancor durent,
car molt valt mialz, ce m'est a vis.
Uns cortois morz c'uns vilains vis.
Por ce me plest a reconter
chose qui face a scouter
del roi qui fu de tel tesmoing
qu'an en parole et pres et loing;
si m'acort de tant as Bretons
que toz jorz durra li renons" (8-41).

Chrétien's pronouncement is not unproblematic, since the tale starts with some rather uncourtly behavior: Arthur offends some of his company by leaving the festivities; Calogrenant tells "a story that was not to his honour but to his shame" (59-60);[118] Kay reacts, as is his custom, by being "extremely abusive, wickedly sarcastic and sneering" (69-70);[119] the opening episode (Calogrenant's story) ends with Yvain sneaking away from court so that he may try the adventure, depriving it of the king, who intends to seek it out. Still, the aim here seems clear: to locate the tale and its values of love and chivalry in the distant past and to highlight the ideal nature of the past in contrast to the present day. Though there are lapses in chivalric behavior, the tale, in the end, reconfirms the ideal nature of the hero: Yvain is able to prove his worth through a series of *aventures*. In this way, the tale as a whole displays ideal knighthood as it was practiced in the long ago time of King Arthur: not, perhaps, flawless, but capable of overcoming faults through chivalric tests.[120]

Quotations from *Le Chevalier au Lion* in the Old French are taken from William W. Kibler's 1985 edition of *The Knight with the Lion, or Yvain*. English translations for all of Chrétien's romances throughout this chapter are D.D.R. Owen's from the Everyman edition entitled *Arthurian Romances*.

[118] "un conte,
non de s'annor, mes de sa honte" (59-60)
[119] "Kex, qui molt fu ranponeus,
fel et poignanz et venomous" (69-70).

[120] Karl D. Uitti sees more of a contradiction between the narrator's praise and the character's actions: "A pattern seems to be established in [the] opening lines and scenes [of *Le Chevalier au Lion*]. Our narrator's opinions are belied by what he sees, yet he reports honestly what he witnesses despite the contradiction. His *clergie,* though not perfect, is genuine, and it seems to be associated with truthful witness. He refuses to permit his (deficient) ideology to stand invariably in the way of accuracy and truth. Yet, the narrator does not switch abruptly from his ideological eulogizing of Arthurianism because what he witnesses and reports contradicts that ideology. The process of change is slow" (82). In the end, he argues, the narrator abandons the "ideology of Arthurianism" (83): "Recounting what happens as it happens suffices; he no longer feels the need to link the deeds of his characters to what, for him, has become the pseudohistorical world of the Round Table Society" (83). However, it seems to me that the ending *confirms* the Arthurian ideology that is espoused in the beginning, rather than abandons it. The nostalgic passage at the beginning can be seen as a prologue, analogous to the prologues of Chrétien's other works. It is therefore a comment on the romance *as a whole*—in the end, the main character will be proven to be perfectly chivalric; the story in its entirety will be worth hearing. The uncourtly elements and failures narrated within it serve to provide the conflict that is ultimately resolved with a picture of a more complete and ideal knight.

There is another moment in *Yvain* when the narrator steps out of the fiction to comment on the declining attitudes toward love. He is in the midst of describing a young maiden and indulging in a flight of fancy about how even Cupid might wish to wound himself for this lady's sake, leading to a meditation on the metaphor of the wounds of love, which Chrétien cuts short to lament: "I could tell you so much about this wound that, if you were happy to listen, I should not finish my account today. There would be someone, though, who would quickly say that I was talking nonsense, for people no longer fall in love nor do they love any more as they used to, and so they do not even want to hear about it" (5393-5400).[121] This seems disingenuous: if people no longer want to hear about love, why has Chrétien, a shrewd literary artist with high-power patrons and an obvious sense of what the people want to hear considering the popularity and even reverence which his work immediately inspired, dedicated all this time, energy, and talent to tales of love? What can Chrétien be up to by putting such an implausible sentiment in the mouth of his narrator? His statement seems calculated to inspire a strong contrary response: We, listeners and readers of romance, do want to hear about love! Indeed we want to be in love! And perform great deeds! A comment like this draws the reader in to participate in Chrétien's reflective nostalgia, even as it ironically denies the response it invites.

The audience's response is further enriched or complicated by the fact that the maiden who occasions these reflections in the first place is, herself, reading a romance aloud to her parents. And this reader of romance, although she appears, somewhat ironically, in the midst of the terrible *Pesme Aventure*, knows exactly how a maiden of romance is to behave to a guest of honor: she helps him remove his armor, washes him, clothes him in fine garments; "She puts so

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[121]"De ces plaies molt vos deïsse/tant que huimés fin ne preïsse,/se li scouters vos pleüst;/mes tost deist tel I eüst,/que je vos parlasse d'oiseuse,/que la genz n'est mes amoureuse/ne n'aimment mes, si com il suelent,/que nes oïr parler n'an vuelent" (5393-5400)

much effort into serving him that he feels ashamed and embarrassed; but the maiden is so courteous, generous and polite that she still feels she is doing little for him" (5434-8).[122] The *Pesme Aventure* is occasionally pointed to by critics who want to stress the realism of Chrétien and his interest in contemporary affairs. After all, the condition of the three hundred maidens forced to sew, hungry and poorly clothed, paid only a small fraction of their worth (Chrétien even goes into the specific figures) stands out within the aristocratic milieu of the romances and suggests an awareness of the working conditions of the poor in the cloth trade.[123] The reference to romance reading itself is a valuable clue to how works like this may have been consumed by their real-life audience. However, there is much in this adventure to suggest the more hazy backward-looking, fairy tale-like, nostalgic outlook as well: the praise of lovers past; the "frightful, devilish custom" (5472-2)[124] Yvain must uphold, whether he will or not; the fact that Yvain's challengers are monsters, born, one of the laboring maidens tells him, from the union of a woman and a *netun* (a devil or monster, line 5277); the actions of the brave and noble lion; Yvain's willingness to spare his opponent when begged for mercy; Yvain's perfectly courteous language in attempting to refuse politely the hand of the lord's daughter; the extreme reverence the freed maidens show Yvain on the completion of the adventure: "I do not believe they would have rejoiced as greatly as they did on his account for Him who created the whole world, had he

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[122] "De lui server tant s'antremet/qu'il an a honte, et si l'an poise,
mes la pucele est tant cortoise,
et si franche et si deboneire,
qu'ancor n'an cuide ele poi feire" (5434-5438).

[123] Or perhaps not. Matthews points out some of the ways this sweatshop operation is not especially realistic at all: the wages are ridiculously low, the women are well-born ladies not peasants, etc. (114-5). Though the misery of the women forced to work does stand in stark contrast to the rest of the romance, it is perhaps so more for their industry than their realism. They are yet another example of damsels in distress, if unusually industrious ones.

[124] "une molt fiere deablie
qu'il me covient a maintenir" (5472-3)

come down to earth from Heaven" (5784-7)[125]; and finally Yvain's perfect courtesy in greeting

the now rejoicing townspeople, pretending to forget that they had earlier heaped shame on him.

In all his actions, Yvain demonstrates he is approaching the ideal of knighthood—indeed, he has

only one more major adventure to complete before he is allowed to return to the fountain to win

back the love of his wife, having proven his service to ladies.

Chrétien's romances should not be mistaken for works of history. They are tales of

adventure. But Chrétien subtly associates romance as such with an attitude of longing for the

past and an eagerness on the part of the reader to belong to "a community of the elect"

(Auerbach 137), made up of the knights and ladies of the romance world, even though their

world is so clearly not our own. The nostalgic feeling resides in the narrative experience itself;

"the defamiliarization and sense of distance drives [the nostalgic] to tell their story, to narrate the

relationship between past, present and future" (Boym 50). The romances are not ideological, in

the sense that they are not a program for knightly improvement, though certainly many readers

took to heart and tried to imitate the elegant and civilized examples Chrétien provided them.

They are also not merely "vain et plaisant," as Jean Bodel famously charged.[126] Occasional

dissatisfaction with the present is evinced, but more often the present creeps into the past in the

form of set dressing. The romances create a sort of mood rather than a definite picture of the

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[125]"ne ne cuit pas qu'eles feïssent
tel joie com eles li font
a celui qui fist tot le mont,
s'il fust venuz de ciel an terre (5784-7).

[126] The opening lines of Bodel's poem *La Chanson des Saisnes* is well known for its taxonomy of romance, dividing the genre into three "matières," or matters, those of France, Britain, and Rome. In doing so, the author also makes value judgments about each type: "The stories from Britain are foolish and trifling; those of Rome are wise and full of learning; and we see the stories of France around us every day." ("Li conte de Bretaigne sont si vain et plaisant,/Cil de Rome sont sage et de san aprenant,/Cil de France de voir chascun jor apparent" lines 9-11.)

longed-for past: as the saying goes, "the past is a foreign country"[127]—similar enough in detail (manners, arms, etc.) to be recognizable, but filled with marvels and customs and adventures. And when a tale's nostalgic image of its pseudo-historical setting becomes overly complicated or risks undermining the nostalgia, it is simply abandoned or treated with irony, as in the case of *Lancelot* or *Perceval*, to be discussed in more detail in the following section. What we are left with, on balance, are a series of tales that give us at best a fragmentary glimpse of an elegant and civilized world in which challenges to knightly perfection are generally not a serious threat to the overall order and are soon overcome by displays of arms and chivalry. It is easy to see how a noble class would have delighted in these tales of individual prowess in the service of an evident good, especially in a time of increasing complex feudal loyalties.

II. From Fallible to Failure: Repurposing Arthurian Legend

A number of characteristics of Chrétien's romances contribute to the overall tone of reflective nostalgia but also leave the door open for later writers to reinvent and reinterpret Arthurian romance in more patently ideological ways. Paradoxically, ways in which Chrétien creates a nostalgic mood—ways in which, in other words, he invites the audience's longing for the past in a *reflective* way—are often the very characteristics that will cause some later authors to criticize the Arthurian world or the chivalric code itself and some modern critics to suggest that Chrétien is doing so. These characteristics include an ambivalent treatment of Arthur; problematic representations of the knights themselves, including occasional failures; a tone of ironic distance; and fragmentary plots. In the following pages, I will address each of these points and how they contribute to the reflective nostalgia of Chrétien's romances and then how they are

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[127] The opening line of *The Go-Between* by L.P. Hartley, as well as the title to Professor David Lowenthal's study of nostalgia and attitudes toward the past.

retooled, particularly in the *Vulgate Cycle,* to further the ideological ends of a later author. Prose romancers building on Chrétien's foundation adapt Arthurian legend for their own purposes, capitalizing on the nostalgia for Arthurian times established by Geoffrey and Chrétien to advocate for particular morals and behaviors.

When one turns from the histories of Geoffrey and Wace to the romances of Chrétien, one of the most immediately obvious changes is that Arthur is no longer the main character. The king becomes a somewhat distant figure whose approval the knights seek, but who remains largely absent from the narrative. His court is the point of departure and return, rather than the site of action. This marginality opens Arthur up to the charge of ineptitude and his court to the charge of decadence.[128] Chrétien never wrote a *morte*; he never describes the destruction of the Round Table fellowship and the death of Arthur, preferring to concentrate on the years of peace and adventure. Nevertheless, it is perhaps the lack of action on Arthur's part in Chrétien's romances that leads later authors of that tragic ending to impute at least some of the blame to Arthur and his ineffectuality. In the Vulgate *Mort le roi Artu*, for example, Arthur is completely powerless to shape events. Even his weeping and begging cannot sway his nephew Gawain from his grudge against Lancelot or from undertaking single combat with him, direct causes of the ultimate downfall of the kingdom. This is a complete turn around from Geoffrey of Monmouth's Arthur whose end is the work of fortune cutting him low at his moment of triumph and whom Geoffrey is careful to keep free of even the suggestion of blame.

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[128] For an overview of the evolution of the portrayal of Arthur during the twelfth century see Barabara N. Sargent-Bauer, "*Dux Bellorum/Rex Militum/Roi Fainéant:* The Transformation of Arthur in the Twelfth Century": "In the course of four or five decades in the twelfth century, the great king, maker and unmaker of lesser monarchs, who dubs, recruits, inspires, and rewards knights, has become strangely diminished. Arthur is not only relegated to the background; he is also depicted as unworthy of his glorious reputation. It is passivity, indeed ineptitude, that characterizes him in the *Conte du Graal*" (40). For a defense of Chrétien's Arthur, see Renée L. Curtis, "The Perception of the Chivalric Ideal in Chrétien de Troyes's *Yvain,*" especially pages 2-4.

In shifting the focus of his work from the king to the knights of the Round Table and sidelining Arthur from the action, Chrétien brings the role of knighthood to the forefront. In a way, it is a shrewd marketing move: at a time of increasing literacy and a widening of the market for literary culture,[129] Chrétien breaks from the historiographical tradition of focusing almost entirely on royalty and instead makes the next tier of society the heroes.[130] In doing so, Chrétien provides a representation of exemplary knighthood rather than kingship and outlines the paradigm for the ideal chivalric knight.

Even so, the way Chrétien represents the knights in his tales, although he frequently assures us that they are the best knights in the world, is often problematic. In *Erec et Enide* Erec fails to keep up chivalric deeds after his wedding and spends so much time in the loving embrace of his wife that people start to talk, and his reputation suffers. He compounds this fault when he blames Enide for telling him the truth about the effect on his reputation and continues to subject her devotion to harsh tests despite repeated proofs of her love. The noble Cligès does not hold up under strict scrutiny, since he tricks his (admittedly duplicitous) uncle out of his wife. Lancelot rides in a cart generally reserved for criminals, though he eventually discovers that his real fault is that he hesitated to do so.[131] Yvain betrays his promise to Laudine. Perceval fails to

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[129] See James Westfall Thompson, *Literacy of the Laity in the Middle Ages*, especially pages 135-8.

[130] Knight discusses class tensions in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, particularly between kings and barons, barons and the newly noble (see especially 75-76), and the ways in which Chrétien resolves these tensions in his romances: Arthur's role as a *roi fainéant* is the "wish-fulfilling answer" to the problem of the landless knight by having him gain "power and property through a woman" (81), and so forth. In *The Chivalrous Society*, Georges Duby looks in detail at the changing class structure of the twelfth century (see chapter 6, especially pages 95 ff.) after a period of relative stasis in the eleventh century (see chapter 3, especially pages 67 ff.). In particular he notes the decline of many of the noble families (*nobiles*) and the rise of knights (*chevaliers*), so that the distintion between these classes slowly evaporates. The change begins in the twelfth century, and "[b]y the second half of the thirteenth century the knightly class was…transformed into a genuine nobility" (95); by the fourteenth century intermarriage had completely erased any perceivable difference between the two (96).

[131] His adulterous affair with no less a person than his king's wife, however, seems oddly less problematic in the world of the tale.

ask the obvious questions that would heal the Fisher King. On the other hand, these are the

conflicts that drive the plot, give the adventures stakes, and the romances structure.[132] These are,

in other words, the faults that the knights must overcome, and they do so by proving their worth

through their quests and thus achieving a higher measure of chivalric excellence. Only Perceval

does not rectify his failure to ask the Grail questions, but *Le Conte du Graal* is unfinished, so we

can only speculate on whether Chrétien intended for him to succeed—as, indeed, seems likely.[133]

Many of the basic principles of chivalry, as portrayed in Chrétien's works at least, are set

out in *Perceval*, fittingly so since the hero himself is completely ignorant of knighthood and

chivalric society at the start of the tale. Perceval receives these precepts from his mother; his

guide to courtly knighthood, Gornemant de Goort; and his guide to Christian knighthood, his

uncle the hermit. Douglas Kelly lists them as:

1. Honor and assist ladies, maidens, and orphans in distress (ll. 533-42, 1657-62, 6465-70)
2. Love maidens honorably, not importunately (ll. 543-56)
3. Know his companions (ll. 557-62)
4. Honor and seek out the acquaintance, counsel, and company of worthy men and women (ll. 563-66, 6460)
5. Attend mass regularly and pray for guidance (ll. 567-72, 1666-70, 6440-59)
6. Grant mercy to defeated opponents (ll. 1640-47)

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[132] In "The Plot Structure in Four Romances of Chrétien de Troyes" William Woods sums up the structure of the romance plot as practiced by Chrétien: "A hero achieves the realization of his world ambitions and desires in an introductory passage. He is then made aware of some error or fault or of some less obvious reason which forces him to abandon his lofty pinnacle of happiness. This point in the plot can be likened to the initial impulse of a drama for it serves to motivate the main body of the poem which is a series of adventures concerned with the hero's efforts to recover his former status, presumably through his becoming more deserving of it by the correction of his error or by the expiation of his fault" (4). Woods limits his discussion to *Guillaume d'Angleterre, Erec et Enide, Le Chevalier au lion,* and *Le Conte de graal*. In *The Craft of Chrétien de Troyes* Norris Lacy extends the pattern to the other romances and restates it rather more pithily as "happiness gained, happiness lost, happiness regained" (10).

[133] Later adaptors of Chrétien's tale, such as Wolfram von Eschenbach, certainly thought so. In his *Parzival* the hero gets the chance to right his wrong: he asks the appropriate question, heals the Grail King, and is made the new Grail King. Chrétien's mysterious and incomplete story of the grail invited a number of continuations and adaptations during the Middle Ages, and they each imagine the ending differently. Ruth Harwood Cline usefully sums up the contributions to the story of each in the introduction of her translation of *Perceval*; see pages xvii-xx.

7. Moderate talking [sic] (ll. 1648-56)
8. Show due respect to men of the church (ll. 6461-64) [134]

Perceval's limited understanding of these chivalric guidelines and his failure to recognize that they are not absolutes leads to a great deal of comedy and irony. For example, on his first day away from home he tries to follow all of his mother's advice, but the naïve youth gets everything wrong: he mistakes a tent for a church and tries to worship there; when he finds a maiden asleep inside he kisses her, despite her protestations; when he sees she has a beautiful ring, he removes it by force and takes it. All of this, he explains, is because his mother told him to, though he has gravely misunderstood her and causes a lot of trouble for the maiden. But it is not only the naïve Perceval who must learn how to navigate the ambiguous principles of chivalry. In fact, what the knights in Chrétien's romances must often learn is how to balance these sometimes conflicting ideals.[135] For example, both Erec and Yvain must learn that while deeds of arms are noble and love is ennobling, one must not exclude the other. Frequently the struggle to restore balance and rectify failures includes a quest that is uniquely suited to the knight's particular failure: in *Le Chevalier au Lion* Yvain encounters a series of adventures in which he rescues ladies from terrible fates before he is able to make up for the wrong he did to his own lady and find his way back into her good graces.[136]

While Chrétien's knights, though fallible, are able to overcome their faults and reassert their status as exemplars of the chivalric ideal, in the *Queste del Saint Graal* the majority of the knights of Arthur's court are deemed failures; the chivalric ideal is itself shown to be empty,

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[134] The list can be found on page 122 of *Medieval French Romance.*

[135] We should, perhaps, except Lancelot from this generalization, since he is faulted for taking the time to weigh his reputation against his love of the queen. Lacy suggests that one of the ways *Lancelot* differs from Chrétien's other poems is that "it is the only one of his works in which there is a *real* conflict between love and prowess"—other knightly concerns are secondary to love (55). It is not, in other words, an issue of balance.

[136] Lacy compares this tendency in Chrétien to Dante's principle of *contrappasso*—see pages 8-10.

even morally bankrupt. "The stage is the same [as in other Arthurian romances] and so are the players, but all the accepted values are inverted. The *Queste* sets out to reveal the inadequacies and the dangers of the courtly ideal. By allowing his heroes to retain their traditional roles and character, the author is able to show how their much-vaunted attributes lead them to the outcome one would least have looked for" (Matarasso 15). Thus, Gawain who, here as ever, demonstrates ideal courtly behavior—by, for example, willingly obeying his king and trying the first adventure of the sword although he is sure it is not meant for him, being the first to take up the Grail Quest, challenging and fighting those who cross his path—is an utter failure in what the *Queste* emphasizes again and again is a spiritual rather than earthly journey. Gawain refuses confession and penance and thus he meets with no adventures worth telling and instead commits senseless acts of violence and even murder, for which he is shamed by King Arthur at the start of the *Morte*. Gawain, whom readers of romances might expect to play a central role in this definitive quest of the Round Table, is deemed unworthy and is therefore marginalized and finally excluded from the adventure. And rather than the exception, Gawain's plight proves to be representative of the majority of Round Table knights, many of whom do not survive the quest for the Holy Grail because of their worldliness and sinfulness.

Lancelot, who even more than Gawain was the chivalric hero of the *Vulgate Cycle* as a whole and its representative of knightly perfection, is also found to be lacking in the *spiritual* perfection needed to achieve this final great quest. The distinction is made clear from the very start by one of those mysterious maidens who have a habit of riding into court to announce adventures in romances. She weeps when she recognizes Lancelot and mourns: "Oh, Lancelot, how your luck has changed since yesterday morning!" She goes on to explain: "Yesterday morning, you were the world's best knight. Anyone who might have called you 'Lancelot the

best knight of all' would have spoken the truth. But to say it now would be a lie because there's a better knight than you. It has been proved through the adventure of the sword that you didn't dare touch. That's why your name has changed and why, as I have indicated, you can no longer consider yourself to be the world's best knight" (11).[137] All through the quest, then, Lancelot has difficulty understanding that what held true in his earthly, chivalric existence no longer holds true on this spiritual quest. Therefore, to give one brief example, when he comes across a tournament of white knights versus black knights he does what he thinks is the honorable, knightly thing and joins the losing black side to bolster their cause. In so doing, he is defeated for the first time since being made a knight (Burns 87-8; Pauphilet 140-1). It takes a spiritual guide to explain to him the implications of the tournaments (the black knights being those engulfed in sin; the white being those heavenly knights, cloaked in purity), and remind him that worldly rules do not necessarily apply to spiritual conflict.

Lancelot is saved by his willingness to do what Gawain would not: confess and pursue heartfelt penance. For this he is granted a partial vision of the grail. Yet even at that moment his own sense of chivalry again gets in his way: he enters the room where the grail is, even though he has been forbidden to do so, because he thinks he is going to the aid of the celebrant who seems to be struggling under the weight of the body of Christ. Here again he mistakes the spiritual for the physical, and therefore his grail vision is cut short, and he duly suffers punishment for it. Still, Lancelot's role is crucial because it demonstrates that forgiveness is

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[137] "'Ha, Lancelot, tant est vostre afere changiez puis ier matin!...Vos estiez hier matin li mieldres chevaliers dou monde; et qui lors vos apelast Lancelot le meillor chevalier de toz, il deist voir: car alors l'estiez vos. Mes qui ore le diroit, len le devroit tenir a mençongier: car meillor i a de vos, et bien est provee chose par l'aventure de ceste espee a quoi vos n'osastes metre la main. Et ce est li changemenze et li muemenz de vostre non, dont je vos ai fet remembrance por ce que des ore mes ne cuidiez que vos soiez li mieldres chevaliers dou monde'" (12-13). Old French quotations of the *Queste del Saint Graal* are from Albert Pauphilet's edition. Translations are by E. Jane Burns from the *Lancelot-Grail* series edited by Norris J. Lacy.

available to those willing to seek it. Of course, this hopeful message of the *Quest* is perhaps

undermined in the *Mort Artu,* when Lancelot immediately resumes his sinful relationship with

the Queen as soon as the Grail Quest is completed.

In his effort to call attention to the emptiness of earthly chivalry, the author of the *Queste*

discredits the majority of Round Table knights for their adherence to a system that values, for

example, honor and love of ladies without sufficient emphasis on God's role in one's

performance of great deeds or on the virtue of virginity. He therefore needs to invent a new hero

untainted by these failings and pure enough to succeed in the quest. For this he introduces

Lancelot's son, Galahad*,* a model of Christian knighthood and virginity. Perceval, the Grail hero

in Chrétien's *Le Conte du Graal*, is included in the partial fulfillment, as is Bors, both falling

between Galahad and Lancelot on the spectrum of sexual purity, Perceval being a virgin, but

having lusted and Bors being chaste, though not a virgin. But it is Galahad, both chaste and

virginal, who achieves the fullest understanding of the Grail mysteries, and who represents the

ideal for which the other knights – and the audience – must strive. Lest we despair of matching

this rather distant knight's perfections, the majority of the *Queste* actually focuses on the

struggles of Lancelot to be a better Christian knight and the testing of the virtues of Perceval and

Bors. In this way, and through the example of the unrepentant Gawain, the *Queste* provides an

illustration of the paths available to all Christians, while encouraging the reader to follow the

path of righteousness and be wary of temptation.

The seriousness of the purpose of the *Queste* – namely to expose the shortcomings of

chivalry and bring romance and knighthood in line with Christian (and perhaps specifically

Cistercian[138]) knighthood – leaves little room for levity. The romance world of Chrétien, on the

other hand, with its loose, almost dreamy sense of history allows for humor, irony, and

fragmentary plots, all of which in fact contribute to the sense of distance Chrétien is creating

without damaging the reputation of his heroes. Take, for example, Lancelot's swoons over

Guenevere in *Le Chevalier de la Charrette.* We are accustomed at this point in Chrétien's

romance to superlative praise and over-the-top descriptions. Still, Lancelot's excess of emotion

can be read as both a touching and exemplary expression of knightly devotion as well as a tad

silly and melodramatic, both at the same time. When he finds the Queen's comb with a few hairs

still clinging to it, he is completely overcome, so that he basically faints and nearly falls off his

horse. He gives the valuable comb to his companion, but keeps the strands of hair for himself

and worships them, almost as if they were religious relics:

> Never will the eye of man see anything receive such reverence; for
> he begins to adore them, putting them fully a hundred thousand
> times to his eyes and mouth, to his brow and his face, with every
> show of joy. They are his great treasure and delight. He places
> them against his breast between his shirt and his flesh, next to his
> heart. He would not exchange them for a cartload of emeralds or
> carbuncles. Now he is confident that he will never suffer from
> boils or any other illness. He scorns potions of crushed pearl,
> pleurisy cures or theriac, or even the protection of Saint Martin and
> Saint James, having no need of their help, such is the faith he
> places in those hairs. But what were the hairs like? I shall be taken
> for a liar and a fool if I tell the truth about them. When the Saint
> Denis fair is at its height and stocked at its fullest, the plain fact is
> that the knight would not have wished for all the wealth there
> rather than his discovery of the hairs. And if you want the truth
> from me, gold refined a hundred thousand times and melted down
> again as often would, when placed against the hairs and seen

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[138] Albert Pauphilet laid out the case for Cistercian influence in his *Études sur la Queste del saint graal attribuée à Gautier Map*, pages 53-84. Direct authorship by a Cistercian monk has been called into question, but the influence of Cistercian ideas on the text is still generally accepted. See Richard Barber, "Chivalry, Cistercianism and the Grail": "It is…in the *Queste del Saint Graal* that the link between Cistercianism and secular chivalry is at its most striking" (8).

> beside them, be darker than the night compared with the brightest
> summer day there has been all this year. (204-205)[139]

The gentle irony with which Chretien treats the knights is not, as some critics have argued, an

indictment of chivalry.[140] Instead, it calls attention to and highlights the distance between their

time and the reader's, making these ancient knights seem somewhat foreign, even quaint, though

admirably committed to their passions.[141] When Chrétien runs into difficulties following a plot

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[139] "Jamés oel d'ome ne verront
nule chose tant enorer,
qu'il les comance a aorer
et bien cent mile foiz les toche
et a ses ialz et a sa boche,
et a son front et a sa face.
N'est joie nule qu'il n'an face:
molt s'an fet liez, molt s'an fet riche.
An son sain pres del cuer les fiche,
entre sa chemise et sa char.
N'en preïst pas chargié un char
d'esmeraudes ne d'escharboncles;
ne cuidoit mie que reoncles
ne autres max jamés le praingne;
dïamargareton desdaigne
et pleüriche et tirïasque,
neïs saint Martin et saint Jasque!
Car an ces chevox tant se fie
qu'il n'a mestier de lor aïe.
Mes quel estoient li chevol?
Et por mançongier et por fol
m'an tanra l'en, se voir an di:
quant la foire iert plainne au Lendi
et il i avra plus avoir,
nel volsist mie tot avoir
li chevaliers—c'est voirs proves—
si n'eüst ces chevox troves.
Et se le voir m'an requerez,
ors cent mile foiz esmerez
et puis autantes foiz recuiz
fust plus oscurs que n'est la nuiz
contre le plus bel jor d'esté
qui ait an tot cest an esté,
qui l'or et les chevols veïst,
si que l'un lez l'autre meïst" (1460-92).
Quotations from *Le Chevalier de la Charrete* in the Old French are taken from William W. Kibler's 1981 edition of
Lancelot or, The Knight of the Cart.

[140] See Curtis, "Perception of the Chivalric Ideal in Chrétien de Troyes's 'Yvain,'" especially pages 4-9.

[141] There are certainly other such love-stricken moments we could reference here, such as Perceval's fixation on the
drop of blood in the snow which reminds him of the coloring of his beloved (lns 4162-4211).

line to its conclusion without contradicting the ideals or the tone that he has established, that plot is simply abandoned, as in the case of *Lancelot* and *Perceval*.[142] There can be no satisfactory resolution for the hero and heroine of *Lancelot*, since their love is adulterous, and so none is offered. *Perceval*, on the other hand, seems to have spiraled somewhat out of control, with Gawain's adventures occupying the bulk of the existing ending while the tantalizing Grail story, with its inadequately harmonized Christian and pagan elements, is left incomplete. Complete plot is subordinate to creating the right tone.

The prose cycles that followed in the wake of Chrétien's romances, by contrast, seek specifically to flesh out and complete the Arthurian legend, providing back stories for knights, inventing prequels, and generally leaving no stone unturned in their quest to provide a fully realized Arthurian world. To eliminate gaps, the prose versions even follow awkward plot turns, like Lancelot's affair with the Queen, to their logical conclusion. Thus, the end of Arthur's reign becomes an indictment of many of the knights and even of the king himself, and it is developed into a tragic, near-apocalyptic climax, with the fellowship broken and nearly every single knight killed. This is in stark contrast to the ending of Arthur's reign in Geoffrey of Monmouth's version, where Arthur's end comes at the height of his powers, though no fault of his own. In the conclusion to the *Vulgate Cycle* Arthur's death and the end of the Round Table fellowship are the result of a series of failures on the part of the king and his knights; there is plenty of blame to go around and the authors anticipate the inevitable doom in frequent instances of foreshadowing and prophecy. The destruction feels at once inevitable and also easily avoidable. In this atmosphere there is little room for irony, particularly in the *Queste*, the most serious and

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[142] It is generally accepted that Chrétien probably died before he could finish *Le Conte du Graal*. However, given the fact that he abandoned one plot without finishing it, I don't see what we should exclude the possibility that he did so again.

ideological of the prose romances, in which the author has a clear agenda—to appropriate chivalric themes in an effort to promote Christian beliefs, particularly the value of virginity. Instead, backgrounds, origins, and explanations (often in a sermon-like form delivered by a religious figure) take precedence. So, the *Queste* goes into detail about the origins of the Grail and how it came to reside in England, and it aligns its version of events carefully with biblical history. It also fits into the larger plan of the cycle, perhaps following the design of a single "architect" who laid out the plan for the whole,[143] taking its place as just one part of the long history of the Round Table and its knights.

III. Restorative Nostalgia and *La Queste del Saint Graal*

La Quest del Saint Graal is perhaps the most extreme example of how prose romances repurposed Arthurian material, since it turns the values of earlier romances so completely on their head. The author capitalizes on material found in Chrétien in order to present his Christian message, one that rejects the chivalric values presented in Chrétien as sinful. Moreover, the nostalgic associations embedded in Arthurian stories by Geoffrey and Chrétien—in other words, the fact that readers would have been familiar with the characters, themes, even plot points and that they would associate all these with better, bolder, braver times now long past—allow the author a way of engaging some very powerful and deeply held beliefs in order to shape and change them. So, when he goes about undermining worldly chivalric values and replacing them with Christian ones, he does so from within a framework associated with ideal chivalry. In this way, he begins to shift what was once reflective nostalgia into something more active: restorative

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[143] The "architect" theory, put forth by Jean Frappier is still a generally accepted theory for how the Vulgate Cycle was designed to fit together so neatly, though there's no way to know for sure if it is correct. However, the alternatives – a single author for all the works in the cycle or different authors working autonomously – both seem rather unlikely.

nostalgia. Ironically, given his indictment of the Arthurian court and chivalry at large, he attempts to evoke the nostalgia for Arthurian adventures, but then pulls a sort of bait and switch, substituting the ideal Christian knight, Galahad, for the ideal chivalric knights, Lancelot and Gawain, and transforming Lancelot into a kind of everyman, seeking a path of redemption for his sinful ways. Thus the author advocates a strict Christian lifestyle based on worshipping God and living chastely, a path open to all through confession, holy living, and the Eucharist. By promoting these practices and associating them with nobility and knighthood, the author of the *Quest* seeks to "restore" a lost Christian ideal.

Not only is this swapping of values achieved through the introduction of a new, ideal Christian character, but that character and the others deemed holy enough to pursue the Grail Quest literally bring the adventures we associate with the Round Table and with romance as a genre to an end. Adventures are a staple of romance. With its name derived from the Latin *advenire*, to come toward, an adventure is specially suited to the particular knight it approaches. The successful completion of adventures is what a knight's reputation is based on; it is how he gains honor, renown, and thus the love of a lady. Indeed, "trial through adventure is the real meaning of the knight's ideal existence…[;] the very essence of the knight's ideal of manhood is called forth by adventure" (Auerbach 135). The *Queste del Saint Graal* draws a sharp dividing line between the adventures of the past and a new era ushered in by the Grail Quest. Adventures are relegated to a now outdated (according to the author) tradition of nostalgia for chivalric heroes, to be replaced by a more active nostalgia for the Christian heroes, while the world of the secular knights crumbles and dies out.

The author of the *Queste* ties adventures to the presence of the Grail in Logres. Adventures multiply as the Grail Quest approaches. Rather than exciting tests of bravery, they

are something from which the country needs to be rescued. Galahad is recognized as "the knight who will bring an end to the adventures of Great Britain and heal the Wounded King" (9)[144] and who was "the one sent by God to free our land from the great wonders and strange adventures that have been taking place here for so long" (10).[145] The fact that the Grail Quest is underway apparently affects the way adventures are to be interpreted: when the first group of monks encountered learns that the Grail Quest has begun, they are able to give meaning to the adventures the knights have met. Adventures become open to the kind of exegesis one might perform on the Bible, their allegorical depths sounded and spiritual parallels uncovered. Correspondingly, the adventures have changed in character: no longer magical or marvelous episodes that demonstrate the prowess of the knight or his devotion to ladies, like the adventures discussed above in Chrétien's romances, the adventures in the *Queste* are primarily spiritual in nature, testing a knights devotion to God or his chastity.

Parallel to the distinction between the old chivalric adventures and the new adventures ushered in by the Grail and meant for the Christian heroes is a distinction between the Old Law and the New Law that runs through the *Queste*.[146] Galahad is an obvious Christ-figure, first appearing to the other knights at the feast of Pentecost at the beginning of the tale. In the explanation of the mysterious adventure of the tomb, Galahad is explicitly compared to Christ: his arrival was foretold, just as the coming of Christ was foretold; he has come to rescue the people, just as Christ did, though in his case he comes to complete and reveal the meaning of adventures, while Christ came to bring salvation, which is why, a monk explains, "We should

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[144] "ce est cil qui metra a fin les aventures de la Grant Bretaigne, et par cui le Rois Mehaigniez recevra garison" (10).

[145] "celui que Diex nos a envoié por delivrer nostre païs des granz merveilles et des estranges aventures qui tant sovent i sont avenues par si lonc tens" (11).

[146] See Fanni Bogdanow, "The Grail Romances and the Old Law" in *Arthurian Studies in Honour of P.J.C. Field*, especially pages 1-3 where she discusses the anti-semitism of the *Queste del Saint Graal*.

compare your coming to the coming of Jesus Christ, in form if not in significance" (26).[147] The

adventure of the tomb itself signifies the triumph of the New Law over the Old Law. The heavy

tomb "represents the extreme harshness of the Jews, and the body signifies how they and their

descendants were condemned to death by mortal sins that they could not easily overcome. The

voice issuing from the tomb represents the doleful words they uttered before proconsul Pontius

Pilate: 'May his blood be on our hands and on our children's hands!' Because of these words,

they were put to shame and lost everything. You can thus see in this adventure the meaning of

Christ's Passion and the image of His coming" (26).[148] Christ brings the New Law to replace the

Old Law of the Old Testament, which is demonized throughout the *Quest*. Galahad, in resolving

this adventure, demonstrates that he is the one chosen by God to usher in a new Christian

chivalry.

Perceval and Bors, the other Grail knights, are also tested in their ability to distinguish

between the Old Law—portrayed as evil, duplicitous, and hard-hearted—and the New Law of

Christ. For Perceval the test comes in the form of a vision of two ladies, one on the back of a lion

and the other on the back of a serpent. The first, a younger woman, comes to greet and warn him

of coming danger; the second tries unsuccessfully to trick him into worshiping her. Perceval's

spiritual guide explains: "The lady riding the lion represents the New Law, which rides atop the

lion known as Jesus Christ, the foundation on which the Law was built and developed for all of

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[147] "Por quoi len doit vostre venue comparer pres a la venue Jhesucrist, de semblance ne mie de hautece" (38).

[148] "La tombe senefie la grant durté des Gyeus et li cors senefie aux et lor oirs qui tuit estoient mort par lor pechié mortel, dont il ne se pooient mie oster legierement. Et la voiz qui de la tombe issoit senefie la dolereuse parole qu'il distrent a Pilate le prevost: 'Li sans de lui soit sor nos et sor nos enfanz!' Et por cele parole furent il honi et perdirent aux et quant qu'il avoient. Einsi poez vos veoir en ceste aventure la senefiance de la Passion Jhesucrist et la semblance de son avenement" (39).

Christianity, to be the mirror and true light of all who believe in the Trinity" (64).[149] On the

other hand, "[t]he lady you saw riding the serpent represents the Synagogue, the Old Law that

was displaced when Jesus Christ brought forth the New Law. The serpent carrying her is the

Scripture, poorly understood and interpreted. It is hypocrisy, heresy, inequity, and mortal sin; the

devil himself" (65).[150] Bors is tested in a quarrel between two sisters, the older of whom had

been entrusted with the lands of King Love until with cruelty and mismanagement she proved

herself unworthy and was pushed out in favor of the younger. The older sister is now trying to

usurp the younger sister's lands, and Bors fights to defend the younger lady. Later a spiritual

guide explains to him the significance of his fight. His devotion to the New Law has also been

tested. The younger sister, who has been trusted by King Love (Jesus Christ), represents the New

Law. "We take the other lady, who had disinherited the first and warred against her, to be the

Old Law, the enemy who always opposes Holy Church and her followers" (115).[151] Perceval and

Bors both pass their tests and prove themselves to be worthy practitioners of the Christian

chivalry introduced by Galahad and the Grail Quest and advocated by the author of the *Queste* as

a replacement for the secular chivalric ideals of Chrétien.

On the other hand, those knights who are deemed unworthy of the Grail Quest suddenly

stop meeting adventures on their wanderings. Gawain and Hector happen upon each other, each

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[149] "Cele qui sor le lyon estoit montee senefie la Novele Loi, qui sor le lyon est, ce est sor Jhesucrist, qui [par lui] prist pié et fondement et qui par lui fu edifiee et montee en la veue et en l'esgart de toute crestienté, et por ce qu'ele fust mireors et veraie lumiere a toz çax qui metent lor cuers en la Trinité" (101).

[150] "Cele dame a qui tu veis le serpent chevauchier, ce est la Synagogue, la premiere Loi, qui fu ariere mise, si tost come Jhesucrist ot aporté avant la Novele Loi. Et li serpenze qui la porte, ce est l'Escriture mauvesement entendue et mauvesement esponse, ce est ypocrisie et heresie et iniquitez et pechié mortel, ce est li anemis meismes" (103).

[151] "Par l'autre dame, qui deseritee en avoit esté et qui la guerreoit, entendons nos la Vielle Loi, li anemis qui toz dis guerroie Sainte Eglyse et les suens" (185).

complaining of his lack of adventures.[152] Hector says, "In the last two weeks I have met more

than twenty of [our companions], each one alone. And all of them complained of finding no

adventure" (92).[153] Both knights have visions and hear a voice from on high that leaves them

confused. A hermit explains the import: the Round Table knights have become proud; Hector

and Gawain themselves lack charity, abstinence, and grace, and would be better off giving up the

Grail Quest than continuing to their shame. It is because of their lack of these qualities that they

have encountered no true adventures, but only mishaps that have led to the deaths of their

companions. Even in the midst of this very episode, Gawain kills his friend Owein, a sign of the

sinfulness of both men.

In the meantime, the Grail knights meet with continuous and wondrous adventures.

Indeed, after the tests that make up the bulk of the narrative have concluded, they spend another

five years before arriving at the Grail Castle wandering the land completing adventures: "During

those five years, Perceval accompanied [Galahad] wherever he went. And Galahad completed

all the adventures in the kingdom of Logres, so that few were ever seen again except for certain

miraculous revelations of Our Lord" (162).[154] The author of the *Queste* associates knightly

adventures, therefore, with the time before the completion of the Grail Quest. Once the Grail

knights complete the quest, the Grail itself must leave the kingdom of Logres, "never to be seen

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[152] Even though he meets no adventures *per se*, Gawain apparently cannot help engaging in senseless slaughter – a further sign of his unworthiness: "I can tell you truthfully, as a friend, that riding alone with no other mission, I have killed more than ten knights, the worst of whom showed considerable valor, but I have not found a single adventure" (92). ["Car je vos creant loiaument come a mon compaignon que por aler solement, sanz autre besoigne fere, ai je puis ocis plus de dis chevaliers dont li pires valoit assez, ne aventure ne trovai nule" (147).]

[153] "[J]e en ai puis quinze jors trové plus de vint chascun par soi, qu'il n'i ot onques nus qui ne se plainsist a moi de ce qu'il ne pooit trover aventure" (147).

[154] "En en toz les cinc anz li tint Perceval compaignie en quel leu qu'il alast. Et dedenz celui terme orent il si achevees les aventures dou roiaume de Logres, que poi en i veoit len mes avenir, se ce n'ert demostrance de Nostre Seignor merveilleuse" (265).

here again. Nor will the adventures associated with it take place here any longer" (165).[155]

What should be the high point of Arthur's reign—the successful completion of the Quest of the

Holy Grail—turns out to be its low point: the Grail is removed from England, the bulk of the

Round Table knights have been found unworthy of a holy quest, and the very values of chivalric

society have been called into question. For, what is a knight to do without adventures to pursue?

The Quest for the Holy Grail, it turns out, marks the beginning of the end. With no more

adventures and with mostly sinful, proud knights left at court, the knights turn on one another

and the fellowship is broken. There are no adventures in the *Mort Artu*, only suspicion, betrayal,

infighting, and finally the end of the entire enterprise. It is the fulfillment of what Arthur fears at

the start of the Quest when he wishes they had not begun it, knowing that many would not

return: "It should not be surprising that I'm saddened by [my knights'] departure. No Christian

king has ever had—or will ever have in the future—as many good knights and brave men at his

table as I have here today. Once they've left, they will never gather here again. This is what

distresses me most" (13).[156]

The author of the *Queste*, then, has both effectively explained why knights no longer

come across the kinds of wondrous adventures they have read about with such longing in the

romances of Chrétien and even in the earlier parts of the *Vulgate Cycle*, like the *Prose Lancelot,*

and he has shown the dangers of engaging in actions solely for personal glory. Seeking only

personal glory leads to sin, which destroys not only the individual, endangering his soul, but the

whole community. It is all the more dangerous because it is seductive and tempting. Therefore,

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[155] The Grail knights must take it to the holy city of Sarraz: "En la cité de Sarraz, ou palés esperitel, et por ce t'en covient il de ci aler et fere compaignie a cest saint Vessel, qui anuit se partira dou roiaume de Logres en tel maniere que ja mes n'i sera veuz, ne des or mes n'en avendra aventure" (271).

[156] "[C]e n'est mie de merveille se je sui corrouciez de lor departement. Car onques rois crestiens n'ot autant de bons chevaliers ne de preudomes a sa table come j'ai eu en cest jor, ne ja mes n'avra quant il de ci departiront, ne ja mes ne seront a ma table rasemblé einsi come il ont esté ci; et ce est la chose qui plus me desconforte" (17).

much of the work the *Queste* does is in trying to educate the knights—and thus the audience—on the consequences of their actions, the meaning of their dreams and adventures, and the importance of prayer, chastity, and repentance. Unfortunately for the author, all the heavy-handed preaching and explanation is not quite as exciting as old-style adventures. The fact that he couples sermons with adventures, however, demonstrates his understanding of the draw of the romance form and its power to influence its audience. He shows a particular adeptness at Christianizing adventures and giving them a spiritual, allegorical import in the mouths of the numerous hermits and monks whom the knights visit for counsel. This guidance includes what mistakes the knights have made in their past adventures and also advice on how to pursue a righteous path that will lead to salvation. Gawain gets this advice when he is told to make confession, but he refuses to follow it and so is denied adventures. Lancelot becomes the model for reform when he earnestly tries to follow the teachings, making confession, undergoing penance, wearing a hairshirt, and praying fervently. He sometimes still fails—even at the moment of his partial vision of the Grail he proves unable to follow directions and enters where he has been forbidden to go. Nevertheless, his sincere desire to be a good Christian knight and his willingness to work to change provide a model for all struggling sinners: it is not too late to seek salvation with the help of our Lord and his deputies on earth, religious men and women. The implication is clear: those who care about the eternal fate of their souls must give up their longing for selfish, empty, worldly glory and instead look to Galahad as the ideal and learn from the tests of Perceval and Bors and the struggles of Lancelot to be a better man. The author of the *Queste* understands the power of the nostalgia for Arthurian knighthood and evokes it, even as he seeks to replace it with religious fervor.

IV. Conclusion: Nostalgia in Transition

Geoffrey of Monmouth established an ideal that reflected what was lacking in his own time, although he shies away from explicitly urging readers to imitate it. This is a passive exemplum; a tale of caution and of inspiration rather than a detailed program for readers to follow in their own lives. In the romances of Chrétien, as we have seen, there is a pervasive sense of distance—a feeling of longing and admiration is inspired, but it is clearly a reflective nostalgia. Readers are invited in the prologues to take pleasure in the elegance of the composition (*Erec et Enide*) or in the fact that France is the inheritor of Greek and Roman *studii et imperii* (*Cligès*) or in the deeds that have been done for love (*Yvain*), but they are not exhorted to imitate the heroes or adopt an ideological system. This changes drastically with the continuations of Chrétien and with the Arthurian prose romances produced in the thirteenth century. Continuations reduce the distance, try to work out the inconsistencies, and follow the cracks in the knights' perfect chivalry to their logical conclusion. Some, like *Parzival,* do this in a positive way: the Grail Quest is achieved, Parzival heals the king, and all is favorably resolved. The *Queste del Saint Grail,* however, is more ideological: failures are more worrying, and ideals stricter and more difficult to live up to. And the stakes are higher too: on the line is the immortal soul of the knight. Given this, the *Queste* urges, it is time to give up nostalgia for the glory and adventures of Arthur's day—this is a childish sort of longing. Those adventures have been resolved by the Christ-like Galahad. He is now the ideal of knighthood, one the audience would profit by imitating.

Chapter 4

Revising the Ideal: Accounting for Failure in English Arthurian Poetry

I. Arthurian Romance in English

Taken as a whole, English achievement in romance is often seen as pale in comparison to

continental accomplishments. Many English romances are derivative or, worse, condensed and

inferior translations of fuller, more polished French works. In part, this is due to audience

considerations: at the time of romance's first flowering, most noble Englishmen could read the

French originals—indeed French was the primary language of the court, the locus of the romance

audience.[157] Romances translated into English, therefore, would have been intended for a

humbler audience, one that appreciated brevity and straightforwardness over rhetorical flair and

intricacy of plot.[158] Nevertheless, a few insular romances stand out as being superior examples of

poetic achievement in the genre of romance in English, and three of these are of particular

relevance to this study: the Alliterative *Morte Arthure,*[159] the Stanzaic *Morte Arthur*, and *Sir*

Gawain and the Green Knight.

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[157] From the beginning of the literary history of Arthurian legend, there is a complicated relationship between the story, the language it is composed in, and the place of composition. Geoffrey of Monmouth, writing in England, composes in Latin; Wace translates Geoffrey into Anglo-Norman French for the benefit of the Norman aristocracy in England; Laȝamon translates Wace into English. These three versions are generally understood as being more akin to chronicles in genre and form. Romances emerge in France (in French, of course) and are tied, at least loosely, to those three versions from England; French versions find their way back to England, sometimes adapted or translated into English; finally original Arthurian material in English appears once again in the fourteenth century with works like *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight.* This simplified overview does not even take into account the many treatments of Arthur in other languages, including some superb Arthurian texts in German.

[158] Some critics have questioned this view of English romances. See, for example, Jutta Wurster, who in her chapter "Audience" in *The Alliterative Morte Arthure: A Reassessment* argues that English romances had a gentry audience moved by the Hundred Years War to embrace writing in English for nationalistic reasons.

[159] It is convenient, though perhaps not accurate, to include the Alliterative *Morte Arthure* in a list of romances, when that classification is not altogether justified. There has been considerable debate about the genre of the poem. In addition to often being grouped together with romances, it has been variously called a heroic epic, a tragedy, a chronicle, and an antiromance. K.S. Whetter outlines the arguments for seeing it as "epic-heroic" in "Genre as

All three of these texts were written in the second half of the fourteenth century, and they are all anonymous. They are part of a larger flowering of literature in English that included Chaucer, Langland, and Gower. Two belong to the Alliterative Revival of the West Midlands: the Alliterative *Morte Arthure* employs alliteration exclusively, while *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* blends it with rhyme. The third, the Stanzaic *Morte Arthur,* uses an eight-line rhyming stanza. All three are briefer than the typical French romance, and they are more linear in their plotting, forgoing *entrelacement* and replacing a meandering sense of plot with one that values clear motivation and causation for actions.

Beyond these similarities of composition, the poems share some thematic preoccupations, in particular the representation of high ideals, but also an interest in the unfeasibility of those ideals, and what happens when they cannot be met. All three evoke nostalgia for lost ideals, but then call into question their workability, threatening to undermine the reader's sense of longing. Yet the author of perhaps the most nostalgic Arthurian text of all, both in itself and in the lasting effect it has had on generations of readers—I am speaking, of course, of Sir Thomas Malory and his *Morte Darthur*—would go on to use two of these poems as principal sources for some of his most moving and nostalgic books. Therefore, this study of medieval Arthurian texts would be incomplete without a consideration of how Middle English Arthurian texts engage the fascination and longing for Arthur, even when that longing is problematic, and what the

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Context in the Alliterative *Morte Arthure*"; Larry Benson agrees, but puts more emphasis on the tragic elements ("The Alliterative *Morte Arthure* and Medieval Tragedy"); Mary Hamel argues that although in plot it follows the chronicles, the poem reformulates episodes following a romance structure ("Adventure as Structure in the Alliterative 'Morte Arthure"); Karl Heinz Göller contends that it is an antiromance in "Reality Versus Romance: A Reassessment of the Alliterative *Morte Arthure*." See also Patricia Clare Ingham, *Sovereign Fantasies*, chapter 3 and Lee Patterson, *Negotiating the Past*, chapter 6. I include it here despite these concerns about genre in part because of the themes to be discussed in this chapter, in part because of its importance as an example of a superb Arthurian poetic text written in English, and in part because of the bridge it provides between the chronicle of Geoffrey of Monmouth, discussed in chapter 2, and the prose romance of Sir Thomas Malory, discussed in chapter 5 of this study.

consequences are for the audience's sense of nostalgia when, ultimately, the ideals proposed cannot be met.

II. The Warrior Ethos of the Alliterative *Morte Arthure*: Preserving Nostalgia in the Face of Destruction

The Alliterative *Morte Arthure* harks back to the chronicles of Geoffrey of Monmouth, Wace, and Laʒamon for its plot, style, and view of Arthur. The king is once again a robust leader and warrior, the central figure of his own story—rivaled only, perhaps, by his nephew Gawain, who after a decline in reputation in French romance is here unparalleled among Arthur's knights. It begins with Arthur returned home from various successful conquests, ready to hold court and pursue the pleasures of hunting, feasting, and celebrating Christmas. As in the chronicles, feasting (now for New Year's) is interrupted by messengers from Rome demanding tribute, which results in the war against Lucius that leaves the kingdom vulnerable to the treachery of Mordred and the eventual destruction of Arthur and most of his Knights of the Round Table. Despite the tragic ending and the fact that the poem ultimately deals with failure, the introductory statement of purpose the author offers focuses entirely on the glorious aspects of Arthur's reign. The author assumes at the outset a nostalgic interest in the noble deeds of the knights of old. The point of the poem, the author tells us, is to remember the great deeds of the past:

> You that desire to listen or love to hear
> Of elders of old times and of their strange deeds,
> How they were loyal to the law and loved Almighty God,
> Listen to me courteously and hold yourselves still
> And I shall tell you a tale that is true and noble
> Of the royal ranks of the Round Table,
> That were the best examples of chivalry and noble chieftains,
> Both skilled in their works and wise men of arms,

Doughty in their deeds and dreaded always shame,
Kind, courteous men and skilled in courtly manners—
How they won much worship in war,
Slew Lucius the wicked that was lord of Rome,
And conquered that kingdom through craft of arms—
Listen now here and hear this story.[160]

The poet starts by addressing the audience directly, appealing to their love of old stories,

particularly those concerning adventure. He asks the reader or listener to pay close attention,

emphasizing the truth of the story and its nobility. He praises the virtues of the characters and

their great deeds; the fact that Arthur and his knights are the "chefe" of chivalry—or the best

example of it, the ideal[161]—is the source of the nostalgia the author evokes. The values praised

include chivalry, bravery, nobility, and courteousness, which are typical of Arthurian romance.

There is no real suggestion that the audience will learn to be better knights by hearing the tale

(except, perhaps, implicitly), rather there is pleasure in hearing of the great deeds of noble men

for their own sake.

It is also important to note in particular the mention of war (with Rome), the praise of

conquest, and, most strikingly, the absence of any mention of the tragic end of the Round Table

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[160] "Ye that liste has to lyth   or luffes for to here
Off elders of alde tym   and of theire awke dedys,
How they were lele in theire lawe   and louede God Almyghty,
Herkynes me heyndly   and holdys ȝow styll
And I sall tell ȝow a tale   þat trewe es and nobyll
Off the ryeall renkys   of the Rownnde Table,
That chefe ware of cheualrye   and cheftans nobyll,
Bathe ware in thire werkes   and wyse men of armes,
Doughty in theire doyngs   and dredde ay schame,
Kynde men and courtays   and couthe of courte thewes—
How they whanne wyth were   wyrchippis many,
Sloughe Lucyus þe lythyre   that lorde was of Rome,
And conqueryd that kyngryke   thorowe craftys of armes—
Herkenes now hedyr-warde   and herys this storye" (12-25).
Translations to modern English of the Alliterative *Morte Arthure* are my own. The Middle English found in the notes comes from Mary Hamel's critical edition.

[161] Hamel defines "chefe" in her glossary as merely "fine" or "excellent"; the *Middle English Dictionary* defines it is as "best."

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that makes up the conclusion of the poem. The fact that it is omitted could mean that the poet had a very modern sense of how to create suspense and did not want to spoil the ending for his audience, even though they were almost surely familiar with at least the basic outline of the plot. Indeed, the poem offers a gripping impression of events unfolding in real time that is part of what makes it such a compelling read and gives it a rather modern profile. On the other hand, it is much more common for medieval authors to anticipate the outcome of their tales, usually in their introductions and especially when that outcome is essential to the message of the work.[162] In this case we can infer that while Arthur's downfall and death is an essential part of his story, it is not the most significant chapter of his tale. The poet suggests, at least in his introduction, that it is the glorious deeds and demonstrations of knightly prowess that ought to be our focus.

In spite of this focus on the glories of Arthur's reign at the start of the text, a notable achievement of the Alliterative *Morte Arthure* is the heightened sense of tragedy the work as a whole conveys, especially in comparison to its source texts, the chronicles of Geoffrey, Wace, and Laȝamon. The tragedy is present in the sources but dulled considerably by the chronicle format: Arthur is, after all, only one of many leaders to rise and fall, albeit one of the greatest and most noteworthy; such is the nature of history, especially the cyclical telling of history characteristic of the *Historia regum Britanniae*.[163] But by removing these episodes from their context, by beginning precisely with Arthur's moment of triumph and his challenge of the authority of Rome, which loomed large as an imperial and cultural force, the Alliterative *Morte Arthure* focuses squarely on the success and fall of the paragons of chivalry. In addition,

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[162] The Stanzaic *Morte Arthur*, for example, refers to the end and the "wo" (woe) of the knights in its introduction (8). This will be discussed in more detail below.

[163] See chapter two of this study.

changes to the plot, in particular the role of Mordred, the importance of Fortune, and the delayed, unforeshadowed, yet inevitable fall, contribute to intensifying the final tragedy.

In the Alliterative *Morte Arthure*, therefore, the author appears to have two main, sometimes conflicting aims: on the one hand, he seeks to represent the ideal, showing admirable knights at the height of their powers, accomplishing amazing feats of arms and a society worthy of our awe; on the other, he undermines the glory by snatching it away and heightening the tragic loss of these great knights, a fate some critics have found to be deserved by an Arthur who appears more bellicose and vainglorious than in almost any other version.[164] Indeed, critics have tended to overemphasize one or the other of these impulses, but neglected to consider how they work together. So, for instance, Patricia Clare Ingham's provocative analysis of the function of loss and trauma in the Alliterative *Morte Arthure* in her monograph *Sovereign Fantasies: Arthurian Romance and the Making of Britain* concludes that "Arthurian romance…encodes the past as mournful, distressing, and inconsolable" (86), but glosses over the very real consolation heroic tales like the *Morte* offer in the representation of martial deeds worshipfully done and even of glorious death. Dorsey Armstrong sees only the continued violence and concern for

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[164] Whether or not Arthur is to blame for his tragic end has been perhaps the main focus of critical debate regarding the Alliterative *Morte Arthure* since William Matthews argued in *The Tragedy of Arthur* (1960) that the king's sinfulness and worldly ambition resulted in his ill fortune. Matthews' view has found many followers, including John Finlayson ("Arthur and the Giant of St. Michael's Mount" and "The Concept of the Hero in the *Morte Arthure"*), Dorsey Armstrong ("Rewriting the Chronicle Tradition: The Alliterative *Morte Arthure* and Arthur's Sword of Peace") and most of the authors included in *The Alliterative Morte Arthure: A Reassessment of the Poem*, edited by Karl Heinz Göller. However, others, like R.S. Loomis (*The Development of Arthurian Romance*, page 151), Helaine Newstead (in her review of Matthews' book), and Richard Moll (*Before Malory: Reading Arthur in the Later Middle Ages*), have rejected Matthews' reading and insisted on Arthur's glorious representation in the poem. Still others, like Andrew Lynch ("'Peace is good after war': The Narrative Seasons of English Arthurian Tradition") and John Barnie (*War in Medieval Society: Social Values and the Hundred Years War, 1337-99*) have argued that the poet is, at the end of the day, simply ambiguous or ambivalent on the issue, particularly about the justness of Arthur's wars.

martial glory at the end, but neglects the sadness and mourning.[165] However, when one

combines these two impulses of greatness and loss and gives them each the weight they are

accorded by the text then what remains is a mournful longing for past glory—that is, nostalgia.

The poem is interested in war above all else. The men of the Round Table hold strongly

to a warrior ethos.[166] The poet admires most those who are successful warriors, particularly

Gawain and Arthur himself, both reinvigorated here after their less active roles in French

romances. While there are examples that can be (and have been) adduced by critics to

demonstrate a certain amount of ambivalence toward excessive warfare, especially in the second

half of the poem, by and large the poet relishes descriptions of war and praises successful

warriors. Both the warriors and the narrator anticipate battles with eagerness: Cador is thrilled at

the prospect of war with Rome for the exercise of arms it will bring and the chance for the

knights of the Round Table to prove once again their might:

> Now reawakens the war, Christ be worshipped!
> And we shall win it again through vigor and strength.[167]

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[165] In focusing too much on whether the poet is praising or blaming, the critics mentioned in the note above tend to miss the overall effect of the poem.

[166] Benson points out that we need to adjust our expectations gleaned from reading Malory or *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* that Arthur will be "chivalric": "This is an Arthur who is pre-eminently heroic, a king whose most noble title is 'conqueror,' who knows little of tournaments, but a great deal about war and nothing of courtly love but everything of friendship and loyalty" (76).

[167] "Now wakkenyse þe were, wyrchipide be Cryste!
And we sall wynn it ag[a]yne   be wyghtnesse and strenghe."(257-8)
Tellingly, the *Morte Arthure* poet omits Gawain's reply to Cador found in Wace in which he stands up for peace:
"Bone est la pais emprès la guerre,
Plus bele e mieldre en est la terre;
Mult sunt bones les gaberies E bones sunt les drueries.
Pur amistié e puir amies
Funt chevaliers chevaleries."
"Peace is good after war and the land is the better and more lovelier for it. Jokes are excellent and so are love affairs.
It is for love and their beloved that knights do knightly deeds" (Wace 10765-10772).

"[S]ir Gawayne was glade" (1386) when he provokes the Romans into battle on his mission as a messenger, and later it is "with a glade will" (2525) that he comes across the armed Priamus ready to fight. As the troops gather to fight outside of Metz as part of the hunting expedition turned full-fledged battle, the narrator can hardly suppress excitement: "It is a marvel to hear of such a great multitude!"[168]

The battles themselves are both numerous and described in meticulous detail—the poet adds battles that do not appear in his sources, and elaborates those that do. Descriptions of wounds are a particularly grisly feature, with entrails and brainpans spilling in profusion. Arthur and his men are even occasionally darkly humorous about the wounds they inflict, as when Arthur severs the legs of a giant and exclaims:

> 'Come down and talk to your companions!
> You are too tall by half; I hate you in truth;
> You shall be handsomer very soon, with the help of my Lord!'[169]

Later in the same battle Arthur goes berserk after Kay is mortally wounded and slices one enemy in half vertically (including his horse!) and then another horizontally, so that his bottom half rides on. The narrator quips, "I hope he never heals from that hurt!"[170]

The alliterative poet demonstrates considerable skill in his ability to describe battles as well as a deep knowledge of warfare. He discusses Arthur's strategy and his arrangement of his troops (1973-2005). In addition to one-on-one encounters, such as those discussed above and

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[168] "Of siche a grett multitude was meruayle to here!" (2905).

[169] 'Come down…   and karpe to they ferys!
Thowe arte to hye by the halfe,   I hete þe in throuthe;
Thow sall be handsomere in hye,   with þe helpe of my Lorde!' (2126-8)

[170] "Of that hurt, alls I hope, heles he never!" (2209).

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countless other examples of knights wounding or killing their enemy, the poet is able to convey the wider scope of a large battle, giving a sense of the confusion it creates. For example, he details a terrifying barrage of arrows that quickly dispatches hundreds of men and sends the front line into a panic (2095-2108). The naval battle just before Arthur returns to Britain is another particularly good example of a description of battle chaos (3672-3688). The poet even gives us a glimpse of what the battlefield might look like mid-fighting, with every "stream in the forest running with red blood"[171] and men lying wounded and filthy all about.

Although profit from battle is a concern—before engaging the enemy on the road to Paris, for example, Cador exhorts his men to remember that Arthur has richly rewarded them with gifts, lands, and gold therefore they must uphold the reputation of their king and of the Round Table (1726-37); after victory against Lucius the enemy camp is ransacked—the Alliterative *Morte Arthure* emphasizes a number of times that profit is secondary to the more typically epic (and violent) drive for revenge. Arthur only agrees to spare Senator Peter if the wounded Sir Ewain survives, even though Peter is worth a hefty ransom. Furthermore, Arthur frames it as a values issue, both for kings—

> For it is not becoming for a king who is considered a conqueror
> To bargain with his captives out of covetousness of silver.

—and for knights—

> It never becomes knighthood…
> To talk of bartering when captives are taken.[172]

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[171] "further in the firthe of rede blode rynnys!" (2144)

[172] For it comes to no kynge   þat conquerour es holden
To common with his captifis   for couatys of siluer.
It come neuer of knyghthede,   knawe it yif hym lyke,
To carpe of coseri   when captyfis ere takyn (1579-2).
Hamel glosses "comes to" as "is proper to" or befits. Therefore it is not befitting for a knight to enter a battle out of greed for treasure.

Similarly, when Kay is mortally wounded Arthur commands that no captives be taken

until he is avenged, provoking an almost orgiastic slaughter, which despite its violence seems to

be meant to impress the reader and rouse something akin to patriotic feeling or pride in the

knights:

> There might men see chieftains on chalk-white steeds
> Chop down in the chase noble knights—
> Powerful Romans and royal kings
> Had their ribs ripped apart with hard steel.
> Brains burst through burnished helmets,
> Cut to pieces with swords on the broad fields,
> They hewed down heathen men with hilted swords
> By whole hundreds near the forest's edge;
> There might no silver save them or secure their lives,
> Neither Sultan nor Saracen nor senator of Rome.[173]

It is easy to see why some modern critics might find the examples I have given of Arthur

and his knights representing the ideal of this particular kind of warrior ethos more indicative of

an indictment of war and of Arthur personally.   Andrew Lynch, for example, calls Arthur's wars

"excessive" and "endless" (21). And indeed the poem does occasionally make us question

whether Arthur and his men have been immoderate in their lust for war. After all, by the time he

gets to Rome, rather than being satisfied with his success, the King sets his sights on yet more

war, declaring, "We shall be overlords of every place on earth!"[174] But it is also hard to justify a

full-scale condemnation, either of Arthur, warfare, or the warrior ethos on the part of the poet.

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[173] Thar myghte men see chiftaynes on chalke-whitte stedez
Choppe doun in the chaas cheualrye noble—
Romaynes þe rycheste and ryall kynges,
Braste with ranke stele theire rybbys in sondyre.
Braynes forebrusten thurghe burneste helmes,
With brandez forbrittenede one brede in þe laundez,
They hewede doun haythen men with hiltede swerdez
Be hole hundrethez on hye by þe holte eyuyes;
Thare myghte no siluer thaym saue ne socoure theire lyues,
Sowdane ne Sarazene ne senatour of Rome. (2268-77)

[174] "We sall be ouerlynge of all þat on the erthe lengez!" (3211).

The gravest evidence against Arthur is in the words of his philosopher to whom he turns for an

interpretation of his dream of the Wheel of Fortune. The philosopher's warning is dire: he tells

Arthur that he has come to the end of his good fortune, and he suggests that the king bears at

least some of the blame for this change and must therefore repent and do what he can to save his

soul. He tells Arthur:

> 'You have shed much blood, and destroyed many people for no
>   reason,
> Out of pride, in many king's lands.
> Confess your shame and prepare for your end!'[175]

He further implores the king,

> 'I urge you to list and acknowledge your unreasonable deeds,
> Before you soon repent all your cruel works;
> Man, amend your attitude before you suffer misfortune,
> And meekly ask mercy for the reward of your soul!'[176]

If, as Jutta Wurster contends, that philosopher's speech acts as a parallel to the narrator's

introduction, setting the tone for and outlining the conclusion of the story, this is damning indeed

(56). But these passages do not tell the whole story.[177]

Even the philosopher must acknowledge that as dire a warning as the dream of the Wheel

of Fortune is, it also recognizes and represents Arthur's greatness. After all, Britain's king has

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[175] Thow has schedde myche blode, and schalkes distroyede,
Sakeles, in cirquytrie, in sere kings landes.
Schryfe the of thy schame and schape for thyn ende! (3398-400).

[176] 'I rede thow rekkyn and reherse   vnresonable dedis,
Ore the repenttes full rathe   all thi rewthe werkes;
Mane, amende thy mode   of thow myshappen,
And mekely aske mercy   for mede of thy saule!' (3452-5).

[177] Richard Moll points out that simply by calling Arthur to repent and prepare for the afterlife, does not necessarily mean the philosopher is condemning the king's past deeds: any Christian should repent before death: "He…recognizes that Arthur's conquests have involved the deaths of innocents and that he should atone for those deaths, but there is nothing in the philosopher's speech, except proximity, which indicates that the deaths of innocents have caused Arthur's fall." Furthermore, "Critics who claim that the philosopher condemns Arthur's conquests are forced to acknowledge an inconsistency in the poet's attitude towards the king" (115).

been included among the Nine Worthies, the very best men in all of history. Although doomed

to descend, he has also had his time at the top of the wheel: he has had his moment as the very

best of the best. The fall is an inevitable part of being included in this group, and all its members

will suffer a similar fate. As Lee Patterson points out, this is part of the recursiveness of history

that the Alliterative *Morte Arthure* exemplifies.[178] Between remonstrating and calling for

repentance, the philosopher praises Arthur in terms more familiar to the overall ethos of the

poem:

> Fortune calls you forward to fulfill the number,
> As one of the nine of the noblest named on earth.
> This shall be read in romance by royal knights;
> You will be reckoned and renowned among riotous kings
> And judged on Doomsday for your deeds of arms
> As the doughtiest that ever dwelled on earth—
> So many clerks and kings shall talk of your deeds
> And tell of your conquests in chronicles forever![179]

Even a fall from Fortune's wheel cannot erase the memory of Arthur's triumphs, which will be

celebrated in literature (specifically the poet mentions romance and chronicle) for all time. This,

not his ultimate failure, will be Arthur's real legacy. He is not, perhaps, a perfect man, but he is

an ideal warrior king. Furthermore, with the image of future clerks and kings "carping"[180] about

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[178] See *Negotiating the Past,* chapter 6, "The Romance of History and the Alliterative *Morte Arthure,*" pages 197-230. Patterson discusses the dream in particular on pages 224-227. "Both in its structure and in its inclusion of the Nine Worthies the dream has a broader relevance. The concept of Fortune inevitably expresses a historiography of recurrence: Alexander is the prototype whose achievements are endlessly, and meaninglessly, reenacted" (225).

[179] Forethy Fortune þe fetches   to fulfill the nowmbrye,
Alls nynne of þe nobileste   namede in erthe.
This sall in romance be redde   with ryall knyghttes,
Rekkenede and renowned   with ryotous kynges,
And demyd one Domesdaye   for dedis of armes
For þe doughtyeste that ever   was duelland in erthe—
So many clerkis and kynges   sall karpe of ȝoure dedis
And kepe ȝoure conquestez   in cronycle for euer! (3438-45)

[180] Carping is used here not in the more modern sense of "complaining," but in the Middle English sense of "chattering" or "talking" (*Middle English Dictionary*).

his deeds of arms, we get a sense of the nostalgia the philosopher, and ultimately the poet, anticipates in future audiences of Arthur's tale.

While battle prowess is the paramount value in the Alliterative *Morte Arthure*, other values play an important role as well. Often tied to battle prowess, and certainly part of the warrior ethos, is the connection between the king and his men, and to a certain extent between the men. Arthur acknowledges his debt to his warriors; their deeds of arms have made his reputation:

> My reputation and my manhood you maintain on earth,
> My honor in other kings' lands,
> My wealth and my worship throughout the rich world;
> You have conquered in a knightly way all that belongs to my crown.[181]

The men, in turn, proudly fight for their sovereign. Their battle cry is ever "Arthur!" To the very last they stand by their king, so that the poet declares:

> No other earthly knight ever had such honor
> On the day of his death except Arthur alone.[182]

The relationship at times is almost like that of a father to his sons, and not only when the knights are actually kin, as in Arthur's heart-wrenching mourning for Gawain.[183] Sir Idrus refuses to leave Arthur's side in the final battle even when his own father is hard-pressed, forsaking all kin to fight beside his king (4145). To the bitter end Arthur's knights "mayntenyde [his] manhede." Even though it costs them dearly (and Arthur's final speeches are filled with pathos), because the betrayal is confined to Mordred and there is none of the internal strife present in the romance

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[181] 'My menske and my manhede   ye mayntene in erthe,
Myn honour all vtterly   in oþer kynys landes,
My wele and my wyrchipe   of all þis werlde ryche;
Ye haue knightly conqueryde   þat to my coroun langes' (399-402).

[182] Siche honoure neuer aughte   none erthely knyghttez
At theire ending-daye   bot Arthure hym seluen! (4169-70).

[183] For more on Arthur as a father figure and the Round Table as a family unit, see Jeff Westover, "Arthur's End: The King's Emasculation in the Alliterative *Morte Arthure*," especially page 312.

tradition, their legacy is less complex than in the *Mort Artu*, the Stanzaic *Morte Arthur,* or Malory's *Morte Darthur*. Excepting Mordred alone, they are paragons of feudal loyalty.

The poet also endeavors to make Arthur and his knights embody courtly virtues, though these tend to be a sort of veneer lightly covering their more martial inclinations, but nevertheless providing a civilizing influence. Courtly characteristics are made more of in the early parts of the poem, such as the grand and luxurious feast, the demonstrations of hospitality to the emissaries from Rome, and the formal war council. Lynch points out that in fact these "normal motifs of peace are enlisted as part of Arthur's hostile capacity" (137), meant to intimidate the messengers; thus courtliness is put in service of warlike aims. Rebecca S. Beal discusses Arthur's arming scene in meticulous detail and demonstrates how it "presents Arthur as the product of his civilization and thus characterizes him as the antithesis of the giant" he fights (32). Nevertheless, it is clear that courtly values are subordinate to more heroic ones. Arthur willingly casts off courtly things to focus on bringing Mordred to justice. He swears to Jesus and Mary that he will never hunt, hawk, or host a Round Table until he avenges Gawain's death (3997-4008).

Although it may seem antithetical to all the violence, bloodlust, and desire for revenge, this is a deeply religious poem, and Arthur and his knights are specifically ideal *Christian* warriors. Their battles are practically framed as crusades, as both Lucius and Mordred enlist the aid of pagans and, in Lucius's case, even "giants…engendered with fiends" and "witches and warlocks."[184] When he realizes he and his men are doomed in their fight against Mordred, Gawain comforts them that they will all "dine with our Savior solemnly in heaven"[185] for their part in bravely fighting the Saracens. In his final battle, Arthur carries a shield emblazoned with

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[184] "geauntes…engenderide with fendez" (612) and "weches and warlaws" (613)

[185] "Souppe with our Saueoure solemply in heuen" (3805).

an image of the Virgin and Child—"these were the noble arms of Arthur the worthy, while he lived."[186] Arthur has cause to call on God (and Jesus and Mary) often in the last battle, and he prays sincerely for his men in his last battle speech (lines 4084-4104). Arthur and his men die all the more gloriously because they do so fighting bravely for Christ. In spite of the warnings of the philosopher, Arthur and his knights continue to be representative of the ideal in the final war, and their fight against Mordred is represented as nothing short of holy.

Finally, there are all sorts of miscellaneous details that reinforce our impression of Arthur as an ideal king. Although vicious in his subjugation of France and Northern Italy, Arthur willingly grants mercy when asked, for example in Lorraine. The siege of Metz has often been seen as emblematic of Arthur's pride and violence, but the description of siege warfare is more suggestive of the cruel realities of war from a poet who has already clearly established an interest in realistic depictions of battle than an indictment of Arthur *per se*, especially since Arthur is so willing to be merciful when asked. Generally it is Arthur's enemies who are depicted as causing senseless destruction;[187] Arthur rescues his people,[188] establishes laws and order,[189] subdues rebels, and, yes, conquers territory,[190] which in the heroic perspective of the poem is more virtue

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[186] "this ware the cheefe armes/ Of Arthure the auenaunt, qwhylls he in erthe lengede (3650-1).

[187] Lucius begins plundering Arthur's territories in anticipation of their war, lines 610-625 and 1235-1262. In this second passage a messenger, on behalf of the people, begs Arthur to come to their rescue. Mordred invites the Saxons into Britain and their chief, Childrick, rapes and pillages his way around the countryside.

[188] In addition to the examples from the note above, Arthur undertakes the fight with the giant of Mont Saint Michel to save his people from this cannibalistic fiend.

[189] The poet goes into considerable detail about Arthur ordering the affairs of Metz (3068-77). In Como he makes certain his men behave themselves and do not rape the women or do violence to the men, while he himself calms the fears of the citizens (3122-3133).

[190] The behavior of Arthur and his men in Tuscany certainly leaves something to be desired by modern standards (3150-75). Here the poet gives a glimpse of the realities of conquest. We also see Arthur and the Round Table knights celebrating their victories with games and with food and drink seized from the conquered people, which in the wake of the destruction they have caused can strike a modern reader as being in rather poor taste. But the poet describes them, without irony it seems to me, as the merriest men on earth (3175). If anything, it appears that this is

than vice. Although ruthless to his enemies, Arthur is respectful once they are dead. He attends to appropriate burial rites for Lucius and his men (2290-305), in notable contrast to Mordred who leaves the bodies of Gawain and his men facedown in the dirt (3943-4).

As strongly idealistic and laudatory of Arthur and his wars as the poem is, this is also a deeply tragic composition, and the poet goes to great lengths to heighten the tragedy. Even the basic shape of the story he chooses to tell is calculated to pack an especially tragic punch. The poet skips over the more tumultuous start of Arthur's reign and begins with the king already an established conqueror. He then raises him to yet more glorious heights, including victory in single combat against a ferocious giant (an episode from his source, to be sure, but much developed here), the defeat of Lucius and his Saracen and giant hordes, and he adds new victories of his own invention, in Lorraine and Tuscany. Arthur marches even to the outskirts of Rome and is on the point of being crowned emperor. By raising Arthur so much higher in glory and position than his sources, the poet is able to make his precipitous fall in fortune that much more effective. Most of the changes from his sources are calculated to add to this effect.

Perhaps the most striking change that the alliterative poet makes is in the character of Mordred. In every other version where he appears, Mordred is uncomplicatedly evil, usually plotting from the beginning to be left in charge in Britain precisely so he can usurp the throne and steal away the queen. In the French *Mort Artu* Mordred even puts himself forward for the job. In the Alliterative *Morte*, however, he is a more complex character. Although he still gets caught up in intrigue and he is certainly a traitor, the poet makes him more sympathetic and complicates his blameworthiness. For starters, he does not want to be left behind in Britain, even

Arthur at the very height of his fortune—primed for a fall, perhaps, but if we see his fall as Boethian rather than Aristotelian (as Larry Benson does), then this behavior does not cause the fall. It is the fickleness of Fortune herself that casts one down in one's prime.

as regent. In a world that values martial achievement above all else, being left behind is not an honor, but a disgrace. Mordred is modest in his response to the king's directive, calling himself too "symple" (684) for the job and claiming it would be better left in the hands of someone wiser.   Arthur's response is somewhat threatening: "If you will not perform my will, you know what that means,"[191] basically ignoring Mordred's pleas.

In light of this treatment and in consideration of the values the poems espouses, some critics have found Mordred's move to seize power understandable.[192] Denied a chance to prove his prowess on the battlefields of Europe, it is unsurprising that Mordred's frustrated martial impulses get turned against Arthur. Even so, the changes to Mordred's temperament are carried through to the end of the poem, into his traitorous war with Arthur. Having killed his kinsman Gawain, Mordred is moved by guilt and grief to eulogize him. He mourns his cousin, but also his own part in the tragedy: "he moaned and repented all of his foul deeds."[193] The narrator also suggests that fate (and perhaps, implicitly, tradition) has played a part in creating this role for Mordred.[194]

The result is a different kind of tragedy than what we will see in the stanzaic version of the death of Arthur or indeed in Malory's *Morte*. In those versions the Round Table fellowship itself is destroyed. The knights break into factions and fight among themselves. Arthur must choose sides. This is what leads to the final battle and the deaths of nearly all the knights. In the alliterative poem there is a single failure of loyalty, a lone traitor, and even he plays his role

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[191] "That thow ne wyrk my will, thow watte whatte it menes" (692).

[192] See Armstrong, page 90.

[193] "He romyd and repent hym of all his rethe werkes" (3894).

[194] See line 3889: "his werdes ware wroghte siche wandrethe to wyrke."

reluctantly. The tragedy here is that despite the best efforts of everyone involved, Arthur and his knights cannot overcome their destiny, their fortune. It is an especially medieval kind of tragedy.

The role of fortune is, of course, underscored by her appearance in the poem, another change to the Arthur story made by the alliterative poet.[195] As in interpretations of the philosopher's speech discussed above, critics have often seen the dream of the Wheel of Fortune as indicating that Arthur's fall is "God's just punishment for his evil deeds" (Jannsen 141). There is no doubt that the dream indicates that Arthur's failure is around the bend. Indeed, immediately after the king has the dream interpreted, Sir Craddok appears with the bad news from home and Arthur must rush back to Britain to subdue Mordred and try to restore order. There is no doubt either that Arthur's conquests and his relentless drive for martial glory have left him susceptible to a failure of fortune. After all, the greater one's good fortune is, the more one has to lose, and Arthur has risen to the very apex of Fortune's wheel. A medieval, Boethian understanding of fortune does not necessarily implicate the individual who suffers bad fortune, except perhaps he who overvalues earthly, transitory things. Indeed the fact that fortune is often depicted as blind further reminds us that she can be both fickle and indiscriminate. Although the other kings Arthur sees on the wheel express regret for their deeds, Dame Fortune herself does not scold Arthur for bad behavior. Her only explanation for his change in circumstance is that he has "lived in delight and lordship long enough":[196] simply put, his time is up.

What heightens the tragedy from the reader's point of view is both the suddenness of this change in circumstance and the timing. Until this point there have been very few hints of Arthur's impending doom. Gaynor (as Guinevere is called here) foretells it in her grief (703,

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[195] The Wheel of Fortune appears in other versions, but the author of the Alliterative *Morte Arthure* both moves and expandes the episode.

[196] "lyffede in delytte and lordchippes inewe" (3387)

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720), but her excessive display of emotion erodes the seriousness with which the reader might take her prophecy. The narrator makes no allusion whatever to Arthur's end, either in the prologue or in the text itself until it occurs, a big change from other authors of *Mortes* who frequently refer, obliquely or not, to the tragic ending. Almost certainly the audience of the Alliterative *Morte Arthure* would have been aware of Arthur's fate, but the fact that the poet never refers to it, coupled with the extension of the king's adventures that delays that fate—the addition of the subjugation of Lorraine and Northern Italy—makes Arthur's tragic decline appear sudden and surprising and therefore all the more heart wrenching.

Arthur expresses the sadness of the ending best:

> King, truly crowned, in care am I left!
> All of my lords are laid low under the ground,
> That me have given rewards, by grace of God,
> Who maintained my manhood by might of their hands,
> And made me manly in the world and a master on earth!
> In a troubling time this mischief was raised
> By a traitor, which has destroyed all my true lords;
> Here rests the noble blood of the Round Table,
> Defeated by a scoundrel, more's the pity!
> Helpless on the heath, I will house myself alone,
> Like a woeful widow who wants her man;
> I may curse and weep and wring my hands,
> For my wit and my worship is gone forever!
> I take leave of all lordship until my end;
> Here is the blood of the Britons brought out of life.
> And now in this journey all my joy ends. [197]

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[197] Kyng comly with crowne,   in care am I leuyde!
All my lordchipe lawe   in lande es layde vndyre,
That me has gyfen gwerdouns,   by grace of Himselven,
mayntenyde my manhede   be myghte of theire hands,
Made me manly one molde   and mayster in erthe!
In a tenefull tym   this torfere was rereryde,
That for a traytoure has tynte   all my trewe lordys;
Here rystys the riche blude   of the Rownde Table,
Rebukkede with a rebawde,   and rewthe es the more!
I may helples one hethe   house by myn one,
Alls a wafull wedowe   þat wanttes hir beryn;
I may werye and wepe   and wrynge myn handys,

The speech contrasts sharply with the passage just before Arthur's dream when he and his men celebrated their victories and were the happiest men in the word (line 3175). Here, all joy has ended. Instead of the invincible king strutting outside the walls of Metz, Arthur is more like a "wafull wedowe." Instead of building an empire, his homeland is in ruin. The knights who supported his reputation have perished. This is a true reversal of fortune: Arthur has fallen from the very top of Fortune's wheel to the very bottom.

Arthur's speech also turns our attention to the nostalgia the poem invites. It invokes the glories of the past (the recent past for the characters, but distant for the readers) by recalling the power of the knights and the fact that Arthur was briefly the greatest king of all. But it also stresses the irrevocable loss of this time of glory—"my wit and my worship are gone forever!"[198] Though the poem's postscript recites the old belief that Arthur is *rex quondam rexque futurus*, the poem leaves no doubt that Britain's greatest king is dead and buried. All the highborn ladies, clergy, and remaining noblemen come to mourn at his grave, just as his readers mourn the passing of this civilization that brought such grandeur to England. That the readers are invited into the action is made clear throughout the work by the author's habit of using the first person plural—the knights of the Round Table are "our cheualrous knyghtez" (1362), "oure bolde men" (1434), "oure valiant biernez" (1958); Arthur is "oure soueraygne" (2055), among many other examples. The audience is encouraged to identify with the characters, partly because they are their ancestors (as the prologue makes clear), partly because they are their countrymen, and partly on the basis of shared values of knighthood.

For my wytt and my wirchipe	awaye es for euer!
Off all lordchips I take	leue to myn ende;
Here es þe Bretouns blode	brought owt of lyfe.
And nowe in this journee	all my joy endys.' (4275-90)

[198] "my wytt and my wirchippe awaye es for euer!" (4287)

The nostalgia for the lost ideal in the case of the Alliterative *Morte Arthure* is rooted, then, in the direct connection between the audience and the characters, who are their elders, and in the patriotic satisfaction of hearing of the successful conquests of one's forbears. It is further heightened by the sheer greatness of Arthur and his knights before their fall—their prowess in battle, richness in feasting, and loyalty to their king (with the exception of Mordred, of course, though even Mordred has a moment of regret for his treachery). And it is uncomplicated by any serious failure of the Round Table. As was shown in the discussion of the introductory lines, the focus of the poem is the ideal; the nostalgia of the audience stems from the fact that the ideal has been irrevocably lost: there is no attempt to induce readers to imitate these actions and there is no lingering hope that Arthur may one day return. Arthur dies at the end of the poem, his fortunes lost. We can therefore only mourn for the loss of the ideal and marvel at the tales of its practice.

III. Courtly Values in the Stanzaic *Morte Arthur*: Nostalgia in Peril

It is hard to imagine two versions of the same story more different than the Alliterative *Morte Arthure* and the Stanzaic *Morte Arthur*. The Stanzaic *Morte Arthur*, like the alliterative poem, is deeply tragic, but in another vein. The source text in this case is the French romance *La Mort le roi Artu*. Whereas the Alliterative *Morte Arthure* is closer to epic in its focus on politically motivated war and martial prowess, and the reasons for Arthur's downfall are likewise primarily political and military betrayal, the Stanzaic *Morte Arthur,* on the other hand, is squarely in the romance tradition. The tragedy is a more personal one, and the betrayals to blame for the failure of the Round Table are private and internal to the fellowship: the illicit love between Launcelot and Gaynor (Guinevere), the feud between Gawain and Launcelot, the troublemaking of the sons of Lot.

As in the Alliterative *Morte Arthure*, the opening stanzas of the Stanzaic *Morte Arthur*

announce the purpose of the poem:

> Lordinges that are lef and dere
>   Listeneth, and I shall you tell,
> By olde dayes what aunters were
>   Among our eldres that befell;
> In Arthur dayes, that noble king,
>   Befell aunters ferly fele,
> And I shall tell of their ending,
>   That mikel wiste of wo and wele. (1-8)[199]

The author proposes to tell of the adventures of "our eldres," drawing a direct connection

between the characters in the poem and the audience hearing of their deeds, a connection that

invites nostalgia much like the introduction of the alliterative poem. There is little direct mention

of the ideal stature of the knights, beyond Arthur being dubbed "noble," though the fact that

"aunters ferly fele"—that is, wondrously many adventures—were accomplished by these knights

implies much about their worthiness. Unlike the beginning of the Alliterative *Morte Arthure*,

which merely promises to tell of Arthur's successful conquests and makes no mention of the

disastrous consequences that follow, the Stanzaic *Morte Arthur* describes the adventures of the

knights explicitly as a precursor to and a set up for their ultimate destruction and failure. The

ending is not sudden or unexpected, but is, as both Richard Wertime and Sherron E. Knopp have

pointed out, the direct consequence of the actions of the characters, including their "social focus

and…unflinching acceptance of the chivalric code" (Wertime 1076). Wertime calls the poem, "a

tragedy of consequence" (1075), rather than of fortune and speaks of the "oppressive sense of

necessity" (1076) in the plot.[200] The tragic ending is set in motion in the opening lines, and the

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[199] Quotations of the Stanzaic *Morte Arthur* come from Larry D. Benson's edition.

[200] See also Sherron E Knopp, "Artistic Design in the Stanzaic Morte Arthur," especially page 571: "The uncontrollable swift flow of events and the inescapable lingering burden of consequences become literal truths in this carefully designed romance. Thus when Wertime calls the poem a "tragedy of consequence" to distinguish it

poem that follows traces the steps that lead Arthur and his men to that terrible conclusion.

Interestingly, though both texts are sources for Malory, he choses the stanzaic poem's version of

events for the section leading up to and including the *morte*, preferring to explore the

consequences and complexities of conflicting loyalty among upstanding knights, which are the

subject of this poem.[201]

Between these two poems, then, we find represented in the English tradition the two

dominant strains of the legend of the death of Arthur: the historical/epical and the romantic. In

both, however, and according to their separate traditions, the knights are idealized and the

nostalgia is heightened by a treatment of the loss of the ideal. I have already shown how the

Alliterative *Morte Arthure* works to represent Arthur and his knights as embodiments of the

warrior ethos espoused by that poem, raising them to even loftier heights than the poet's sources

before casting them down to destruction. The Stanzaic *Morte Arthur*, on the other hand, is a bit

more complicated, in part, perhaps, because the poet is somewhat less skilled: he continually

insists on the knights' perfection, but their actions often fail to bear out his praises. Furthermore,

the courtly ideals espoused, at least as understood and practiced by these knights, are themselves

revealed to have serious destructive flaws. The tragic consequences are a direct result of the

actions of the best knights in the world: Launcelot's affair with the queen, Gawain's inflexible

dedication to his oath to kill Launcelot—indeed, Mordred's betrayal of the king seems to pale in

comparison to the internal fissures that are doomed to destroy the Round Table. Nevertheless,

the poet at all times emphasizes the ideal nature of the characters, and their actions, while

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from tragedies of fate or fortune (p. 1075), he has hit upon a term which accounts for the structure as well as the content of the work."

[201] The conflicting loyalties developed in Malory's *Morte Darthur* are the subject of the following chapter in this study.

destructive, are generally in keeping with the values espoused by the text. "The narrator's rule of thumb is that the truly noble…deserve praise for their virtues and compassion for their faults" (Wertime 1080).

Whereas the Alliterative *Morte Arthure* promotes a warrior ethos, the stanzaic poem has a courtly ethos. The values are occasionally similar—for example, they both prize martial prowess—but their expression of those values is different. It is telling, for example, that the stanzaic poem begins in the bedroom, with the king and queen in private talking of past adventures. From the start, then, it is clear that we are concerned with private matters—are quite literally in a private space—rather than public matters of statecraft. It is the queen, rather than Cador, who complains that the men are going soft and losing their reputation for great deeds of arms. This is appropriate because in romance, unlike epic, knightly deeds are done for ladies, to impress them, to gain their good opinion and, in turn, to earn a reputation for prowess. The solution the queen proposes is not conquest or defense of the kingdom, but a tournament, essentially a game or empty exercise of arms meant for show, rather than the real thing. Indeed, "Full much there was of game and glee" (96) becomes a sort of refrain in the first half of the poem underscoring the fact that the romance ethos presented in the poem is more about appearances and courtly delights than pressing matters of state.[202]

Tournaments are, by nature, concerned with display, but appearances and elaborate courtly customs are especially important in the tournament Arthur summons. Launcelot does not want to be recognized, a common enough motif in romance; therefore, the poet introduces the custom of young knights who wear a single color of armor in their first year so that they may be

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[202] Variations include: "Much there was of game and play" (258); "And made him both game and play" (430); "About him was game and play" (611). Benson glosses "game" in each case as "pleasure," though an impression of frivolity is hard to escape, especially when combined with "play," as it so often is.

easily distinguished from more experienced knights—a convenient device that allows Launcelot to disguise himself in the Earl of Ascolot's son's armor. Further, by accepting a love token from the Fair Maid of Ascolot, Launcelot becomes virtually unrecognizable since the other knights have never known him to carry any token except for the queen's. So even though Launcelot's prowess often outs him, and even though the other knights are savvy enough to realize that this supposed novice is no untried knight, they dismiss the possibility of it being their friend on the basis of that token. None of this is particularly original—this kind of play, disguise, and reliance on complex customs is typical of romance—but it does underscore what the society here depicted values: ceremony, appearances, and martial deeds done in style.

The first half of the poem establishes these values but also begins to put pressure on them, ultimately leading to the strain of the second half, which causes them to crack. Knopp notes that the poem divides into "roughly equivalent halves into which the romance falls like a diptych and which constitute its major structural divisions. In the first half the camaraderie of Arthur's knights is threatened by, but survives, pressures from outside the fellowship. In the second half it collapses under pressures from within" (567). And although it is true that there are outside forces setting conflict in motion in the first half, the way the knights respond to the conflicts already suggests problems with the chivalric values system. This system, especially as it is understood and presented by the author of the Stanzaic *Morte Arthur,* is spectacularly ill equipped to deal with conflicting loyalties. The knights are unable to appreciate nuance or to demonstrate loyalty to more than one party at a time. The single-mindedness of the knights' (and perhaps the author's) understanding of chivalry leads to increasingly disastrous consequences. Relatively minor conflicts in the first half are never satisfactorily resolved, and they become insurmountable in the second half.

Take, for example, Launcelot's performance in the tournament. He tells his protégé, the Earl of Ascolot's son, that they ought to

> Help…them that hath most need:
>   Again the best we shall weel doure
> And we might there do any deed,
>   It wolde us turn to more honour (237-40)

even though that means fighting against Arthur and several of his own kinsmen. While it is a typical romance gesture to help the weaker side, it is nevertheless somewhat ominous to see Launcelot already taking up arms against his sovereign. The tournament becomes a sort of playful version of the later war—perhaps even underscored by Launcelot's scrupulously gallant behavior in that war, behavior one might more rightly expect to find in a tournament than in an actual battle.

Much of the conflict in the first half of the poem can be traced back to the Maid of Ascolot. She falls hopelessly in love with Launcelot at their first meeting and begs him to be her lover. Launcelot acts as honorably and chivalrously as he can. Unable to accept her love, explaining "In another stede mine herte is set" (203), he nevertheless agrees to wear her sleeve as a token and later leaves his armor with her as a remembrance. He seeks to give comfort, but not false hope. His kindness backfires. Unrecognizable to his friends, he is wounded by Ector, leading to some uncomfortable moments for Ector once they are later reunited, when Launcelot first threatens to return the blow and then laughs it off, saying he loves Ector all the more for his ability to deliver such a stroke.

More serious trouble is caused when Gawain comes looking for Launcelot and the Maid of Ascolot claims that they are lovers and produces Launcelot's armor as proof. Whether she is bragging, lying, or simply mistaken is not so clear, especially considering that she later dies for

want of Launcelot's love, leaving a letter accusing him of ungentlemanliness. Gawain reports to

the court that Launcelot has chosen a "leman," which causes the grief of the queen, a falling out

between her and Launcelot, and Launcelot's subsequent departure from the court so soon after

his return. This in turn throws the other knights into turmoil and grief for the loss of the

company of their most beloved friend. They blame the queen:

> And her they cursed for his sake
>   That ever love was them between. (798-9)

Indeed, everyone at court is so distraught that "There was no knight that lust to play," and we

have seen how important play is to these knights.

This in turn leads to a more dire consequence, one that shows the level of strain the

courtly values of the Stanzaic *Morte Arthur* are under. When Gaynor is (falsely) accused of

murder in Launcelot's absence, none of the Knights of the Round Table are willing to champion

their queen. Her husband the king is capable of little more than hand wringing. The poet tries to

absolve him for his inaction, stressing that he cannot get in the way of justice (he "might not be

again the right" 913 and 921), but this explanation is undercut by the reminder that the queen

"aguilte had no wight" (915) and by the proof of the queen's innocence that is discovered as

soon as the slightest investigation is undertaken.

Even more moving—and worrying—are the scenes of the Queen Gaynor desperately

begging her knights, literally on her knees, to take up her cause. She approaches each in turn, and

it quickly becomes clear that the reason they refuse is not so much because they do not want to

stand up for someone they believe is guilty,[203] but because they blame her for Launcelot's

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[203] Only Gawain refuses the queen on grounds that he witnessed the crime and believes her to be guilty:
> "Dame, saw I not and sat beside
>   The knight when thou with poison slogh?

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departure from court. Their responses would seem harsh were they addressed to any weeping, distraught lady; given to the queen by men who "ever had been her owne knight[s]" (1373), they are downright shocking. Bors, who eventually does take pity and agree to be her champion, is particularly harsh in his original response:

> 'Madame,' he said, 'By Cross on Rood'
>   Thou art well worthy to be brent!
> The noblest body of flesh and blood,
>   That ever was yet in erthe lente,
> For thy will and thy wicked mood,
>   Out of our company is went.' (1350-5)

But it is Lionel who first makes the connection between the knights' refusals and the departure of their friend from court:

> 'Madame, how may thou to us take
>   And wot thyself so witterly
> That thou hast Launcelot du Lake
>   Brought out of ower company?
> We may sigh and moning make
>   When we see knightes keen in cry;
> By Him That me to man gan shape,
>   We are glad that thou it abye!' (1380-7)

The fact that these knights could be so callous to a lady—their queen!—is problematic, even if it is ostensibly because of how highly they value the fellowship of their friend Launcelot.

The episode demonstrates how either the code itself or the knights' understanding of it is not nuanced enough to deal with the possibility that a knight might demonstrate loyalty to more than one party—that he might at once remain true to his friend *and* champion his lady. The knights blindly put their love for Launcelot first, and in doing so fail the queen. Indeed, they do worse: they do not simply refuse her requests with gentle explanations of their reasoning, but

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> And sithe, in herte is not to hide,
>   Myself over the borde him drow.
> Again the right will I not ride;
>   I saw the sooth very ynow." (1366-71)

they curse and harangue her. Even if their motive is in keeping with the courtly values

demonstrated by their loyalty to their fellow knight, their reaction is misguided: Launcelot would

certainly want his friends to defend his ladylove, even in spite of their falling out. Indeed,

Launcelot chastises them when he arrives on the scene at the last moment to defend Gaynor:

> Ivel hath the queen beset her deedes
> That she hath worshipped many a knight,
> And she hath no man in her needs
> That for her life dare take a fight. (1568-71)

The episode ends happily enough: Launcelot defeats Gaynor's accuser Mador, and they

even become friends; the queen is exonerated, by both the trial by combat and the subsequent

revelation of the guilty party; she and Launcelot are reconciled; and the court is reunited. A

celebration ensues. But the note of triumph and joy and the celebration of chivalry ring a bit

hollow. The problems with and conflicts of chivalric values have not been confronted or

resolved. Only a few lines before (1527) Mador was threatening to kill the queen in the middle of

dinner while Arthur was looking around helplessly and the knights were sitting by impassively!

It hardly feels like a triumph, and given this shaky resolution, it is not all that surprising that

these chivalric values cannot stand up to the internal conflicts of the second half, however

praiseworthy Launcelot and Gawain may be individually.

In many ways King Arthur's knights try harder than ever to live up to chivalric values in

the second half of the poem. They try to learn from their mistakes in the first half, but the

"oppressive sense of necessity" (Wertime 1076) of the poem, as well as their own flawed

chivalric system, is against them. For example, Gawain has learned his lesson about gossiping

about his friends, and when Agravain wants to tell Arthur about the relationship between

Launcelot and Gaynor, Gawain warns him to mind his own business and attempts to stay out of

it. He worries, rightly, that such gossip will lead to war with the strongest and best knight of the court, the man who has saved them on many occasions, and he is loath to betray his friend (1688-1711). He may also be remembering, as the audience surely does, the scolding he received from the queen when he last gossiped about Launcelot's love life—a scathing speech that goes on for 21 lines (1146-1167) and accuses Gawain of unkindness, discourtesy, disworship, villainy and general bad manners and ends with Gaynor telling him to "devoied my company" (1167). Despite Gawain's warnings, Agravain goes ahead with his plan to stir up trouble. Unlike Gawain in the earlier example, when he revealed, mistakenly, that Launcelot had a lover, Agravain proceeds with his eyes open, aware of the consequences of his action. Gawain's action was a well-meant blunder that nevertheless had some dramatic consequences, including the queen nearly being executed for lack of a champion. Agravain's actions are malicious, and therefore the consequences are even more dire: his death, the deaths of his brothers, war with Launcelot, and ultimately the destruction of the kingdom.

Gawain has apparently learned a lesson about women too. In the second half he is too much of a gentleman to attend the queen's execution: "Gawain wolde never be ner beside/ There any woman sholde be brent"; he, along with his brothers Gaheriet and Gaheries, does not agree with the king's ruling: "they had grete pitee" for the queen (1933). There is no mention, however, of Gawain's squeamishness at witnessing the execution of a lady in the first half when Gaynor is about to be killed for a murder she did not commit. Furthermore, the Stanzaic *Morte* lacks any specific account of Gawain's advice to the king against punishing the queen, as we find in Malory.[204] As in that text, Gawain's attempts to register his disapproval and stay out of

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[204] That advice appears to be Malory's addition, as it does not appear in the French *Mort Artu* either. See Malory, xx.7, page 1174 in Eugène Vinaver's edition, *The Works of Sir Thomas Malory*.

the fray are of course futile. Instead, his brothers, trying to follow his lead but also unwilling to displease their king, are accidentally killed (though unarmed) in the mêlée to rescue the queen. And with that the court breaks into factions: on the one side, Gawain swearing revenge, supported by the king; on the other, Launcelot, desperately searching for a way to be reconciled, and his kinsmen, prepared to defend themselves to the death.

Despite the attempts on Gawain's part to avoid conflict, the values inherent to the chivalric system as represented in the Stanzaic *Morte Arthur* exacerbate moments of bad luck or bad fortune and the troublemaking of the truly ignoble characters (namely, Agravain and especially Mordred). At key moments events are sparked by forces outside the heroes' control: Agravain telling Arthur that Launcelot and Gaynor have an improper relationship, Gaheriet and Gaheris getting killed in the fight for the queen, the serpent appearing at the truce talks. The main characters respond according to their values as chivalric knights, but those responses nevertheless drive the Round Table ever closer to destruction and result in an overall change in mood and focus, though they continue to be praised as ideal by the narrator.

Launcelot surely deserves some of the blame for the break up of the Round Table for his treasonous affair with the queen. But Agravain is the one who actually calls Launcelot a traitor—repeatedly (1679, 1683, 1812, 1813; Arthur also refers to Launcelot at "that traitour" in line 1908). The narrator does his best to mitigate these accusations. Even as Launcelot prepares to go to the queen privately in her chambers, he appears innocent in his carefree attitude. His lack of armor suggests his innocent intentions: he tells Bors he only plans to pay the queen a visit, nothing more. Admittedly, his attitude could be read as hubris or naiveté, rather than innocence, but the repeated insistence that Launcelot and Gaynor do not suspect "tresoun" (lines 1797, 1803) reinforces the impression that the author somehow assigns a clear conscience to the

couple and deflects the label of treason onto Agravain's actions rather than Launcelot's. The accusations against Launcelot by Agravain are furthermore balanced by Bors' repeated fears that Launcelot is about to be the victim of treachery by Agravain (lines 1777, 1879). Finally, the narrator himself never has anything but praise for Launcelot, irrespective of his less-than-praiseworthy actions required by the plot.

Quickly the focus shifts away from Launcelot's failure of loyalty; it is swallowed up by the all-consuming rage of Gawain that leaves Launcelot looking more admirable than ever. The reason for the enmity between Arthur and Launcelot in the rest of the poem is not Launcelot's treachery. If it were, the war would end with the return of Gaynor, and it does not. Indeed, the king immediately regrets "[t]hat ever Launcelot was my fo!" (1981) when he sees the consequences of conflict with Launcelot: in rescuing the queen from the king's punishment, "Many good were brought to ground" (1961) by Launcelot and his men, including Gaheriet and Gaheries. So Arthur seems unlikely to pursue the quarrel. It is Gawain, who up until this point has been striving to keep the peace between his own faction and Launcelot's, who becomes intractably devoted to attacking Launcelot. When he discovers the deaths of his brothers (in this version not necessary killed by Launcelot personally, but in the confusion of the rescue scene) and sees their dead bodies with his own eyes, something in Gawain snaps:

> A word might he speke no more;
> There he lost both main and might
> And over him fell in swooning there. (2003-5)

The "hardy knight" (2007) recovers himself well enough to swear his disastrous oath:

> 'Betwix me and Launcelot du Lake
>   Nis man on erthe, for sooth to sayne,
> Shall trewes set and pees make
>   Ere either of us have other slain!' (2010-13)

Gawain's insatiable desire for revenge becomes the driving force behind the internecine war, and it is Gawain who appears increasingly unreasonable in his rejection of all attempts to make peace—the intervention of the pope, Launcelot's offer of self-exile, and so forth—even against the wishes and advice of his followers and his king.[205] Yet the narrator continues to describe Gawain as an ideal courtly knight, using such terms as "hende and free" (2771) and "grete…of honour" (2778). Gawain's desire for revenge is perfectly understandable and even reasonable. It is a manifestation of the loyalty his owes his kin to avenge their deaths. Also in keeping with loyalty due one's kin, Arthur is honor-bound to stand by his nephew, even when he recognizes that doing so will have disastrous consequences.

Meanwhile Launcelot bends over backwards to be the courtly knight during the sieges of Joyous Gard and Benwick. He is reluctant to engage Arthur in battle, despite the urging of his men who are ready to defend their land. After battle becomes unavoidable, Launcelot spends his time making sure Arthur is safe, even helping him rehorse mid-battle (2190-7). Launcelot's treason is all but forgotten in the face of his courtly behavior; his willingness to hand over the queen, as if she means nothing to him; and his denial of treason against the king (2398-403). His frequent laments about his situation make no mention of his own guilt. Yet his role in precipitating tragedy is not entirely forgotten: the queen's final confession bewails the part her and Launcelot's love had in bringing about the deaths of so many good men.

Thus far I have mostly confined myself to discussing the knights and how their understanding of chivalry contributes to the tragedy. There is, of course, a good reason for this: Launcelot and Gawain are clearly the main characters of the poem, and by far the most time and energy is spent on them. Nevertheless, this is the story of the death of *Arthur*, therefore some

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[205] See, for example, lines 2668-91. "All they spake to have pees,/But himself, Sir Gawain" (2686-7).

investigation of Arthur's role in the tragedy and his conception of chivalry is crucial. As is common in romance, Arthur plays a relatively minor part for much of the Stanzaic *Morte Arthur*. Few if any actions are undertaken of his own initiative. The initial tournament is Gaynor's idea. His hands are tied by his judicial function when the queen is accused of murder. Agravain orchestrates the plan to catch Launcelot in the act of betrayal. It is not the king alone who decides the queen should be burnt for her infidelity, but rather a council (1921-25). His loyalty to his nephew Gawain propels him into war with Launcelot. A council recommends Mordred for steward while Arthur is away, ironically calling him the "sekerest" (2518), or most trustworthy, man in the whole realm. Arthur is perfectly willing to accept Launcelot's overtures of peace, but is prevented from doing so by his angry nephew. Even after Gawain's death, Arthur continues to be guided by him from beyond the grave: it is at the behest of a vision of Gawain that Arthur attempts to make peace with Mordred. Only in his final moments, when chance has propelled him into the final battle, does Arthur act decisively and of his own accord: the battle description is short, but Arthur's prowess is noteworthy; at the end of the battle he sees Mordred across the field and does not hesitate for a moment (as he does in Malory's version), but grasps his spear and delivers the fatal wound, receiving one in return. He is resolute too in his instructions to Bedievere to dispose of Excaliber. Despite these few decisive actions toward the end of his life, by and large Arthur the romance king, best suited to a ceremonial role of calling tournaments and going on hunts, appears ill-equipped to deal with the conflicts of loyalty that continue to plague his court in this tale.

Edward Donald Kennedy argues that Arthur's willingness to follow the advice of counselors and friends represents a positive change in the Stanzaic *Morte Arthur* from its source text (98-99). According to Kennedy, this is representative of his kingly nature and in keeping

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with popular *speculum regis* literature, in contrast with the more imperious, less flattering

representation of Arthur in the source text, the *Mort Artu.* It is true that holding council and

listening to trusted advisors is characteristic of a good king. And the author of the Stanzaic

Morte Arthur provides an excellent example of a king doing just that: but that king is Launcelot,

not Arthur.

Launcelot calls a council to help him decide whether to go on the offensive and attack

Arthur and Gawain's troops that are amassed outside his walls or simply to defend those walls.

In contrast to Arthur's council scenes, which are strikingly short and do not show Arthur taking

any sort of decisive part (a mere five lines to decide Gaynor's punishment, 1921-25; thirteen

lines to decide on Mordred as steward, 2508-20—and in both the decision does not appear to be

Arthur's), Launcelot's council is meticulously described in 64 lines (2540-2603). The scene

starts with Launcelot articulating the dilemma. Each of Launcelot's men is then given a chance

to voice his viewpoint; not all of the councilors agree, although there is a clear majority in favor

of attack. Launcelot listens to their advice but comes to his own conclusion and explains his

reason for it:

> Then spake the lord that was so hende,
>   Himself, Sir Launcelot du Lake:
> 'Lordinges, a while I rede we lende
>   And our worthy walles wake;
> A message will I to them send,
>   A trews between us for to take;
> My lord is so courtais and hende
>   That yet I hope a pees to make.
>
> 'Though we might with worship win,
>   Of a thing mine herte is sore:
> This land is full of folk full thin,
>   Batailes have made it full bare;
> Wite ye well it were grete sin
>   Cristen folk to slee thus more;
> With mildeness we shall begin

And God shall wisse us well to fare.' (2588-2603)

Although Launcelot does not ultimately follow the advice of most of his council, his decision could hardly be called tyrannical. Instead it appears measured and thoughtful and it shows Launcelot takes seriously the responsibilities of kingship: he is concerned about the welfare of his people; he wants to act as a good Christian; he wants to give his estranged, but no less beloved friend Arthur a chance to be reconciled. Given these reasons, his men are quick to support their lord's decision: "And at this assent all they were" (2604). Again, this contrasts strongly with the impression we get of King Arthur being led by the nose, first by his councilors and then by Gawain. The fact that Arthur is now at odds with this beloved knight and exemplary king does not bode well for him or his kingdom.

The tone of the poem underscores the approaching and inevitable doom. The first half of the Stanzaic *Morte Arthur* is full of playfulness tinged with foreboding; in the second half, the foreboding becomes more explicit. The talk is all of treason and treachery rather than games and play, and the main characters are full of lamentation. Gawain and Launcelot are most attuned to the shift. Gawain senses that Agravain's gossip will start war (1695, 1719). Launcelot, at first without suspicion, quickly realizes the seriousness of having been discovered with the queen:

> 'We have begonne this ilke night
> That shall bring many a man full cold.' (1886-7)

Meanwhile, Bors reacts to the news of Agravain's treachery with "drery mood" (1888)—a mood dominant in the second half—and braces himself "After the wele to take the wo" (1891).

The deaths of Gaheries and Gahereit cement the sense of foreboding and gloom. They inspire Gawain's disastrous oath, for one. They occasion the king's first bout of heartfelt mourning, both at the loss of the good knights and at the realization that this signals a break with

Launcelot. Without even hearing his pledge, Launcelot knows instinctively that Gawain will now be his enemy when he learns of the brothers' deaths. He plots his next move "With sorry herte and drery mood" (2031). It is worth noting that their moaning and foreboding is in keeping with each character: Gawain and Launcelot take action, even with their heavy hearts. Arthur's mourning is passive: he can't think what to say ("Jesu Crist! What may I sayn?" 1974) and the only action he can think to take is an obviously futile attempt to keep the news of his brothers' deaths from Gawain.

Launcelot mourns most genuinely over the situation and its seemingly inevitable outcome. Gawain, fueled by his rage, has little time for reflection on the consequences of his actions for the fellowship and the kingdom. But Launcelot laments the plight in which he finds himself (2116); he laments being at odds with the king (2141); he grieves to see the king shamefully unhorsed on the battlefield (2190). Arthur mourns too, but considerably less than he does in, for example, Malory's version of this tale. After his initial lamentation over the break with Launcelot the king seems more or less committed to Gawain's cause. He is willing to make peace for the benefit of his kingdom, but is also perfectly willing to follow his nephew's lead. However, when Launcelot gallantly and worshipfully rescues him on the battlefield, Arthur once again gives voice to his sadness. That sadness is specifically expressed in nostalgic terms: it is for the loss of a more perfect past, when the fellowship was whole:

> He thought on thinges that had been ere;
>   The teres from his eyen ran;
> He said, 'Alas,' with sighing sore,
>   'That ever yet this war began!' (2202-05)

The reason for the king's nostalgia is made palpably clear by the narrator: civil war has fundamentally changed the character of his court:

> There was dole and weeping sore;

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Among them was no childes play. (2244-45)

There is no joy and little glory in war with one's friend—and we have seen how important joy and glory are to Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table.   Therefore the king longs for those now bygone days as he mourns the end of his fellowship.

Play does return briefly to the poem in the anticipation of the final battle. Facing a just and righteous war against the truly treacherous Mordred,

> Sir Arthur maketh game and glee,
>   For mirth that they [Mordred and his army] should be met.
>   (3164-65)

But it is too late for Arthur and his men to recapture their former glory. That night the king has his prophetic dreams: first of falling off the Wheel of Fortune and being caught and tormented by the fiends and dragons that wait below (3170-3187) and then of Gawain come from heaven to warn him not to engage Mordred without waiting for help from Launcelot lest he be killed (3196-3221). Gawain's warning is not enough to save Arthur or his court though. The tragedy we have been told to anticipate from the opening lines of the poem approaches apace.

The poem carries on past the death of Arthur for more than 400 lines. In the last stanzas there is an excessive amount of sadness, weeping, and praying, but surprisingly little nostalgia. Rather than longing for the past, Gaynor powerfully expresses regret and contrition for her and Launcelot's part in the tragedy in their final meeting.   The remaining knights become monks and spend their time in mourning and prayer, not in dwelling on fond memories, until Launcelot dies and they all grieve afresh.

The tragedy of the Stanzaic *Morte Arthur* is less sudden and more expected than in the alliterative poem. Bad luck or ill fortune play their role, to be sure: the truce Arthur seeks in

accordance with Gawain's recommendation is destroyed by the interference of a literal snake in

the grass, for example. Nevertheless, it is easier to see the tragedy portrayed in the stanzaic

poem as the fall of a decadent court—one that was flawed from the start, and largely responsible

for its own undoing. Perhaps this is why the ending is so consumed with sadness and mourning

and has no time for nostalgia. Nevertheless, and in spite of the sad ending, this does not seem to

capture fully the author's attitude. He continues to praise the knights even at their worst, he

includes elements of chance that absolve them from responsibility for the worst blunders, he

provides a showcase for their most admirable moments (such as Launcelot's rehorsing of

Arthur), and he downplays their faults, absolving them at the end through confession and prayer.

The author of the Stanzaic *Morte Arthur* has often been thought of as an inferior artist,

especially compared to Malory.[206] It is true that he fails to tease out or explore in full the issue

of conflicting loyalties and their consequences for chivalric knights. But he has introduced the

problem in a moving way and treated the knights who struggle with it with compassion. In doing

so he obviously sparked the imagination of Malory, who, by more fully exploring both the

conflicts and triumphs of chivalric knighthood, would produce a version of the death of Arthur

that he—and we—can not help but read nostalgically.

IV. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight:* Bringing the Ideal within Reach

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight is not a tale of Arthur's death, like the others discussed

in this chapter, but it is the most accomplished poem dealing with Arthurian matter in English.

That reason alone makes it an essential part of any study of English Arthurian romance. Further,

by considering it in light of concerns of idealism and nostalgia in romance generally, I believe

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[206] Even Richard A. Wertime, who seeks to give the poem its due critical attention, acknowledges its many flaws;
see "The Theme and Structure of the Stanzaic *Morte Arthur*," page 1075.

we can come to a richer understanding of this sometimes-troubling poem. As is typical in romance, the plot of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* revolves around the testing of the hero by means of an *aventure*. One source of the difficulty in understanding *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* stems from the fact that in this case the greatest of Arthur's knights fails in his quest. In the context we have been exploring, however, this should not come as a surprise, as it seems to have done for many modern readers. The entire Arthurian mythos, after all, is constructed around—and has lingering over it—failure and destruction. For *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, as for the *Mortes*, the essential component is the way idealism is preserved even in the face of failure; how the audience can continue to admire a world that is essentially tragic, or at least fallen. The *Gawain* poet is much more artful, poignant, and therefore successful at this than the anonymous author of the Stanzaic *Morte Arthur*. But he is not nostalgic. Rather than long for his sullied idealism, Gawain must come to terms with his failure and his essential humanity. The result is a poem that capitalizes on the audience's interest in and nostalgia for Camelot to present us with a hero who turns out to be flawed like us in order to teach us to embrace both our longing for perfection and our natural, human frailty.

The essential problem in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is that humans, by nature imperfect, cannot be ideal and cannot help being motivated by human nature. Unlike the Stanzaic *Morte Arthur*, in which failure comes as a consequence of blind adherence to the code of chivalry—in other words, the characters succeed in adhering to the code, but the result is nevertheless destruction—here the failure is the inability for even the greatest knight to live up to the chivalric code, no matter how much he may sincerely want to. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* dramatizes the difficulty only hinted at in the Stanzaic *Morte Arthur*: that perfection is impossible to achieve in an unmistakably fallen world. Here, the true ideal is located precisely in

the reconciliation of the courtly (by nature unattainable) ideal and human imperfections as

embodied by Gawain at the end. In this sense it is necessary that Gawain be unable to pass his

test and therefore to fulfill his quest; only then can he provide us with the model of a subtler,

more realistic and human ideal, complete with deeper awareness and understanding of himself.

Paradoxically, therefore, in struggling to come to terms with his imperfection, Gawain of *Sir*

Gawain and the Green Knight comes closer to the ideal than any other knight in Arthurian

legend.[207]

Unlike the poems concerning the *morte* from the same century, whose opening lines I

have discussed as emphasizing the nobility of the characters and introducing the note of longing

for long-past deeds of the nation's elders, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* prepares us to doubt

the perfection of the romance world from the start. There is just enough talk of "bolde bredden"

(bold men) and "ferlyes" (marvels) to evoke some of the familiar nostalgia we by now recognize

as common to the introductions of English romances. The first stanza recalls the chronicle

tradition of the founding of Britain by Brutus, but it is far from an uncomplicated invocation of

legendary history and ancestral marvels. Indeed, the diction is at best ambiguous. Who, for

example, is "The man who had planned treasonable plots" that "was tried for his treachery, the

truest on earth"?[208] Is it Aeneas? How can this man be both treacherous *and* true (if indeed

"trewest" refers to the man)?[209] Britain too is described in ambiguous terms, as a place

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[207] I should, no doubt, except from this broad claim Sir Galahad, who is so perfect he is apotheosized directly into heaven after achieving the Grail Quest. But his very perfection makes Galahad just about the least interesting and relatable Knight of the Round Table, and therefore a poor model for the general reader.

[208] "The tulk that the trammes of tresoun ther wroght
Was tried for his tricherie, the trewest on erth" (2-3).
Quotations of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* come from A.C. Cawley's edition. Translations to modern English are my own but based on Cawley's notes and glosses.

[209] Theodore Silverstein's essay "'Sir Gawain,' Dear Brutus, and Britain's Fortunate Founding: A Study in Comedy and Convention" is focused on unpacking the introductory stanzas of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.

> Where war and vengeance and extraordinary events
> Have at times existed,
> And where both joy and trouble
> Have alternated swiftly ever since.[210]

Even while conventionally invoking legend and the adventures of ancestors and situating the audience in a land of marvels, the *Gawain*-poet makes clear that it is nevertheless a post-lapsarian world. The characters, however, seem not to know it, perhaps because we are also presumably in the infancy of Arthur's reign. The king is "somewhat childish"[211] and inexperienced. The court is preoccupied with games, feasting, and merriment. The reader, too, is easily charmed into nostalgia for this innocent-seeming court. It is the sobering challenge of the Green Knight—one that shocks the knights into quiet and stillness[212]—that will eventually force Gawain to come to self-knowledge and awareness of his fallibility.

Gawain clearly sees himself and presents himself to others as the embodiment of knightly perfection. Although my students often mistakenly do, we are not meant to take seriously Sir Gawain's flattering speech sparing King Arthur from the game and accepting the challenge himself. He says, self-deprecatingly,

> I am the weakest, I know, and have the feeblest wit,
> And the loss of my life would be of least account, if the truth be
> known.[213]

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[210] "Where were and wrake and wonder
Bi sythes has wont therinne,
And oft bothe blysse and blunder
Ful skete has skyfted synne" (16-19).

[211] "sumquat childgered" (86)

[212] They are "stouned" (242) or "stowned" (301); that is, "astonished," according to Cawley's notes, but also perhaps with a pun on "stoned"; that is, frozen or turned to stone:
"al stouned at his steven and stonstil seten
In a swoghe silence thurgh the sale riche:
As al were slyped upon slepe so slaked hor lotes
in hyye" (242-245).
[213] "I am the wakkest, I wot, and of wyt feeblest,
And lest lur of my lyf, quo laytes the shoth" (354-5).

He is allowing Arthur to save face; clearly he does not think he is the worst of all the knights.

Indeed, the elaborate high style of his speech makes clear that Gawain is going to some lengths

to present himself as an elegant and courteous knight of the highest order. Note, for example, the

first sentence:

> 'Would you, honored lord,' said Gawain to the king,
> 'Allow me to go from this bench and stand by you there,
> That I might leave this table without discourtesy,
> And if it does not displease my liege lady,
> I would come to advise you before your noble court.'[214]

He asks permission from his lord to get up from his seat, he acknowledges his lady, and he

humbly offers his assistance. He goes on to flatter the king for his prowess, that he should be

"talenttyf" (350)[215] to take the adventure for himself, as well as the more reluctant knights, to

whom he gives the benefit of the doubt by calling them "bolde" (351), before finally offering

himself as a lowly replacement.

By far the best representation of the standard of perfection to which Gawain holds

himself is the sign of the pentangle emblazoned on his shield, the significance of which the

narrator goes to great pains to explain:[216] "It is a sign that Solomon once devised/as a token of

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[214] "'Wolde ye, worthilych lorde,' quoth Wawan to the kyng,
'Bid me bowe fro this benche and stoned by yow there,
That I wythoute vylanye myght voyde this table,
And that my legge lady liked not ille,
I wolde com to your counseyl bifore your cort ryche'" (343-7).

[215] The *Middle English Dictionary* defines "talenttif" as "willing, eager; eager (to do sth.), desirous"

[216] The poet is not the only one who pauses over the pentangle ("thof tary hyt me schulde" 624)—modern critics have demonstrated something of a preoccupation with this symbol and "quy the pentangle apendes to that prynce noble" (623). In "Gawain's Shield and the Quest for Perfection," Richard Hamilton Green focuses on the ambiguity of the pentangle as a sign and in its associations with Solomon, concluding that it is a symbol of aspirational perfection, but is tinged with the potential for failure. J.A. Burrow gives a classically rhetorical reading of the symbol and its presentation, including a careful look at the etymology of *trawthe* in *A Reading of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (pages 41-51). A.C. Spearing stresses the importance of the interconnectedness of the virtues symbolized by the pentangle and the implications that it has for Gawain's test (*The Gawain-poet*, pages 196-8). Catherine Batt explores the numerological significance as part of her larger discussion of the pentangle (pages 123-

fidelity"[217] in particular because it is "endeles" (630). It signifies Gawain's faithfulness in five

ways and five times in each way. The poet associates it with perfection in Gawain's five senses

and his five fingers. It relates to the five wounds of Christ and the five joys of Mary. Finally, it

suggests perfect adherence to five virtues: liberality and fellowship ("fraunchyse and

felawschyp" 652), purity and courtesy ("clannes and...cortaysye" 653), and finally compassion

("pité" 653). Despite the detail of the poet's digression on the pentangle, there is a fair amount

of ambiguity lingering around it, as critics have pointed out. Richard Hamilton Green argues that

the Gawain-poet "could hardly have chosen a more ambiguous patron for Gawain's virtue" than

Solomon (130). The significance of Gawain's perfect fingers seems more a matter of

convenience (there are five of them!) than sense.[218] The wounds of Christ and joys of Mary are

patently Christian, but the five virtues enumerated are "distinctly secular or social in character"

(Burrow 47), though they of course overlap with Christian values. What purpose, then, does this

symbol serve that the poet goes to such great lengths to offer the reader?

Clearly the pentangle Gawain carries says something about the idealism to which he is

held: by virtue of being the main character of the romance, in his own estimation and that of the

court, and by virtue of accepting this quest. Green points out that the purpose of heraldry is both

as a literal sign of a knight's identity and as a "symbolic means of identifying his characteristic

virtues and aspirations" (127)—in this case Gawain is aspiring to or hopes to be identified with

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5, especially page 123, in "Gawain's Antifeminist Rant, The Pentangle, and Narrative Space"). Others spend more space on the pentangle without bringing much that is new to light—see, for example, Gerald Morgan's *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight and the Ideal of Righteousness,* which spends a whole chapter on the pentangle, and Ross G. Arthur's *Medieval Sign Theory and Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, which spends three. Finally, W.A. Davenport contends that, after all, the pentangle plays a minor role in our understanding of the poem (see *The Art of the Gawain-poet*, page 178-9).

[217] "Hit is a syngne that Salamon set sumquyle/In bytoknyng of trawthe" (625-6).

[218] Burrow thinks the inclusion of the five fingers in the list may be an example of "the demands of the poet's elaborate numerical scheme [proving to be] simply too much for him" (46).

perfection (128). The pentangle "establishes Gawain as the personal representative of the qualities embodied in the courtly civilization whose reputation he defends" (Spearing 197). Even more than that, A.C. Spearing argues, "in him the courtly aspirations are purified, taken a stage further in idealization" (197).[219] It should be clear by now that Gawain is attempting to claim and embody nothing less than perfection.

The poet takes things yet a step further. Not only is Gawain meant to represent perfection in all these 5x5 ways, he stresses that all the individual elements of perfection are interrelated and interdependent:

> Now all these five multiples, truly, were conjoined in this knight,
> And each one was joined to the other, so that none had an end,
> And fixed upon five points that never failed,
> And they neither came together, nor parted company;
> I find no end at any angle anywhere,
> Where the device began or ended.[220]

As Spearing explains, the implication "is that a failing at one point may bring about a failing at others too" (198). By aspiring to this lofty goal of perfection, and in understanding virtues as being so completely interdependent, Gawain is setting himself (or the poet is setting for him) an impossible goal. Furthermore, it is no wonder that Gawain should later understand a relatively minor slip-up on his part as utterly catastrophic to his image of himself. If the pentangle is, as Spearing notes, "an indication of what there is in Gawain to be tested by his adventure" (196) and if, as Green contends, the pentangle contains "the simultaneous suggestion of greatness and

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[219] "and hence," Spearing goes on to say, "more dangerously stretched and exposed" (197).

[220] "Now alle these fyve sythes, for sothe, were fetled on this knyght,
And uchone halched in other, that non ende hade,
And fyched upon fyve poyntes that fayld never,
Ne samned never in no syde, ne sundred nouther,
Withouten ende at any noke noquere, I fynde,
Where-ever the gomen bygan or glod to an ende" (656-61).

potential failure" (132), Gawain is at once being raised to the highest of standards by the poet as well as set up for failure.

Gawain's identity and image is, in fact, a theme of the poem. And when Gawain leaves Camelot and arrives at the mysterious castle, the idea others have of him does not necessarily square with the image he is projecting with his shield. At first, the impression we have is that Gawain's reputation is being bolstered further. When he arrives as Bertilak's castle he is treated with extravagant hospitality. But the court is even more delighted when they find out his identity:

> And all the men in that castle were overjoyed
> To appear promptly in the presence
> Of the one who has all excellence and prowess and noble manners
> Belonging to his person, and is praised at all times;
> His honor is the highest of all men on earth. [221]

At first their delight appears to stem from Gawain's reputation for general good character—he is the most honored man in the world! Gawain's fame as an ideal knight appears to be widespread. But we might be suspicious when their excitement localizes around a particular quality:

> 'Now we shall have the pleasure of seeing a skillful display of
>   courteous manners
> And of hearing the faultless phrases of noble conversation.
> We shall learn without asking what profitable speech is,
> Since we are entertaining the father of good breeding'[222]

Gawain is famous, then, for a superficial part of his character, his ability to turn a nice, courtly phrase. His acumen here cannot be denied: indeed, we have seen this in action already in his

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[221] "And alle the men in that mote maden much joye
To apere in his presense prestly that tyme,
That alle prys and prowes and pured thewes
Apendes to hys persoun, and praysed is ever;
Byfore alle men upon molde his mensk is the most." (910-14)

[222] 'Now schal we semlych se sleghtes of thewes
And the teccheles termes of talkyng noble.
Wich spede is in speche, unspurd may we lerne,
Syn we haf fonges that fine fader of nurture.' (916-19)

first speech, discussed above. And while good manners and elegant speech may fall under the

virtue of *cortaysye,* and certainly Gawain, a little tipsy from the wine at the supposedly modest

feast, is flattered, conversational ability is hardly the chief virtue we might expect from the

bearer of the pentangle who supposedly embodies moral qualities in addition to more superficial

courtly virtues.

Gawain's image and reputation become even more of an issue in the bedroom temptation

scenes, as it is precisely this point that the lady of the castle presses in testing Gawain. In the

first two encounters she questions his very identity, ostensibly on the basis that he does not seem

to know how to practice knightly *cortaysye* according to his reputation. In the first scene she

challenges him, "I find it hard to believe that you are Gawain":[223]

> 'Gawain is rightly held to be so gracious,
> And courtesy is so completely contained in him
> That he could not easily have stayed so long with a lady
> Without being moved by his courtesy to ask for a kiss,
> If only by some small hint at the end of a speech.'[224]

In the second, her charge is much the same:

> 'Sir, if you really are Gawain, it seems wondrous to me
> That one so disposed to noble behavior
> Cannot understand the manners of polite society….'[225]

Gawain, for his part, is both horrified at the prospect of causing offense and confused about how

to act rightly. He does not want to upset the lady, but he also reflects on his duty as a guest, on

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[223] "Bot that ye be Gawan, hit gos not in mynde" (1294).

[224] "So god as Gawayn gaynly is halden,
And cortaysye is closed so clene in hymselven,
Couth not lightly haf lenged so long wyth a lady,
Bot he had craved a cosse by his courtaysye,
Bi sim towch of summe tryfle at some tales end" (1297-1301).

[225] "Sir, yif ye be Wawen, wonder me thynkkes,
Wyye that is so wel wrast always to god,
And cones not of compaynye the costs undertake…." (1481-3)

the one hand, and as a chaste Christian knight who follows the virtue of "clannes" (that is, cleanness or purity), on the other. He strives to please the lady, while also remaining true to his ideals. He grants her kisses in these first two scenes, but not more, and dutifully exchanges those kisses with his host in fulfillment of their agreement.

Part of the conflict for Gawain is that the idealism of the image that the author constructs for him in the opening fitts and through the pentangle is at odds with Gawain's extra-textual reputation. Medieval readers of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* would likely come to the text with an image of Gawain already in mind from familiar French romances, and it is unlikely to accord with that put forth in the first and second fitts. "His reputation was as a knight of courtesy, and of courtesy in a rather restricted sense of the word. He was a philanderer, an expert in the art of love-talking and love-making" (Spearing 198-99).[226] And indeed, this reputation as a ladies' man is what the residents of Hautdesert seem familiar with. Gawain must therefore balance their expectations, his own desire to be a congenial guest, and the idealism he has committed himself to with the pentangle. As if striving for mere perfection were not enough!

Gawain's image is under pressure in the temptation scenes, as his desire to please his hosts, be a good guest, live up to their impression, and congenially enjoy their hospitality imperils and threatens to conflict with the virtues of the shield.   He is able to succeed in doing all of this and maintain his idealism through the first two temptations by confining himself to flirtation and relatively chaste kissing, which he faithfully passes on to the lord of the castle. The

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[226] Indeed, Gawain's reputation is perhaps more complex than Spearing implies here. For example, Roger Dalrymple investigates the changing reputation of Gawain in English romance and contends that, even more than that of other knights, "the depiction of Gawain ranges particularly widely" (265). See Dalrymple's chapter "Sir Gawain in Middle English Romance" in *A Companion to Arthurian Literature*. Carolyne Larrington also discusses the tension caused by a more typically "English" Gawain cast into "the kind of adventure which Gawain is prone to facing in French tradition" ("English Chivalry and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*" in *A Companion to Arthur*, 258).

pressure becomes too much and the ideal begins to crack, however, when it comes in conflict

with his basic human (animal, even) drive for survival.[227]

There are hints of this anxiety about survival early on in the poem. Despite Gawain's

eagerness and pride in taking up the challenge of the Green Knight, there is some nervousness

surrounding the fulfillment of his part of the bargain—and no wonder! Gawain does not have the

luxury of a re-attachable head. The Green Knight perhaps senses that there will be hesitation on

Gawain's part when he reminds him before departing:

> 'Take care, Gawain, that you are ready to go as you promised,
> And look for me faithfully, sir, until you find me,
> As you promised in this hall, in the hearing of these knights.
> .   .   .   .
> Therefore come or be called a coward.'[228]

The first fit ends on a note of uncertainty: the king comforts the queen (perhaps with a sideways

glance at Gawain) and the feasting and merriment resume. But the final wheel suggests the

uncertain peril of Gawain's future:

> 'Now think well, Sir Gawain,
> That for risk of injury you should not hesitate
> To seek out this adventure
> That you have undertaken.'[229]

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[227] We might rightly be reminded here of the animals fighting for survival in the hunting scenes that are interlaced with the temptation scenes. It is beyond the scope of my argument to address the various parallels (or contrasts, according to Burrow, page 87)—they are difficult to pin down and have been thoroughly examined elsewhere. But it is worth pointing out their "collective meaning and effect," which is particularly relevant here. Marie Borroff suggests that, "In them, we see in vividly described action the overwhelming compulsion of vulnerable flesh and blood to save itself from death, as each of a series of three species of animal uses to the utmost the particular means of defense with which nature has endowed it. The deer summon up all their speed; the boar charges out with all his strength; the fox uses all his tricks" (102).

[228] 'Loke, Gawan, thou be graythe to go as thou hettes,
And layte as lelly til thou me, lude, fynde,
As thou has hette in this halle, herande thise knyghtes.
.   .   .   .
Therefore com, other recreaunt be calde the behoveus.' (448-50, 456)

[229] "Now thenk wel, Sir Gawan,
For wothe that thou ne wonde
This aventure for to frayn,
That thou has tan on honde" (487-90).

The second fit begins with a similar anxiety about Gawain's quest. The subtext of the poet's beautiful description of the passing of a year is how quickly Gawain's promise will come due. There is no mention of the impending journey through the descriptions of Lent and spring and summer—not "Until the moon of Michaelmas/Arrived with the promise of winter's approach."[230] At that point Gawain can no longer avoid his promise: "Then Gawain thinks /Of his wearisome journey."[231] Yet still he postpones, perhaps loath to leave the comforts of Camelot and face his mortality. He lingers through the feast of All Hallows, before finally announcing his intention to depart. Gawain appears resigned as his leave-taking looms:

> 'Why should I hesitate?
> In the face of destinies harsh and gentle
> What can men do but try?'[232]

This is not exactly a knight who is eagerly following (even dangerous) adventure, as we typically saw in Chrétien. Likewise, the mood of the court is doleful, though there is some effort to appear cheerful despite their grief for Gawain's sake; they believe they are sending Gawain to his death (see lines 680-81).

His anxiety about his own mortality is what ultimately leads Gawain to slip up: he accepts what he believes to be a magic girdle from Lady Bertilak, keeps it hidden from the Lord in the exchange of winnings, and fails even to mention his deceit at confession. Thus far a fear of public shame has seemed more operative in creating and sustaining Gawain's ideals than his inner conscience (Spearing 226). His image has been performative. And here, when he believes it will be a secret, he goes against his instinct and his word and accepts the supposedly life-

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[230] "Til Meghelmas mone/Was cumen wyth wynter wage" (532-3).

[231] "Then thenkkes Gawan ful sone/Of his anious vyage" (534-5).

[232] "Quat schuld I wonde?/Of destinés derf and dere/What may mon do bot fonde?" (563-5)

saving token. Later, bolstered by the hidden girdle and aghast at the idea of appearing cowardly,

he can confidently reject his guide's suggestion that he secretly fail to meet the Green Knight

(2130-1). But at the moment when he takes the token Gawain 'is a frightened, confused, fallible

human being whose emotions dominate his reason and becloud his grasp of right and wrong"

(Shedd 8).

Confronted with this failing by the Green Knight when they finally meet again, Gawain

has a difficult time coming to terms with his imperfection. At first he is overcome with shame,

blushing and shrinking from the Green Knight as he explains the test. He then becomes angry,

cursing cowardice and covetousness for leading him astray and marring his virtue, throwing the

girdle at the Green Knight, and angrily declaring that, having been discovered in this fault,

having had his "kynde to forsake" (2380), "Now am I faulty and false and have been proven a

coward."[233] He seems to believe that this single fault has destroyed a lifetime of chivalric

actions and admirable deeds—a reasonable assumption given the emphasis placed on the

interconnectedness and interdependence of virtues in the explication of the "endeles knot."

The Green Knight, his tester, is not so harsh in his judgment: he good-naturedly absolves

Gawain, merely offering the girdle as a token of remembrance, "a pure token / Of the adventure

of the Green Chapel to chivalrous knights."[234] But Gawain is not so easily calmed: he proceeds

to direct his wrath at the women, blaming them for his failure. He then accepts the girdle not as

a mere reminder of his adventure, as the Green Knight has intended it, but as a sort of penance, a

"sign of [his] transgression" to

       remind me with remorse of

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[233] "Now am I fawty and falce, and ferde haf ben ever" (2382).

[234] "a pure token/Of the chaunce of the grene chapel at chevalrous knyghtes" (2398-2399).

> the fault and the frailty of wicked flesh,
> How liable it is to catch the plague spots of sin.[235]

Some critics have questioned whether we can rightly accept the Green Knight's point of view. Spearing outlines the two possible ways of viewing the judgment of the poem: "one…sees Gawain's understanding of his adventures as being essentially the same as the poet's, while the Green Knight is misleading and Camelot mistaken; the other…sees the poet as sharing the lenient judgment on Gawain that he attributes to the Green Knight and to the court, and as presenting Gawain's own perception and understanding as seriously flawed" (231).[236] But it seems to me that a middle ground is also possible. We can see the rightness of the Green Knight's leniency and understanding, while also feeling sympathy and affinity for Gawain as he is forced to face and come to terms with his nature as a fallible human being.

The change in Gawain and the lesson the quest imparts is particularly evident in the final scene. Conventional insofar as it is the scene of the hero's return to court from his quest, it also highlights how Gawain has changed while the rest of the court has remained the same. The carefree, childish charm of the poem's opening feast persists but now seems more pointedly silly and frivolous in contrast to what Gawain has experienced. He arrives at court and frankly and manfully tells his tale and the meaning behind his green girdle. It is rather poignant to imagine the famously virtuous knight confessing his shame. Yet the reaction of the court seems totally inappropriate: "The king comforts the knight, and all the court also, / Laugh loudly at that."[237]

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[235] "syngne of my surfet" (2433) to
"remorde to myselven
The faut and fayntyse of the flesche crabbed,
How tender hit is to entyse teches of fylthe" (2434-2435).

[236] Spearing lays out the case for each side in the section titled "The verdict on Gawain's performance" (219-236), and leans toward the second interpretation, that Gawain's view is flawed and we are supposed to share the Green Knight's lenient view (231).

[237] "The kyng comfortes the knyght, and alle the court als,/Laghen loude therat" (2513-2514).

Further, it becomes the fashion for all knights of the Round Table to wear a green sash, ostensibly in honor of Gawain, but seemingly trivializing its significance. Arthur's court appears unable to grasp or appreciate the lesson of Gawain's adventure, but for the reader it is the laughter of the court that rings hollow and the pathos of a knight coming to terms with his humanity that rings true. The knight in failure has ironically transcended the Round Table and by facing his humanity has brought the ideal within the grasp of the audience, thereby lessening the need for nostalgia.

V. Conclusion: The Place of Nostalgia in English Verse Romance

These three English Arthurian texts all start off with a (more or less) nostalgic attitude and assume an audience that shares a longing for bygone days of adventure and idealism. But they press and interrogate that longing. The Alliterative *Morte Arthure* harks back to an earlier warrior ethos and holds on to a nostalgic attitude by combining perfect knightly prowess with longing for its loss. It is able to do so, in part, by avoiding complicity in that loss on the part of the characters. The men remain larger than life. Such a court can never be restored, but we can long for and appreciate its splendor. The author of the Stanzaic *Morte Arthur* is also nostalgic, as we can see from the obvious admiration he has for his heroes. But he is bound by a story that turns against those heroes—or rather has them turning against each other. The courtly values he praises are inadequate for overcoming the conflicts of the tale. The story ends in sadness and mourning, but lacks the sweetness that is essential for the bittersweet feeling of nostalgia. Finally the author of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* offers courtly readers an alternative to nostalgia. He evokes the sense of longing in his introduction and in his presentation of an impossibly perfect hero, but then subtly removes the rose-tinted glasses through which a nostalgic views the past: his hero is not perfect after all. For all the marvelous elements of *Sir

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Gawain and the Green Knight, the ending reveals that the heroes of the past are much more like us than we thought: merely human.

This tendency to humanize and forgive faults is, in some ways, in stark contrast with so many other courtly works, from chivalric handbooks such as Ramón Lull's *Book of the Order of Chivalry* to the French romances, which push knights to strive for and imitate ever-loftier goals. Even the introduction of new characters to the Arthurian mythos has tended toward ever more impossibly perfect heights: first Lancelot was added and made classier, more chivalrous, and capable of even greater deeds of prowess than Gawain; later Percival, purer that the adulterous Lancelot; finally Galahad, matching Percival's purity but correcting his fault of dumbness, and altogether perfect. Once a character like Galahad is being held up as a model for knighthood, what is the average fighting man to do? Tellingly, all these English versions leave out Percival and Galahad, and only the Stanzaic *Morte* includes Lancelot in a meaningful role.[238] As fourteenth century Englishmen reappropriated the story of their most famous king, they strove— in relatively modest ways—to bring the ideals of knighthood back down to earth. The result, therefore, explores failure and questions nostalgia, but perhaps presents a form of knighthood that readers can actually long for and perhaps even aspire to.

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[238] Lancelot is mentioned in both the Alliterative *Morte Arthure* and in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, but he is not a main character.

Chapter 5

"In Kynge Arthurs daye": Nostalgia and Loss in Malory's *Morte Darthur*

I. Recouping the Nostalgia of Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*

To call Sir Thomas Malory's *Morte Darthur* nostalgic is to be a bit old fashioned.

Nowadays (to borrow a Malorian word) the nostalgic reading is seen as outdated and limited,

characteristic of the, well, nostalgic temperament of Victorian readers and critics of Malory who,

influenced by the medievalism of Romantic poets and early novelists like Sir Walter Scott,

revived interest in the Middle Ages by representing them as a time of gentility and romance,

unspoiled by industrialization, and who accepted the portrayal of knighthood in romances at face

value.[239] It is easy to dismiss such a romanticized (in the colloquial sense) view of the Middle

Ages, but it is a mistake to overlook the genuine idealism and nostalgia that nineteenth- and early

twentieth-century readers of medieval Arthurian texts perceived in what they read.

Still, it is something of a commonplace to call Malory nostalgic, but usually either quite

casually without interrogating the term or disapprovingly, as if to be nostalgic is to be

sentimental or trite. A.S.G. Edwards starts off his discussion in "The Reception of Malory's

Morte Darthur" with the seemingly accepted fact of Malory's nostalgia: "The enduring appeal of

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[239] For an overview of the influence of Malory on eighteenth- and nineteenth-century literature see A.S.G. Edwards, "The Reception of Malory's *Morte Darthur*," especially pages 247-51. The popularity of the *Morte* waned in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries and new editions gradually stopped appearing—the last early one being Williams Stansby's 1634 edition. "The next editions do not appear until 1816 and 1817 and they signal the beginnings of modern literary study of the *Morte Darthur*" (Edwards 242). Moreover, "[t]he chief stimulus to these reprintings was the interest of Sir Walter Scott and Robert Southey" (247). Scott recommended the *Morte* to his readers, saying they would get "'an excellent idea of what romances of chivalry were'" from reading it; "Southey…was among the admirers of Malory who traced his influence back to his childhood: 'it has been my delight since I was a schoolboy'" (qtd in Edwards 247), suggesting his own personal nostalgia for the text. Tennyson also first encountered Malory as a child and his indebtedness to the *Morte* is indisputable. "The publication of the *Idylls*, Tennyson's lifelong poetic project, constitutes the greatest acknowledgement of the power of Malory to prompt the poetic imagination" (Edwards 249).

the *Morte Darthur* draws on nostalgia for a world that never existed, one in which King Arthur is not dead but alive in his relevance to situations and contexts beyond the imaginings of Thomas Malory" (241).[240] Raluca Radulescu captures the dismissiveness with which nostalgia is often treated when she comments in the introduction to *The Gentry Context*, "Although Malory chose to set his story in the historical past, his interest in Arthurian romance did not merely take the form of nostalgic writing" (2). On the other hand, some reject altogether the notion that Malory is nostalgic. Richard Barber and Larry Benson argue along similar lines that Malory cannot be seen as nostalgic since the knighthood he portrays is very much a fifteenth-century phenomenon (Barber 31; Benson 198-9). Though Barber concedes that Malory sets his story in the past to give it credibility, he calls a nostalgic reading, especially one based on seeing Malory as a "chronicler of the decline of a high ideal, setting the past above the present," a "serious misconception" (29). He believes that the setting is only incidental because the genre demands it and because evoking the distant past is a medieval literary *topos*.[241] I see no reason why this precludes nostalgia: the fact that the audience was interested in perfecting knighthood in the fifteenth century rather suggests that they were quite susceptible to nostalgia for what was considered to be a more ideal state of a still relevant institution – it is irrelevant to the feeling experienced by the reader that that history is invented. Indeed, as we have seen, it is inherent to nostalgia that it reinvents or even imagines out of whole cloth the past for present purposes. Despite modern critical claims that such a reading is, at best, reductive or, at worst, ignores Malory's purpose and outlook, this chapter will show that to ignore Malory's nostalgia is to be

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[240] For similar instances, see Elizabeth Archibald, "Malory's Ideal of Fellowship" page 328 or Terrence McCarthy, "King Arthur in England," page 17.

[241] Martin B. Shichtman dismisses this view as a "romanticiz[ation of] the culture that produced Thomas Malory" (173), but he also rejects the notion that Malory is nostalgic, even while acknowledging the nostalgia of the age: "Malory seems to recognize the ironies of [fifteenth-century] nostalgia [for the chivalric practices of the fictional past]. For Malory, the Arthurian past provides neither answers nor comfort" (173).

equally reductive.[242] It rejects the way generations of readers, including the very earliest ones, approached and interpreted the text, and ignores much of the value they perceived in it. It rejects the very fabric of the myth of Arthur that Malory takes as his subject. And it overlooks the palpably nostalgic outlook of the knight-prisoner who compiled these tales as an homage to the very best of adventuring knighthood.

There can be no doubt, for example, that William Caxton, Malory's first printer and the one to introduce him to a wider reading public, read the *Morte Darthur* nostalgically. This is evident, first and foremost, in Caxton's preface, where he first lists Arthur as one of the nine worthies, goes on to express doubts as to the historical veracity of the tales of Arthur as well as rehearse some of the evidence in favor of their historicity, and finally explains his purpose in publishing the noble deeds of Arthur. His reasoning is nostalgic and his purpose is didactic. He wishes:

> that noble men may see and lerne the noble actes of chyvalrye, the
> jentyl and vertuous dedes that somme knyghtes used in tho dayes,
> by whyche they came to honour, and how they that were vycious
> were punysshed and ofte put to shame and rebuke; humbly
> bysechyng al noble lordes and ladyes wyth al other estates, of what
> estate or degree they been of, that shal see and rede in this sayd
> book and werke, that they take the good and honest actes in their
> remembraunce, and to folowe the same; wherin they shalle fynde
> many joyous and playsaunt hystoryes and noble and renomed actes
> of humanyté, gentylnesse, and chyvalryes. For herein may be seen
> noble chyvalrye, curtosye, humanyté, frendlynesse, hardynesse,
> love, frendshyp, cowardyse, murdre, hate, vertue, and synne. Doo
> after the good and leve the evyl, and it shal brynge you to good
> fame and renommee. (cxlv-cxlvi)[243]

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[242] At least one recent essay, Karen Bezella-Bond's "Blood and Roses: Maytime and Revival in the *Morte Darthur*," gives more serious consideration to the nostalgia of the *Morte Darthur*, though her discussion is mostly confined to descriptions of Maying.

[243] This passage from Caxton's prologue to the *Morte Darthur* as well as all references to Malory below are taken from Eugène Vinaver's edition of *The Works of Sir Thomas Malory*, 3rd edition.

While there is profit to be gained by reading the adventures of heroes from the distant past—the

"vertuous dedes that somme knyghtes used in tho dayes, by whyche they came to honour"—

Caxton is not under any illusion that everything in Malory's depiction of the Arthurian world is

virtuous and perfect: he acknowledges the presence of "murder, hate…and sin" in this

supposedly ideal world. And these forms of evil are not only present to be conquered by the

heroes—even the best knights are occasionally guilty of "dysworship" in ways that are not

always satisfactorily resolved. It is part of the fullness of Malory's representation that his book

treats heroic life in all its variety. Indeed, it is part of the work's realism, and it is therefore

fitting that Caxton begins his prologue with a defense of the historical reality of Arthur's reign

(he is dubious at first that Arthur really existed, but finds "I could not wel denye but that there

was suche a noble kyng named Arthur, and reputed one of the nine worthy, and fyrst and chyef

of the Cristen men" cxlv). Malory's nostalgia is evident not only in particular moments, but in

the fullness of the chivalric world he represents, its combination of realism, magic, and

adventure. This is what Caxton appreciated and emphasized in his prologue and in the way he

presented the work as a single, comprehensive look at the Arthurian world.[244]

Nostalgia, by definition, is concerned with time, specifically with the lapse of time or the

distance created by the passage of time. That distance allows for a scrubbing of the past; it opens

the past up to reimagination and reappropriation, resulting in a sense of bittersweet longing for

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[244] Particularly since the publication of Eugène Vinaver's edition of the Winchester manuscript under the title *The Works of Sir Thomas Malory*, the relative unity of the *Morte Darthur* has been a much-debated question. Vinaver considered it a collection of separate romances (see the introduction to his edition, especially pages ix and xxxix). D.S. Brewer challenged that claim in "'the hoole book,'" where he argues for a "sense of continuity" (59) of the whole based both on theme and structure. *Malory's Originality*, a collection of essays edited by R.M. Lumiansky, starts from the premise that Vinaver was wrong to consider Malory's work a collection, and individual essays explore the unity as evinced by various parts of the text. Most recent criticism has tended to argue for unity even while acknowledging a certain looseness in detail. Carol M. Meale gives voice to the typical stance: "The narrative scheme which emerges from [an] examination of the manuscript, whilst it entails a recognition of inconsistency of detail, has both coherence and consistency, charting as it does the history of Arthur's Engliand from its beginning, through its heyday, to its inevitable decline" (14).

what is perceived to have been lost and a manipulation of the past to suit present ends. Like all

the works discussed in this dissertation, Sir Thomas Malory's *Morte Darthur* uses the distant

past, specifically the Arthurian past, to advocate for particular values to be embraced by his

present readers. Like Chrétien de Troyes and the French prose romances that followed his and

later became sources for Malory, *Le Morte Darthur* is principally concerned with the values of

knighthood. And while Malory's understanding of those values is slightly different than the

French authors, adapted for a fifteenth-century English audience, as I will show in this chapter,

what is perhaps most interesting is the way Malory manipulates time, creating a past that feels

immediate and present in contrast to the distance emphasized by Chrétien. In doing so, he not

only brings the past to life for his audience, but he also makes them direct inheritors of the

Round Table legacy, playing on their collective nostalgia for a time of adventurous, ideal

(though not necessarily perfect) knighthood—knighthood that perseveres in the face of

conflicting loyalties. The example is particularly well suited to the fifteenth century, a time of

political uncertainty, civil unrest, and multiple usurpations, when knighthood was considered to

be in jeopardy, even as its values were more whole-heartedly embraced than ever.[245] For

Malory, a man often on the wrong side of political conflict, writing for a society for whom

loyalty was at best complex, with family and political ties often conflicting, the story of Arthur

would surely have resonated. Its conflicts must have seemed startlingly relevant and its lessons

uniquely *apropos*.

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[245] Although they almost surely did not know it then, searching as they did for a past golden age of chivalry, if anything the fifteenth century *was* chivalry's golden age. Larry Benson points out, "There were few knights in the twelfth or even the thirteenth century who had either the leisure or the literacy to hold the mirror of life up to art. Consequently the ideals of chivalric literature spread slowly, and not until the late fourteenth century was chivalry widely accepted"—or at least practiced—"by the nobility" (*Malory's* Morte Darthur 141). See also Beverly Kennedy, *Knighthood in the* Morte Darthur, page 82.

In addition to longing, however, nostalgia is also tied to loss, and it is here that Malory is most memorable. He confronts loss head on in his last, most emotionally affective books. As much as the *Morte* is a depiction of knighthood for his contemporaries, and as much as it shows them the way, time and again, to behave like good chivalric knights (and ladies, though Malory is much less interested in the female sex than his French counterparts[246]), in the end it hammers home that the Arthurian world has been destroyed; that it is, in fact, unsustainable. Malory's skill at balancing this give and take of hope and loss—hope of living up to the ideals of the past by following them and loss in knowing that this is impossible, that the past is irretrievable—is what makes the *Morte* so memorable and makes it rise above a mere translation to a work of art in its own right. It is a measure of Malory's success that it is his version that has become the standard Arthurian text for the English-speaking world.

This chapter will therefore address three issues: Malory's ideology and the particular values of knighthood he advocates, specifically looking at how they differ from those of his French counterparts and how they are specially tied to his audience; Malory's complex manipulation of time and how it contributes to the nostalgia evoked by his text; and Malory's depiction of loss and how he successfully treats loss in such a way that it heightens the nostalgia, rather than destroys it. By investigating these aspects of Malory I will demonstrate that generations of nostalgic readers have not been misguided, simplistic, or anachronistic in their approach, but have appreciated the perspective of the work and an attitude entirely appropriate to the English fifteenth century. By embracing our sense of nostalgia, we connect with centuries of readers of Malory and better appreciate the text and the ideological work it performs.

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[246] See, for example, Helen Cooper, "Romance after 1400": Malory "neither courts nor implies a female audience for his work, frequently cutting the psychological or emotional development of the original narratives while keeping the details of tournaments and battles" (704). Armstrong, however, calls for a reexamination of the importance of women in Malory in *Gender and the Chivalric Community in Malory's* Morte d'Arthur.

II. Malory's Chivalric Values and Chivalric Audience

In order to consider the ideology of Malory's text we must consider what the values are that the text espouses and at whom those values are directed—in other words, the type of audience that would appreciate such a long work dedicated to bringing to life a particular vision of the past. We must therefore take into account the fifteenth-century milieu Malory addresses and the ways in which the text is tailored to that society—or at least Malory's vision for that society. We can do this by looking at both the context of the fifteenth century as well as clues from the text itself concerning its intended audience and purpose. Finally, we must consider how the values espoused by Malory in the *Morte Darthur* have changed from those of his sources.

Because the Winchester Manuscript, discovered in 1934 in the Winchester College library, seems to demonstrate how intrusive Caxton had been as an editor, many scholars have sought to reject Caxton's reading of Malory along with his (supposedly) meddlesome edits[247] And perhaps in their impossible quest to get to some sort of more "pure" version of the text, they are justified in questioning Caxton's interference. Still, to my mind, Caxton provides the valuable insight of a talented bookseller with his finger on the pulse, as it were, of the literary

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[247] Eugène Vinaver considered Caxton not merely Malory's printer, but a manipulator of the text, which he calls "Caxton's 'Morte Darthur'" (see the Introduction to *The Works of Sir Thomas Malory,* xxxv-xli). But the question is by no means settled and continues to inspire considerable debate. On the one hand, William Matthews and his adherents argue that Caxton's text most likely represents Malory's final revisions, since Caxton had neither the time nor the background in Arthuriana to undertake sweeping changes such as those seen in Book V on the Roman War, nor does Caxton comment on those changes, as he was wont to do, in his prologue. On the other hand, Vinaver's adherents, including N.F. Blake and Shunichi Noguchi among others, detail considerable linguistic, rhetorical, and structural evidence to suggest that, in fact, Caxton was a heavy-handed editor of a text much closer to the Winchester Manuscript in form. The nuances of the debate are laid out in *The Malory Debate: Essays on the Texts of* Le Morte Darthur, edited by Bonnie Wheeler, Robert L. Kindrick and Michael N. Salda. Like many questions regarding medieval authorship, the problem seems impossible to settle without more evidence. Fortunately, whether Caxton was an intrusive editor or not does not alter my larger point.

market. We can learn from Caxton and from his edition something about who was reading the *Morte Darthur*, why they read it, and its place in the courtly milieu.

As A.S.G. Edwards notes in "The Reception of Malory's *Morte Darthur*," aside from notes on a late sixteenth century manuscript copy of Malory, "no [concrete] evidence survives of how contemporary readers responded to the [*Morte Darthur*]" (243). The dearth of extant print copies, however, of a work that circulated widely and was reprinted five times after Caxton's original run in 1485 is, in fact, evidence of the text's popularity, suggesting "the degree to which Malory's work, like other early editions of romances, was literally read to destruction" (243). Clearly the work had, in fifteenth-century terms, a wide and appreciative audience. There is also no mention by Malory of his intended readership—unlike most of his contemporary authors, he does not dedicate his work. We can only make inferences based on his content and a few direct addresses to the audience.

Malory's publisher is much more explicit about the audience and purpose of the text from his perspective as marketer, as we have already seen in the excerpt from his prologue cited above. Caxton was a savvy businessman and a successful publisher: while other early English printing presses were going bankrupt, Caxton's press thrived by focusing on courtly texts in the vernacular intended for an English-speaking audience, rather than on the humanist or religious markets, as presses in Europe and other early presses in England, such as the ones in Oxford or St. Albans, were doing by publishing largely Latin school and religious texts.[248] N.F. Blake argues convincingly that despite Caxton's lip service to various, very often unnamed, patrons, "it was Caxton who was responsible for the choice of texts coming off his press rather than the

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[248] See N.F. Blake, *William Caxton and English Literary Culture*, especially chapter 5, "The Spread of Printing in English during the Fifteenth Century," pages 57-74.

nobles or merchants who are mentioned in them" (17). And Caxton was adept at identifying and tapping into a new market of literary (and literate) consumers.

Therefore, we can rely on Caxton's marketing strategies, as revealed in his publication choices, his prologues and epilogues (including the dedicatees he addresses), and his edits, to tell us something about the audience whom he saw as the market for *Morte Darthur* and other books like it that he published. Caxton's "basic publishing policy…consisted in the provision of texts in the vernacular to members of the nobility and the middle class" (Blake 66). He published relatively few Latin texts, and those seemingly on commission (Blake 14), preferring vernacular literature following European models, including English poetry by and in the school of Chaucer as well as prose translations of Burgundian and French courtly works.[249] As Edward Gibbon put it, conceding Caxton's talent even while deriding fifteenth-century taste: "In the choice of his authors, that liberal and industrious artist was reduced to comply with the vicious taste of his readers; to gratify the nobles with treatises on heraldry, hawking, and the game of chess, and to amuse popular credulity with romances of fabulous knights and legends of more fabulous saints" (qtd. in Blake 5). Perhaps we can take Gibbon's point and set aside his snobbery: Caxton saw

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[249] N.F. Blake argues, somewhat tangentially, about the importance of Caxton's choice to publish translated prose works rather than native English ones: "It is time now that we reconsidered the position of the fifteenth century in the history of English prose, for we have hitherto failed to recognize that the authors of the time were trying to break new ground. Consequently their achievement has been undervalued. They could see that poetry had made a new start [with Chaucer and his followers] and they wished to do the same for prose. But since they had no English model and were forced to rely on foreign ones, it is only to be expected that their attempts to fashion a new style should seem naïve to us.   But this does not mean that the fifteenth century translator 'had seldom any interest in English style'. On the contrary, he was intensely conscious of it and tried to improve it. Naturally the first steps were uncertain, but the fifteenth-century translators paved the way for the achievements of the sixteenth century" (133-4). For Caxton this meant avoiding assiduously the outmoded and "old fashioned" alliterative rhythms of traditional English poetry and prose, as well as updating vocabulary and rhetorical ornamentation on Latin and French models. Caxton therefore not only complied with the Continental tastes of his audience, but helped shape the trajectory of English prose style, despite not being much of a stylist himself. Blake frequently accuses him of being unable to practice what he preached in terms of style and ornamentation—without a model to follow, Caxton's "own compositions were more notable for their clumsy style than for their balanced or rhythmical sentences" (126).

the *Morte* as a text well suited to the interests of his target consumers: the leisured noble class with chivalric aspirations.

Caxton identifies the intended audience for the *Morte Darthur* outright in his prologue: he dedicates the book to "alle noble prynces, lords, and ladyes, gentylmen or gentylwymmen, that desyre to rede or here redde of the noble and joyous hystorye of the grete conquerour and excellent kyng, Kyng Arthur" (cxlvi). In doing so he casts a wide net, presumably hoping to maximize the market for what is, after all, a very long book, one that appears to have been virtually unknown, and was no-doubt an expensive and risky undertaking. In the uncertain political climate of the time, he also hedges against naming specific noble or royal patrons who might end up on the losing side and thus become liabilities rather than assets in promoting the work.

Somewhat more specifically, Caxton claims it was "many noble and dyvers gentylmen of thys royame of England" who "camen and demaunded me many and oftymes, wherfore that I have not do made and enprynte the noble hystorye of the Saynt Greal and of the moost renomed Crysten kyng, fyrst and chyef of the thre best Crysten, and worthy, kyng Arthur, whyche ought moost to be remembred emonge us Englysshemen tofore al other Crysten kynges" (cxliii). Caxton presupposes an audience eager for this material, even if he is inventing the anecdote, as seems likely. This is an audience with a taste for European, especially French, fashions, but with a strong sense of English patriotism born out of centuries of political conflict with France (the recent disastrous end of the Hundred Year's War being fresh in English memory). Caxton is adept at catering to these prejudices: many of his publications, like this one, are translations or adaptations that make French literary culture available to a courtly, English-speaking audience. Caxton emphasizes, therefore, not only the fact that Arthur is their very own former king, but his

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place in Western culture: he is recognized throughout the known world as one of the nine

worthies, and the chief Christian worthy; his adventures have been "more spoken of beyonde the

see, moo bookes made of his noble actes, than there be in Englond; as wel in Duche, Ytalyen,

Spaynysshe, and Grekysshe, as in Frensshe" (cxlv). Twice more Caxton harps on the French

origins of the work, once himself witnessing to its continental provenance—"many noble

volumes be made of [Arthur] and of his noble knyghtes in Frensshe, which I have seen and redde

beyonde the see, which been not had in our maternal tongue"—and once referencing the work of

the author (whom he casts as a translator rather than original writer) as a witness—"Sir Thomas

Malorye dyd take oute of certeyn bookes of Frensshe and reduced it into Englysshe" (cxlv).

Arthur's tale is therefore worth reading both for its cultural superiority as well as its

demonstration of English greatness.

Likewise, the differences in the Caxton edition from the Winchester show a marked

preference for Continental style. The most heavily edited book of the *Morte* is Book V, which

tells the story of the war with Emperor Lucius and which Malory based on the English

Alliterative *Morte Arthure*. The Winchester manuscript displays a high incidence of alliteration

preserved from the source. Caxton, however—if he was, in fact, the one to edit the text—went

out of his way to avoid alliteration and to introduce French loan words where the Winchester

relied on Anglo-Saxon constructions. The result is that "Caxton's version is more courtly and

less specific" (Blake 131) and is "more in line with the romance stereotype" (204), in keeping

with the tastes and expectations of a courtly audience desirous of romances on the European

model.

All of these choices—in text, in marketing, in revision—tell us something about the

tastes Caxton was catering to and which he saw Malory's text as satisfying. This was a courtly

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audience, aware of Continental style and forms, though perhaps not as fully literate in French as

their forebears had been, so that they would value (and purchase!) sophisticated romances on the

Continental model in their own tongue.[250] This audience is partly in search of a national hero, but

is even more interested in exemplars of taste, manners, and prowess—in short, the flower of

chivalry, irrespective of nationality. Historical pedigree also seems to count more than

nationality, suggesting an audience looking for historical precedents for their values—though it

surely does not hurt that the greatest king is their countryman. On the other hand, it is in no way

problematic that the greatest knight, Launcelot, is French. They delight in stories of perfect

chivalry from the distant past. In short, they enjoy romances, not as escapism or fantasy but as

nostalgic histories of the institution (in this case knighthood) that they themselves were striving

to perfect.[251] And Caxton is counting on this to sell *Morte Darthur*—indeed it is the very

marketing scheme he relies on in his prologue.

Following in Caxton's footsteps, later publishers continued to emphasize the didactic and

nostalgic elements of the *Morte* in their promotion of the text. Caxton's protégé Wynkyn de

Worde produced two further, slightly updated editions of the *Morte Darthur* based on Caxton's

text, the first of which further demonstrates the nostalgic purpose the publisher attributed to the

text. De Worde interpolates the following passage into Book XX, Chapter 12:

> me thinketh this present book called La Morte Darthur is right
> necessary often to be read; for in it ye shall find the gracious,

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[250] As Stephen Knight puts it in *Arthurian Literature and Society*, "Malory's role was to offer chivalry as an ideology to those who could not understand French" (107).

[251] Andrew Lynch suggests that Caxton may have also appreciated the broad appeal the book offers: "Caxton…seems to have offered Malory's work to the public as a kind of chronicle, reference book, and anthology….It covers a range of gentry interests from religious observances, battles, tournaments, and love to marriage, genealogy and inheritance, law, hunting, land management, and table manners. It could serve many functions for the reader: a history of Britain's greatest era, a study of great kingship, a record of notable deeds of arms, a model of good conduct and deportment, a story of faithful love, and a work that inculcated religious piety" ("Malory's *Morte Darthur* and History" 303).

knightly, and virtuous war of most noble knights of the world, whereby they gat praising continual. Also me seemeth by the oft reading thereof ye shall greatly desire to accustom yourself in following of those gracious knightly deeds, that is to say, to dread God, and to love righwiseness, faithfully and courageously to serve your sovereign prince.[252]

De Worde sees Malory as not only representing the ideal of knighthood, but also providing exempla for those wishing to live perfect knighthood. Of course, his motive may not be solely the preservation or exaltation of the institution of knighthood: he is also marketing his books. One apparently needs to read these tales often and study them to reap the benefits, encouraging personal ownership of the book. On the other hand, this moralizing passage is buried late in the text rather than in the introduction, which might more obviously be used to publicize the work, so in that sense it may be less a marketing tool than a genuine explanation of the purpose and use of the text as de Worde saw it.

Malory himself does not explain his motivation for writing: the text as we have it begins *in medias res* with none of the typical introductory elements we might expect, such as a statement of purpose or dedication or even historical context. These, where we find them, are supplied by Caxton's introduction, as discussed above.[253] Nevertheless, the text itself can tell us some things about the audience Malory had in mind as he wrote and who may have enjoyed or profited from reading it. Beverly Kennedy points out, "it assumes that [the audience] will be familiar with every aspect of knighthood and will enjoy extended descriptions of knightly activities like battles and tournaments" (2). Fights tend to be rather formulaic, generally involving two knights rushing at each other with spears on horseback one or more times. Often

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[252] Sir Edward Strachey includes the passage at the end of his 1899 edition of *Le Morte Darthur*; see note A, page 488.

[253] The Winchester manuscript is missing the first gathering all together; the beginning of the story must be supplied from the Caxton version.

one knight is unhorsed, at which point the other will "avoyd" (dismount from) his horse and they

will engage in sword fighting, which more often than not tests them both in the sorest terms.

One will prevail, and unless the other has already been killed, mercy will be discussed, begged

for, freely offered, or cruelly rejected. This basic formulation (with some variety for

circumstance) so fascinates Malory that he can repeat it countless times over hundred of pages,

and it suggests a readership likewise captivated and thrilled by the vagaries of one-on-one

combat.[254] For an author who is famously sparse in his descriptions, rarely describing, for

example, characters or appearances or settings in any real detail and often cutting back on

descriptions from his sources,[255] Malory's attention to detail when it comes to how knights

acquit themselves in these fights is notable, though hardly profuse by other authors' standards.[256]

Indeed, his restrained descriptions suggest that he expects his audience to be familiar with the

details of knighthood and chivalric life. In a typical example from Book VIII, Sir Galahalte

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[254] For more on the importance of fighting in the *Morte* overall, see Andrew Lynch, *Malory's Book of Arms: The Narrative of Combat in* Le Morte Darthur. He argues that the "formulaic nature of the description [of combat] functions as a guarantee of authority; the story follows an approved course, and stimulates a general judgement shared by the knightly peer group in response to known events. The formula invokes collective speech rather than the singularity of individual writer and book-readers. In this way, though the narrating of the content of combat might seem to display conflict and division within the chivalric ranks, both its manner of description and the implied circumstances of communication, reception and recommunication stress instead a solidarity of outlook, and coerce the would-be 'jantyll' reader-hearer to conform his or her judgement to the chivalric norm" (31).

[255] A notable example here is the gruesome description of the giant of Mont Saint Michel that is so vivid and memorable in the *Alliterative Morte Arthure* but is trimmed to just a few words by Malory. Much has been written about Malory's use of sources, but perhaps Stephen H.A. Shepherd sums up the types of changes Malory makes most succinctly in the commentary of his edition of *Le Morte Darthur*: "If there is any agreement about the general pattern in Malory's handling of sources, it is that he abbreviated extensively, removed the interdispersing of multiple story lines—the *entrelacement*—characteristic of some of his French sources, suppressed expressions of (amorous) sentiment and psychological introspection, reduced passages of religious allegory and other expressions of doctrine, and reduced accounts of magical phenomena; at the same time he emphasized accounts of martial endeavor and knightly values of loyalty and honor, and drew greater attention to the (tragic) heroism of certain characters—in particular Launcelot. Sometimes, however, he produced virtual word-for-word translations or incorporated words and phrases verbatim from his English sources" (703). See also Terence McCarthy, "Malory and His Sources" in *A Companion to Malory*, pages 75-95.

[256] Lynch points out that, while fighting and descriptions of fighting are absolutely central to *Le Morte Darthur,* Malory does not include the morbid catalogues of injuries found in other texts (49); indeed, he "omi[ts]…some of the gruesome details of the battle-scenes" lending them a similarity to "a herald's report" (52).

"profyrde to fight with Sir Trystrames," a fight Malory describes using the technical terms of

jousting and swordplay:

> So anone they mette togydyrs so hard that aythir bare othir
> adowne, horse and man, to the erthe. And whan they avoyded their
> horsis, as noble knyghtes they dressed their shyldis and drewe their
> swerdys wyth ire and rancoure, and they laysshed togydyr many
> sad strokys—and one whyle strykynge and another whyle
> foynynge, tracynge and traversynge, as noble knyghtes.
>
> Thus they fought longe—nerehonde half a day—and aythir
> were sore wounded. (VIII.27, Vinaver 416)

The minor variations in these fights, their almost relentless frequency, and Malory's use of

technical details make it "likely that Malory conceived of his book as an extension of and guide

to…professional discussion[s of knighthood]" (Lynch 30).[257]

Longer descriptions of formal tournaments reveal a similar interest on the part of Malory

and presumably his courtly readers, who in the fifteenth century would have been at least

familiar with knightly tournaments, if not the actual participants and audience for what had

become the spectator sport of chivalry (making Kennedy's comparison between the audience's

interest in knightly descriptions and a present-day fan's enjoyment of a long game of cricket or

baseball – even second hand – rather apt [2]). Frequently in these tournament descriptions

spectators comment on the action before them, especially who is winning the most honor that

day. In keeping with romance tropes, it is not unusual for that knight to be a mysterious,

disguised figure. Take, for example the great tournament in "The Book of Sir Launcelot and

Quene Guinevere": here Launcelot fights in disguise, wearing the favor of the Fair Maid of

Ascolat, while Arthur and Gawain, who is sitting out the tournament at the king's behest,

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[257] Beverly Kennedy calls the *Morte* a "*summa* of medieval chivalry": "it incorporates exemplars of every
conceivable type of knightly excellence to be found in the literature of the previous five hundred years [and]
compares them to one another in a lengthy series of knightly adventures" (82-3).

observe and comment on the action. Gawain wonders, "'What knyght ys yondir that doth so mervaylous dedys in that fylde?'" When Arthur refuses to tell him, he goes on to say, "'I wolde sey hit were sir Launcelot by hys rydynge and hys buffettis that I se hym deale. But ever mesemyth hit sholde nat be he, for that he beryth the rede slyve uppon hys helmet; for I wyst hym never beare tokyn at no justys of lady ne jantillwoman" (XVIII.11, Vinaver 1071). What we see here is a combination of heightened description for literary effect, appropriate to romance (the disguise, the love token, the knight of such extreme prowess that it cannot be hidden) but also realistic action that the audience could surely relate to (spectators enjoying a sport and commenting on the technique and skill of the participants, court members gossiping). The tournaments described in the *Morte* provide, therefore, pleasing counterparts and even historical precedents for a familiar practice, one conducted, indeed, in imitation of romance models.[258]

Tournaments and other knightly pursuits—quests, wandering through the forest and engaging in *pas d'armes,* taking on the "customs" of various castles, court gatherings and festivals—all allow for the display of manners appropriate to chivalric knights and ladies and no doubt valued by Malory's upper class audience, as well as those middle class readers with social aspirations. The Pentecostal Oath in Book III is often pointed to as an overt statement of these values. Arthur makes his knights swear to be loyal, not to commit murder, to be nice and helpful to ladies, and not to take the wrong part in any quarrel. Knightly encounters highlight other, implicit values of chivalry, such as mercy, not attacking a tired knight when one is fresh, not attacking unexpectedly or someone who is unarmed, being gracious in victory and defeat, aiding

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[258] See the in depth discussion of tournaments as literary invention in chapter one of this dissertation.

those in need, offering and receiving hospitality, and bravely accepting any challenge or adventure.[259]

Malory's value system is indicative of his social milieu, including, by extension, the audience for his romance. Malory tells us little about himself except, famously, that he is a "knight prisoner." If, as seems likely, he is the Thomas Malory from Newbold Revel,[260] he had, to put it mildly, a checkered past. But as a man of arms with experience in combat, he was also well positioned to know first-hand the importance and value of soldierly camaraderie and brotherhood—what he most often refers to as "fellowship."[261] As a soldier during the turbulent War of the Roses, however, caught more than once on the wrong side of the conflict, he was just as cognizant of the hazards of conflicting and sometimes shifting loyalties, such as those that bring down the Round Table in the end. This is not to suggest that the *Morte Darthur* is a direct commentary on or parallel to fifteenth century politics in any organized or allegorical way; rather it explains Malory's own interest in the complex history of Arthur and why he might reasonably have hoped that his work would find favor among his peers.[262]

Finally, the most direct evidence Malory gives of his purpose and his conception of his audience comes in a few brief direct addresses scattered throughout the *Morte* where the action is

[259] Raluca L. Radulescu investigates the "gentry values" espoused by the text, particularly "worship, lordship and friendship," in Chapter 3, "Gentry Values in Malory's *Morte Darthur*," of her monograph *The Gentry Context.* See pages 83-111.

[260] P.J.C. Field rehearses the arguments for various Thomas Malorys and convincingly demonstrates that the one from Newbold Revel is, given what we know to date, the only likely choice – see *The Life and Times of Sir Thomas Malory.*

[261] For an exploration of the term fellowship and its importance to Malory, see Elizabeth Archibald, "Malory's Ideal of Fellowship"

[262] Radulescu's essay "Malory and Political Ideas" takes a similar stance, suggesting rather echoes of fifteenth-century political concerns over sustained parallels. Others have sought to draw more direct parallels, such as Stephen Knight in *Arthurian Literature and Society,* though there too Knight notes the parallels are not consistent but rather ways of reflecting on contemporary events while presenting chivalry as the ideal.

momentarily put on hold and the author speaks straight to the audience. One such passage

comes as Malory is describing the traditionally courtly achievements of Sir Tristram, including

his talents as a harpist and a hunter: "as me semyth, all jantyllmen that beryth olde armys ought

of ryght to honoure Sir Trystrams for the goodly tearmys that jantylmen have and use and shall

do unto the Day of Dome, that thereby in a maner all men of worshyp may discever a jantylman

frome a yoman and yoman frome a vylayne. For he that jantyll is woll drawe hym to jantyll

tacchis [habits], and to folow the noble customys of jantylmen" (VIII.3, Vinaver 375). The

description turns into a commentary on the universal and necessary attributes of a gentleman, in

the sense of a nobleman. Tristram is presented as the ultimate model of these universal qualities.

Although Malory emphasizes again and again the superiority of Launcelot—the two are

constantly compared, with Launcelot beating out Tristram for title of best knight, but only just

barely—Tristram is the knight traditionally associated with courtly refinements beyond the more

martial achievements of jousting and fighting. While Launcelot and Tristram are both famous

lovers, only Tristram is typically associated with "the noble customys of jantylmen" as suited to

the recreational pursuits of the court, like music and hunting. Tristram is, in fact, so strongly

associated with hunting prowess that Malory points out that the very "booke of [venery, of

hawkynge and huntynge is called the booke of] Sir Trystrams" (VIII.3, Vinaver 375). Therefore

Tristram is the model of these aspects of chivalry, which Malory presents as universally

applicable to noblemen: Malory applies these qualities to the distant past (by associating them

with the flower of ancient chivalry, the Round Table knights), to his contemporaries, and to all

future noblemen, "unto the Day of Dome." Because what constitutes nobility, according to this

passage, is following "noble customys," Malory's comments can be taken as a rubric for

understanding the text overall as evidence of "noble customys" past still to be followed to

distinguish a (presumably) noble reader from a "yoman" or (gasp!) a "vylayne." Thus Malory

provides historical pedigree for values and behaviors he seeks to encourage in his readers,

suggesting their universal nature.

Another such passage treats a different universal truth of knighthood, applicable to any

time: "Here men may undirstonde that bene men of worshyp that man was never fourmed that all

tymes myght attayne, but somtyme he was put to the worse by malefortune and at som tyme the

wayker knyght put the byggar knyght to a rebuke" (IX.12, Vinaver 484). It explicitly addresses

an audience of knightly peers – "men of worship" who know from first-hand experience the

vagaries of combat. It again stresses the continuity of knighthood throughout the ages and

provides an ancient pedigree for this knowledge.

Later direct addresses to the audience, on the other hand, are concerned with the ways in

which chivalry is in decline, contrasting practices in Malory's day with the more ideal behavior

of the past. Interestingly, these occur as the Round Table fellowship becomes imperiled.   They

cover such diverse and integral issues as justice: "for such custom was used *in tho dayes*: for

favoure, love, nother affinité there sholde be none other but ryghtuous jugemente, as well uppon

a kynge as uppon a knyght, and as well uppon a quene as uppon another poure lady" (emphasis

added, XVIII.6, Vinaver 1055); and the declining status of love:

> *But nowadayes* men can not love sevennyght but they muste
> have all their desyres. That love may not endure by reson, for
> where they bethe sone accorded and hasty, heete sone keelyth. And
> ryght so faryth thelove *nowadayes*, sone hote sone colde. Thys ys
> no stabylyté. *But the old love* was nat so. For men and women
> coude love togydirs seven yerys, and no lycoures lustis was
> betweyxte them, and than was love troughte and faythefulnes. And
> so in lyke wyse was used such love *in kynge Arthurs dayes*.

Wherefore I lykken love *nowadayes* unto sommer and wynter:
for, lyke as the tone ys colde and the othis ys hote, so faryth love
nowadayes. (emphasis added, XVIII.25, Vinaver 1119)

In both cases Malory stresses the gap between practices in "tho dayes" and "nowadayes,"

expressing longing for the past, which was superior in matters of justice and love, and implicitly

critiquing his contemporaries and readers for their failure to live up to its ideals.

Finally, Malory's last direct commentary again addresses a consistency through the ages,

but in this case he reveals his frustration, both with the inevitable outcome of his chosen subject

matter and with the unpredictable nature of contemporary English politics: "Lo ye all

Englysshemen, se ye nat what a myschyff here was? For he [Arthur] that was the moste kynge

and nobelyst knyght of the worlde, and moste loved the felyshyp of noble knyghtes, and by hym

they all were upholdyn, and yet myght nat thes Englyshemen hold them contente with hym. Lo,

thus was the olde custom and usayges of thys londe, and men say that we of thys londe have *nat

yet loste that custom*. Alas! thys ys a greate defaughte of us Englysshemen, for there may no

thynge us please no terme" (emphasis added, XXI.1, Vinaver 1229). At first glance it appears

that Malory has cast off his nostalgia and become openly critical of his characters; however, it

seems to me that it is precisely because Malory is so nostalgic for the Arthurian world he creates

that he is distressed at its doom. Furthermore, the politics of his own day appear to be imperiling

knighthood once more, making the lessons of Arthur and the Round Table especially timely.

All of these direct addresses share an interest in values, whether those of gentlemen, of

lovers, or of citizens. They serve to remind the audience of the relevance of the stories of King

Arthur, while allowing the author a vehicle for articulating that relevance. Finally, they place

both the story and the audience's present time on an historical continuum, reinforcing the ways

in which society has changed (most often for the worse), the ways it has stayed the same, and the

values that are shared across time. As we shall see later in this chapter, time, in particular the manipulation of narrative time, is extremely important to Malory's narrative art, and is one of the chief ways he imbues the text with nostalgia. We see that method being employed here in the moments when the narrator breaks the fiction to address the audience and articulate his feelings.

The values of the *Morte Darthur,* therefore, are consistent with those of the fifteenth-century upper class as they wished to imagine themselves: cultured, chivalric, skilled in fighting and loyal. Loyalty, in particular, was a tricky concept at the time, as Malory's lament about fickle English loyalty suggests: it was much valued, but increasingly complex as feudalism waned and the War of the Roses raged. Malory specifically adapts the story to highlight these values (and difficulties), which differ in important ways from those espoused in the French sources written in the previous centuries.

III. Updating the Values of the Round Table for the Fifteenth Century

By the time Malory was writing, the Round Table was a commonplace subject for romances. There were, as Caxton notes in his prologue, versions in most European languages, though they were perhaps most common and well known in their French iterations. Chrétien de Troyes had started the trend in the twelfth century; by the fifteenth it was still going strong and had acquired the veneer of a well-established tradition. But for all that, there were relatively few versions in English, and nothing so ambitious as the *Vulgate Cycle* when Malory set out to bring the complete tale of Arthur to the English in their native tongue. However, as Felicity Riddy points out, Malory's "Englishing" is "not simply a matter of translation but of narrative perspective and…of ideology" (64).

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Malory's audience in fifteenth-century England would have been a substantially different one from Chrétien's in twelfth-century France in a number of important ways. First, the conception and role of chivalry in noble life had changed considerably. Chretien's descriptions of chivalry were, as was discussed in chapter three, aspirational: he describes knightly encounters not so much as they were—bloody, messy affairs—but as they might be in a polite, highly refined, Christian court. By Malory's time, there was "genuine and widely felt disquiet about the degree to which contemporary chivalry fell short of ideal standards" especially in contrast with its (supposed) "antique vigor" (Keen, "Huizinga, Kilgour and the Decline of Chivalry" 6), resulting in the fifteenth century in more conscious and sincere attempts to enact the kind of chivalry depicted in romances. Recent scholars have shown "that the fifteenth-century may well have been the golden age of chivalry" (Kennedy 23). Even if many knights failed to live up to the ideal, as the violence of the age suggests, it was clear by the fifteenth century what it meant to be a good chivalric knight, and literary models demonstrated that ideal in profusion. That real life was beginning to emulate literature is evident from, for example, the knightly orders that were springing up all over Europe in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. In England the Order of the Garter, founded in 1348 by Edward III, was consciously modeled on romance fellowships: "Chronicles state explicitly that Edward III had the Arthurian model in mind at the time when he first decided to found an order of knighthood" (Keen, *Chivalry* 191). The proliferation of chivalric biographies in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries further demonstrates the admiration men had for great knights and their exploits.[263] Chivalry was no longer just in the storybooks, but something real men were striving to adopt. "So when Malory talks about chivalry," says Richard Barber, "he is invoking a newly-revived but flourishing ideal,

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[263] See Richard Barber's chapter "Chivalric Biographies and Handbooks," pages 144-155 in *The Knight and Chivalry*.

not an echo of past traditions" (31). But Barber is wrong to dismiss the location of the high point of this ideal in the past as merely a "*topos* common in medieval literature" (31) without much significance. Yes, Malory is writing for an audience well versed in chivalry, but the essential purpose of his work is to provide the full provenance for chivalry and its illustrious English history in English to an audience eager to recapture the glory of Camelot.

Secondly, the very composition of the nobility and of the reading public had changed drastically by the fifteenth century. James Westfall Thompson in his book *The Literacy of the Laity in the Middle Ages* discusses how, although the "average layman in Northern France and the Low Countries was illiterate" (126) in the tenth century (with more interest in learning in Southern France, though by no means widespread literacy), by the eleventh and certainly the twelfth century literacy[264] among the laity[265] was certainly on the rise. This is the beginning point of a professional laity with a need for education and literacy. Records attest to lay teachers, and with the rise of lay teachers a "gradual increase in the number of laymen who were interested in letters for their own sake, without any utilitarian purpose" (Thompson 135). Thompson goes so far as to claim, "In no other period of medieval France do we find record of so many well-educated men and women" (138). However, he is also forced to concede that despite these trends, literate noblemen were "not numerous" and the "cultural level of the laity…was not very high" (136). Even in Champagne, headed by the cultured and literate Count Henry and his wife Marie of France, whose court was "marked not only by Latin learning but also an interest in the new vernacular literature" (144), there were likely "still plenty of illiterate noble men" (145). So

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[264] Thompson is particularly concerned with reading and writing ability in Latin, though he does give some attention to the rise of vernacular literacy in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.

[265] Thompson confines his discussion to noble laity.

while Chrétien's works came out of a society with a renewed and budding interest in culture and learning, it was still a rather narrow and limited one.

In contrast, "there is general agreement among late medieval historians that a[n]…expansion of literacy took place among all classes in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries" (Moran 19). Estimates of literacy rates vary widely, and these figures are notoriously difficult to pin down; however, for the sake of comparison to twelfth century Champagne, where many, but by no means all of the members of the highest level of society were likely to be literate, "perhaps 30% of the population could read in the fifteenth century" (Du Boulay 118) or, by another reckoning, as much as 50% of London laymen in the 1470s (Thrupp 156-58). Regardless of how reliable these estimates are, "There is no doubt that most members of the English upper classes by the fourteenth century were literate; that is, they could read and write in either French or English and oftentimes both" (Moran 150); furthermore, there is evidence that education and literacy were trickling down to the lower classes as well (Moran 172-75).[266] It is not likely that those of the lowest classes would be the audience for a work like *Le Morte Darthur,* however the increased literacy rates do suggest a wider possible audience, and one reaching somewhat further down the social scale, perhaps to those—men and women—with courtly ambitions.

Not only was reading ability becoming more widespread, but also entrée into the middle and upper classes had become, particularly during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, something that could be accomplished through individual merit.[267] On one hand, the *Morte*

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[266] Some of the evidence Jo Hoeppner Moran cites include the increase posting of written bills, the history of the translation of the Bible into English, both of which presuppose an audience literate in the vernacular, as well as notices in manorial roles of serfs requesting license for their sons to attend schools (174-5).

[267] See Raluca Radulescu, *The Gentry Context for Malory's* Morte Darthur, especially pages 7-14.

provides tantalizing hints of the promise of social mobility through personal achievement. "The

Tale of Sir Gareth" appears to have a lowly kitchen servant win glory and the hand of the rich

and beautiful Dame Lyonesse and thus prove himself worthy of becoming a Round Table knight

and powerful member of the nobility. Of course this is not really the case, because Beaumains, as

he is nicknamed by Kay, is really Gareth, brother to Gawain and nephew of the king. He is

already of the highest nobility and has simply employed a disguise to win worship through his

deeds. As such, the text generally caters more to the established upper classes than to the

aspirational ones in valuing blood as much as deeds—or rather assuming that noble blood and

great deeds are inextricably tied—and even demonstrates some of that class's anxiety about the

economic movement away from the landed aristocracy.[268]

Finally, England was embroiled in decades of civil strife. Twelfth-century France was

likewise turbulent and often violent, however Champagne, where Chrétien likely composed his

romances, was fairly peaceful and prosperous by the day's standards.[269] Furthermore, Chrétien

generally stays aloof from politics and the petty squabbles of noblemen in his fictions. John W.

Baldwin characterizes him as "remarkably insulated from his own historical context" (3): he

"wrote romances that remained totally oblivious to the political, matrimonial and martial events

of his day, just as they ignored the governmental achievements within the three surrounding

principalities and the king's domain" (Baldwin 12). The world of Chrétien's romances is

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[268] See Benson, *Malory's* Morte Darthur*, pages 143-4 and Stephen Knight, *Arthurian Literature and Society*, especially pages116 and 120.

[269] "The tenth and eleventh centuries, the formative period for knighthood, had been a time of almost continuous warfare in western Europe….The twelfth century brought relative peace and substantial prosperity to much of the west, particularly France and England" (Barber, "Chivalry and the *Morte Darthur* 20). And with fighting between Christians denounced by the church and military focus drawn to the crusades, violence in Europe was curtailed somewhat (see John D. Cotts, *Europe's Long Twelfth Century*).

strictly one of imagination and high ideals. Chrétien is writing for a noble class seeking to shed

its violent and barbarous ways and embrace learning, manners, and courtliness.

Malory's audience is also anxious to embrace the niceties of chivalry, but he is writing

for a nobility in conflict: loyalty is still an ideal, but one which had been muddied by conflicting

allegiances and so-called "bastard feudalism."[270] And Malory himself is embroiled in these

conflicts – is, indeed, writing from prison perhaps because of them. In fact, Malory's checkered

personal history is a perfect illustration of the kinds of conflicts in loyalty and the thuggery that

could result from the divided politics of the Wars of the Roses.[271] What at first glance appears to

be a shocking life of crime for one so interested in chivalry and ideal knighthood, including such

crimes as attempted murder, extortion, robbery, rape, and various (sometimes daring) jailbreaks,

may have been politically motivated[272]—either the charges trumped up by his enemies, or the

dastardly deeds done in service of his cause (the kinds of raids and attacks he was accused of

participating in being not uncommon tactics during the Wars of the Roses[273]). If, as P. J. C.

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[270] See K.B. MacFarlane's chapter "Bastard Feudalism" in *England in the Fifteenth Century*, pg 23-43. Bastard feudalism refers to the developing practice of paying for service, rather than expecting it as a feudal obligation: "Its quintessence was payment for service" (MacFarlane 24). And it did not apply to "just royal servants: men of ability of all kinds, soldiers, lawyers, clerks and professional administrators had many anxious to be their good lords and to pay for the privilege. It is unrealistic to suppose that their loyalties were either indivisible or deeply engaged" (30-31). Like his fifteenth-century counterparts, King Arthur retains knights to his service with fees—see Beverly Kennedy *Knighthood in the Morte Darthur*, page 36.

[271] Modern historians have amply demonstrated that the fifteenth century was not as marked by decades of armed conflict and civil war as has often been popularly imagined. J.R. Lander reckons that "active campaigning between the first battle of St Albans (1455) and the battle of Stoke (1487) amounted to a little more than one year" (9); A.J. Pollard puts the total at "no more than 12 or 13 weeks" between 1455 and 1485 (7). The average Englishman was barely impacted at all. However, even taking into account this more measured view of the civil unrest of the fifteenth century, for those involved with the court, and for noblemen seeking to work out personal feuds and land disputes, they could be violent and dangerous times indeed. For example, Stephen Knight notes that the fifteenth century "was notorious for civil disorder" (113), and points out that knights, supposed to be keepers of order, were very often the ones violating the peace and causing disorder. He ties this notion into the policing theme in the Pentecostal Oath and in *Le Morte Darthur* at large (Knight 114).

[272] See P.J.C. Field's *The Life and Times of Sir Thomas Malory*, especially chapter 8, "Reversals," pages 126-47.

[273] Field suggests that "Malory's importance in the struggle between York and Lancaster [particularly in his youth] had been quite out of proportion to the social status suggested by the surviving evidence of his property, income, and family connections. His importance may have been a function of his ability to cause trouble…" (128).

Field has argued, these Thomas Malorys are all the same man and our author, then after having

first been a follower of the Duke of Buckingham, a Lancastrian, and sent up to Parliament on his

behalf as the MP for Bedwin in 1449, Malory returned to Parliament in 1450 on behalf of the

Duke of York. In between these sessions his most egregious crimes are alleged to have taken

place, including the ambush of the Duke of Buckingham with twenty-six other men. Around this

time Malory may also have become associated with Richard Neville, Earl of Warwick, the so-

called Kingmaker and another notable example of the shifting loyalties of the Wars of the Roses:

Warwick was instrumental in Edward IV's usurpation of the throne and, disillusioned, the brief

restoration of Henry VI. Malory appears to have gotten on the wrong side of the Yorks by

joining Warwick in his effort to restore Henry. He was called out by name as being excluded

from general pardons issued by Edward IV.

Malory's biography is useful for what it implies about the times and his social milieu. As

K. B. MacFarlane puts it, knights in Malory's day "turned their coats as often and with the same

chequered success as their betters. Since many of them were wise or greedy enough to have more

coats than one to turn, they may well have been more dexterous than the lords at changing them

to suit the demands of survival" (248). And although Malory's own allegiances appear to have

been somewhat fluid, the text of the *Morte* suggests that loyalty (and the consequences of

conflicting loyalties) was a major preoccupation for him. This is demonstrated in particular by

"his radical reorganizing of the moral structure of the French Vulgate cycle, to turn Arthur's fall

from being the result of the inadequacy of earthly knighthood when measured by divine

standards, to being caused by failure in social and political terms" (Cooper, "Romance after

1400" 715). Instead of a lack of piety or Christian morals, as demonstrated by the failure of the

Grail Quest in the *Queste del Saint Graal,* in Malory's text failures of personal relationships and

conflicting loyalties are the root causes of the destruction, something hinted at but not fully developed in one of his sources, the Stanzaic *Morte Arthur*. Conflicts date back further than the last two books: Helen Cooper argues that "Malory…locates the cracks that lead to the break-up of Arthur's fellowship within his great exposition of chivalry in the *Tristram*," where "jealousies, false sense of honour, [and] hatred" win out over knightly qualities, particularly as evident in the murder of Lamorak ("The Book of Sir Tristram" 185); Barbara Nolan sees hints of trouble in Book III, which "set[s] two kinds of brotherhood—chivalric and biological—in competition with each other" (167); and Stephen Knight notes that the earliest hints of the internal strife that will eventually bring down the Round Table appear in the very first book (114-5).

In the very last section divisions of loyalties become most stark, and one can best see their consequences. The loyalties owed are complex. Launcelot owes loyalty to the king, as his retainer, and has been handsomely rewarded for that loyalty.[274] He also bears a special obligation to the queen, his true love. In particular, since the queen is in trouble on his account in the final book, all the knights, including Gawain, understand that Launcelot is duty-bound to rescue her: "'For full well wyst I,' sayde sir Gawayne, 'that sir Launcelot wolde rescow her, othis ellis he wolde dye in that fylde; and to say the trouth he were nat of worshyp but if he had rescowed the quene, insomuch as she shulde have be brente for his sake. And as in that…he hath done but knyghtly, and as I wolde have done myselff and I had stonde in lyke case'" (XX.9,

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[274] Beverly Kennedy notes the many ways Arthur strives to keep the loyalty of the nobility: "He personally confers the order of knighthood upon most of his knights. He honours the best of them with membership in the elite fellowship of the Round Table, which constitutes the core of his political power, and rewards them further with rich gifts of money and lands. Finally, like both the Lancastrian and the Yorkist kings of England, Arthur makes his knights swear a peace-keeping oath and threatens them with the loss of his 'lordship' and their 'worship' if they should fail to keep it" (28).

Vinaver 1184). As a king in his own right, Lancelot also has a special responsibility to his own

men, particularly his kinsmen.[275]

Gawain is bound by loyalty to Arthur on the basis of lordship, kingship, and kinship, as

he stresses when pleading for support of his pursuit of revenge: "'My kynge, my lorde, and myne

uncle,' seyde Sir Gawayne, 'wyte you well, now I shall make you a promyse whych I shall holde

by my knyghthode, that frome thys day forewarde I shall never fayle sir Launcelot untyll that

one of us have slayne that othir. And therefore I requyre you, my lorde and kynge, dresse you

unto the warres, for wyte you well, I woll be revenged uppon sir Launcelot; and therefore, as ye

woll have my servyse and my love, now haste you thereto and assay youre frendis'" (XX.10,

Vinaver 1186). Similarly, he owes loyalty to his king and uncle's wife, Guinevere, and for that

reason refuses to speak against her, even in the midst of his rage.[276] He bears a familial

obligation to his brothers, although Aggrevayne and Mordred apparently forfeit his loyalty when

they disregard his advice and Aggrevayne is killed trying to entrap Launcelot and Guinevere out

of "prevy hate" rather than true loyalty. Gaheris and Gareth, however, caught up in their own

conflicting loyalty between the king and Launcelot—obliged to attend the burning of the queen

at the behest of Arthur, but refusing to bear arms out of consideration for Launcelot—retain

Gawain's deepest familial loyalty and their accidental deaths inspire his rage against Launcelot.

In theory, all the knights owe each other loyalty based on their Round Table fellowship,

though in practice the degree of loyalty to a fellow knight varies. The knights quickly break into

factions in the final books, often based on kin. Launcelot's family and followers stick with him

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[275] Malory spends considerable space establishing Lancelot as a king in his own right, with his own followers, and his own lands to bestow to retain those followers—see pages 1204-5, where Lancelot generously bestows his goods on his kin and men.

[276] See, for example, XX.11, page 1189: "'As for my lady the quene, wyte thou well, I woll never say her shame.'"

and follow him back to France (where he dutifully pays for their maintenance); Gawain's

brothers have frequently banded together (with the exception of Gareth), as they did for the

murder of Lamorak, and are often portrayed as jealous of other Round Table knights.[277] On the

other hand, certain knights bear extra special loyalty to their fellow knights. Gareth and

Launcelot share a bond of loyalty based on the fact that Launcelot knighted Gareth. Tristram and

Launcelot are connected because they are the two best knights and perhaps because they are

parallel in other ways too, such as the love they bear for their queens. As the ending nears, these

loyalties are tested and everyone must choose sides.[278]

No one is more alert to the consequences of divided loyalties than King Arthur, who is

forced to choose between his followers but seems oddly unaware of his ability to avoid the

situation altogether. He says "And now hit ys fallen so…that I may nat with my worshyp but my

quene muste suffir dethe" (XX.7, Vinaver 1174), yet Gawain councils restraint and patience—

therefore it is by no means necessary that Arthur have Guinevere executed. In following his

own, in this case apparently misguided, sense of duty and ignoring the good council of Sir

Gawain, Arthur helps precipitate the clashes of loyalties. As those clashes occur, he laments their

seemingly inevitable consequences. When Mordred reports having found Launcelot with the

queen, Arthur laments: "me sore repentith that ever sir Launcelot sholde be ayenste me, for now

I am sure the noble felyshyp of the Rounde Table ys brokyn for ever" (XX.7, Vinaver 1174).

[277] Certainly the rivalry between the knights of Orkney and the knights of France is not new. For example, Dynadan comments on it in "The Book of Sir Tristram de Lyones": "for sir Gawayne and his bretherne, excepte you, Sir Gareth, hatyth all good knyghtes of the Rounde Table for the moste party. For well I wote, <as> they myght, prevayly they hate my lorde sir Launcelot and all his kyn, and grete pryvay dispyte they have at him. And sertaynly that is my lorde sir Launcelot well ware of, and that causyth hym the more to have the good knyghtes of his kynne aboute him" (XX.58, Vinaver 700).

[278] Andrew Lynch address the conflict between personal loyalties and those owed to a lord in "Malory's *Morte Darthur* and History"; see pages 299-301 especially. He finds that Malory tends to reward personal loyalty and forgive lapses in political loyalty, no doubt influenced by his personal experience. Malory also distinguishes between knights like Mordred and Aggravain who act out of malice and those like Lancelot and Gawain who are drawn into conflict.

When Launcelot's hand is forced by the impending execution of the queen and he must betray

his loyalty to Arthur and (accidentally) Gareth, the King again, upon hearing the news of the

deaths of Gareth and Gaherys, mourns, "Alas, that ever I bare crowne uppon my hede! For now

have I loste the fayryst felyshyp of noble knyghts that ever hylde Crystyn kynge togydirs. Alas,

my good knyghtes be slayne and gone away fro me, that now within thys two dayes I have loste

nygh fourty knyghtes and also the noble felyshyp of sir Launcelot and hys blood, for now I may

nevermore holde hem togydirs with my worshyp. Now, alas, that ever thys warre began!" (XX.9,

Vinaver 1183). He anticipates Gawain's rage and knows before it happens that Gawain will not

rest without revenge, occasioning perhaps the most famous lament of all: "my harte was never so

hevy as hit ys now. And much more I am soryar for my good knyghtes losse than for the losse of

my fayre quene; for quenys I myght have inow, but such a felyship of good knyghtes shall never

be togydirs in no company" (XX.9, Vinaver 1183-4). Even watching his new enemy, Launcelot,

struggle with his divided loyalties inspires wailing from the king. Launcelot spends the battle at

Joyous Guard trying to protect King Arthur and as many of the king's men as he can ("and ever

sir Launcelot ded what he myght to save the people on kynge Arthurs party" XX.13, Vinaver

1192), despite the fact that they are the enemy and are doing their utmost to kill Launcelot and

his men. Launcelot's divided loyalty moves Arthur to tears and to lament once more "Alas, alas,

that [ever] yet thys warre began!" (XX.13, Vinaver 1192).

And yet, what is perhaps most notable about these examples, and the ending of the *Morte*

Darthur generally, is the honor Malory emphasizes in these knights' behavior. They may be in

impossible situations, forced to choose between conflicting loyalties; the choices they make may

be doomed to end their fellowship and get most of them killed; and yet the narrator and the

characters themselves frequently comment on the rightness of their actions. Launcelot's only

honorable option is to rescue the queen, as Gawain understands. The king is honor-bound to

support his nephew in his quest for revenge. Gawain's thirst for revenge, though extreme and

misguided, is rooted in an honorable desire for justice for the deaths of his innocent brothers.[279]

Gareth and Gaherys, whose attempt to remain loyal to both the king and Launcelot—by

attending the execution of the queen at the king's behest, but refusing to be armed—gets them

killed, become martyrs to the divided loyalty endemic to Arthur's court and Malory's fifteenth-

century England. "The specific narrative motives for [the feuds that lead to the end of the Round

Table] may have more to do with romance (the love of Morgawse and Lamorak, the widespread

envy of Lancelot's prowess) than did the political divisions that led to the Wars of the Roses, but

they are emphatically not implausible or marvelous; and the effects of private quarrels

amalgamating to split the kingdom into warring interest groups, are identical" (Cooper,

"Romance after 1400" 716).

So, while putting aside direct parallels with the Wars of the Roses, we can see that

Malory molds the story of the death of Arthur into something his audience could very much

relate to. Furthermore, Malory demonstrates for that audience how a knight can maintain his

honor even in failure—as Malory himself, we can imagine, may have hoped to do. According to

Stephen Knight, "Gawain, Guinevere and Launcelot all come to recognize their errors, yet they

are not left in guilt and moral disarray. Their confessions are as honourable as their other actions,

and throughout the last tale there are clear signs that Malory deliberately makes Launcelot and

Guinevere particularly noble even as they are shown to be prime causes of disaster" (144). The

nostalgia in *Le Morte Darthur*, particularly in the final books, then, is complex. Characters and

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[279] Kennedy argues that what sets the three major figures of the last book against one another is their adherence to incompatible types of knighthood (and therefore incompatible understandings of honor), based on the typology of knighthood she outlines in her book, *Knighthood in Morte Darthur*: each (Gawain, Arthur, and Launcelot) "acts strictly in accordance with his own [different] knightly code of ethics, and the consequences are…disastrous" (331).

audience long together for a time when loyalties did not conflict and when knights could be in perfect fellowship. However, the *Morte* seems to recognize that real, lasting fellowship is more fantastical than a magic ring or a giant or two. A truly great knight must strive to be honorable in whatever situation he finds himself, even if circumstances pit him against his former friends. Arthur and his knights continue to inspire nostalgia because they are particularly good examples of this; readers can long to imitate them as well as see the applicability to their own day.

By altering the values of the text from his sources and appealing more directly to the sensibilities of his contemporaries, Malory provides his knightly English audience with both the blueprint and the historical precedent for their chivalric aspirations. He deals head-on with the tragic consequences of conflicting loyalties, but demonstrates how knights can rise above their tragic circumstances and impossible situations to remain good knights. Finally, by presenting that institution as both ancient and in need of revival, he invites longing for the past and an aching desire to recreate it—in short, nostalgia.

IV. Malory's Manipulation of Time

The melancholy inherent to nostalgia stems from the knowledge that the past one longs for feels very distant. The nostalgic has difficulty coming to terms with the fact that the past is irrecoverable: it is over and done with and can not be recaptured except imaginatively—though the fact that it cannot be recovered does not stop the nostalgic from attempting to revisit or relive it, inevitably rosying it up in the process. This is the paradox of nostalgia. Sir Thomas Malory succeeds in heightening the nostalgia of *Le Morte Darthur* in the way he manipulates time and the audience's impression of the past. In doing so he gives them instances of knightly living and hope for establishing a sense of true knighthood in their own turbulent times. Perhaps he even

finds meaning for and peace with his own imprisonment, though to suggest that is to indulge in a bit of romance and nostalgia.

By choosing to write a comprehensive version of the Arthurian legend suited to his fifteenth century courtly (specifically knightly) audience, Malory evokes the long-ago setting that is built into the legend. As we saw in chapter three with the French romances, the Arthurian court can be itself a sort of short-hand for the distant past, or even the "once upon a time" of fairy tales. Arthurian time has its own distinct connotations irrespective of Malory but to which Malory contributes simply by writing an Arthurian tale.

On one hand the Arthurian court setting calls to mind the Golden Age of Britain that Malory and his readers considered historical reality, when a good and powerful king conquered his enemies and expanded his territory and when knights did great deeds of arms and gallantry. In fact, Caxton rehearses some of the evidence in favor of Arthur's historical reality in his prologue, including physical evidence (such as Arthur's tomb and Gawain's skull), local tradition, and evidence from histories.[280] Malory's style is in some ways more appropriate to history than romance. For one, he writes in prose, a medium more associated with chronicle than romance.[281] He tends to downplay fantastical or miraculous elements in favor of the more

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[280] Caxton lists the "many evydences" of Arthur's existence available at the time: "Fyrst ye may see his sepulture in the monasterye of Glastyngburye. And also in the Polycronycon…[which describes] where his body was buryed and after founden and translated into the sayd monasterye. Ye shal se also in th'ystory of Bochas, in his book *De Casu Principum*, parte of his noble actes and also of his falle; also Galfrydus, in his Brutysshe book"—that is, Geoffrey's *Historia regum Britanniae*—"recounteth his lyf. And in dyvers places of Englond many remembraunces ben yet of hym and shall remayne perpetuelly, and also of his knyghtes: fyrst in the abbey of Westmestre, at Saynt Edwardes shrine, remayneth the prynte of his seal in reed waxe, closed in beryll, in whych is wryton, *Patricius Arthurus Britannie Gallie Germanie Dacie Imperator*; item, in the castel of Dover ye may see Gauwayns skulle and Cradoks mantel; at Wynchester, the Rounde Table; in other places Launcelottes swerde and many other thynges" (cxliv).

[281] Though this is a generalization: certainly prose romances existed (including some of Malory's sources), as did verse chronicles. Still, prose suggests the tradition of history going back to Geoffrey of Monmouth and even further back to the great ancient historians. Cooper notes the "associations [of prose] with historiography" ("Romance after 1400" 691), while Carol M. Meale points out, "There was little tradition of composing English prose romance prior to [Malory's] period of activity" (13).

mundane and realistic.[282] Geography is more accurate than in most versions of Arthur's life.[283]

Even the enormous cast of named characters (though sometimes Malory seems to mix them up)

lends an air of realism and historicity.

But in addition to the historical past evoked, hundreds of years of Arthurian romance had

by Malory's time inextricably connected the Arthurian setting with a less historical sense of the

past—a fairy tale time full of magic and adventure and somewhat fuzzier on such specifics as

geography and chronology. While it is possible that medieval people were more apt to accept

magical elements as not incompatible with history,[284] the prevalence of magical rings,

sorceresses, and mysterious customs in romances and their (usual) absence from histories, whose

mystical elements tend to be confined to things like prophesy, suggests an altogether different

sense of past-ness. This past is practically another world, with other rules and possibilities.

Malory engages both senses of the past—historical and romantic—in his version of the Arthurian

court, complicating both in their interrelationship and manipulating his audience's sense of

Arthurian times in order to heighten their nostalgia for them.

Malory relies on a variety of strategies to accomplish this that will be investigated here.

Some of these are major, structural devices. For example, he manipulates the timeline of the

Arthurian mythos to fit his grander narrative, which, when coupled with the backward-looking

stance of the final books, heightens the pathos of the ending. He also relies heavily on

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[282] See, for example, Cooper, "Romance before 1400": The stanzaic *Morte Arthur*, among others, "distance their subject matter from fantasy and stress instead the qualities in romance that are possible, even potentially factual; the same concern is apparent in Malory's prose treatment of Arthurian material too, where again he shifts the style towards chronicle" (702).

[283] See George R. Stewart, Jr., "English Geography in Malory's 'Morte D'Arthur'": "although one may admit that the geography is certainly hazy [in the *Morte Darthur*], nevertheless it is frequently more clearly defined than that of its sources" (204).

[284] See John Finlayson, "The Marvellous in Middle English Romance," especially page 374.

anticipation, especially prophecy and foreshadowing and especially in the early books. This

forward-looking perspective provides a counterpoint to the recapitulation and instances of

reflection in the final books. In between, in the middle books of Launcelot, Gareth, and

Tristram, there is a certain looseness of chronology as Malory plays with time. The sequence of

events is often unclear: dead knights return to fight another day, adventures overlap, and "time

can shrink or expand by as much as a generation according to the requirements of the story"

(Cooper, "The Book of Sir Tristram" 187, n. 9). Other devices are more localized, but

nevertheless contribute to the overall sense of Malory's interest in and manipulation of time. The

occasional direct addresses to the audience already discussed, particularly those that directly

contrast "nowadayes" with practices and manners "in those dayes," are examples.

A major change that Malory makes to the Arthurian timeline as established by Geoffrey

of Monmouth is to divorce the Roman campaign from the tragic ending.[285] In his principal

source for the war with Rome, the Alliterative *Morte Arthure*, this campaign is directly

connected to the destruction of the Arthurian court: Mordred is left in charge (and left to make

mischief) in England when Arthur leaves to fight Lucius; Arthur's failure to be satisfied with the

routing of Lucius as well as his insistence on subduing the entire countryside contribute to the

destruction of his court and his ultimate demise, if for no other reason than that they make him

vulnerable to the turn of Fortune's Wheel. His disconnection of the Roman campaign from the

ending shows that Malory is rethinking his material, its chronology, including the relationship of

events in the narrative, and the effect he wants particular episodes to have on his audience. In the

case of the Roman war, rather than risk portraying Arthur as dangerously proud and headed for a

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[285] Malory may be following the *Vulgate Cycle* in this chronology. The prose *Merlin* also places the Roman War
after the wars in England and when Arthur is a young man and ends with Arthur victorious. See William Matthews,
"A Question of Texts" in *The Malory Debate,* page 74.

fall, it presents him as a powerful leader, capable both in battle and in setting up strong and fair administration of his newly acquired territories—in short, worthy of the devotion he later receives from his knights when he no longer does much of note. The campaign against Lucius as presented in the *Morte Darthur* is therefore a high point in Arthur's reign: it establishes the peace that allows for all the adventures of the following books without the taint of the fall following immediately after. It shows the knights in their role as warriors and defenders of the kingdom, and it allows them to go on to show their prowess as knights of romance—that is, chivalrous followers of adventure.

The Roman campaign is in the historical/chronicle or even epic mode.[286] It deals primarily with politics and the movements of armies. Messengers come from Rome to challenge Arthur's authority; the king consults with his councilors; he gathers his liegemen and travels to the continent; battles ensue. Although it is clearly incredible to claim that Arthur ruled the Roman Empire when that could easily be refuted by Roman histories, still the sense of the past presented is historical. True, there is an extended episode of giant-fighting, which strikes the modern reader as pure fantasy, but even here, though Malory does not omit the episode, he tones it down and shortens it considerably from his source text, the Alliterative *Morte Arthure*.[287] Also, it is worth pointing out that the episode, complete with giants and cannibalism, dates back to Geoffrey's *Historia regum Britanniae*, which, unlike the *Morte Darthur*, does actually claim to be a history. Indeed, battles against giants have no less a pedigree than the Bible, where David defeats Goliath.

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[286] See Elizabeth Archibald, "Beginnings: *The Tale of King Arthur* and *King Arthur and the Emperor Lucius*." History and epic have in common an interest in historical wars and the public sphere of politics.

[287] In particular he trims considerably the description of the fiend from the Alliterative *Morte Arthure*, which compares him to all manner of beasts. Malory likens him to a greyhound, but forgoes the other animal similes in favor of the reporting of action.

The Roman campaign also allows Arthur some uncomplicated and heroic victories.

Unlike in Geoffrey's history, in Malory Arthur does not have such an easy time subduing his

realm. The first several books detail the almost continual need for the king to assert his might.

His initial, more magical demonstration of worthiness and true kingship, pulling the sword out of

the stone, must be repeated multiple times—at Candelmass, Christmas, Easter, and Pentecost—

and still does not satisfy the barons. In fact, in a rare depiction of people of other rank than the

highest, it is the commoners who finally insist that the nobles quit dithering and allow Arthur to

be crowned:

> And at the feste of Pentecost alle maner of men assayed to pulle at
> the swerde that wold assay; but none myghte prevaille but Arthur,
> and pulled it oute afore all the lordes and *comyns* that were there.
> *Wherfore alle the comyns cryed at ones,*
>
>   'We wille have Arthur unto our kyng! We wille put hym no
> more in delay, for we all see that it is Goddes wille that he shalle
> be our kynge, and who that holdeth ageynst it, we wille slee hym.'
> And therwithal they knelyd at ones, *both ryche and poure,* and
> cryed Arthur mercy bycause they had delayed hym so longe.
> (emphasis added, I.7, Vinaver 16)

With that, Arthur is finally crowned king, and he sets about righting injustices in the kingdom.

But it is hardly the end of the matter. At his very first formal court Arthur calls together his

knights and the lesser kings who owe him homage (King Lot of Orkeney, King Uryens of Gore,

King Nayntres of Garloth, and King Carados are specifically named) to give them gifts, as a

good king should. "But the kynges wold none receyve, but rebuked the messagers shamefully

and said they had no joye to receyve no yeftes of a berdles boye that was come of lowe blood,

and sente hym word they wold none of his yeftes, but that they were come to gyve hym yeftes

with hard swerdys betwixt the neck and the sholders" (I.8, Vinaver 17). Arthur must then subdue

these kings in hard battle. Indeed, it is such a difficult contest that he requires the assistance of

Bors, King of Gaul, and Ban, King of Benwick and father of Launcelot, to help him defeat the rebel kings. There is a great deal of slaughter, and at one point Arthur has to be reined in from his battle blood lust by Merlin (I.17, Vinaver 36). Lot continues to make trouble until he is finally killed in battle by Pellinor in Book II. But even this is not the end of fighting in England. In Book IV, Arthur must face invaders, the Kings of Denmark, Ireland, the Vale, Sirleyse, and the Ile of Longtaynse. "'Alas!' seyde Arthure, 'yet had I never reste one monethe syne I was kyng crowned of this londe'" (IV.2, Vinaver 127). There is also more intrigue than in Geoffrey, with Lot's wife appearing in Arthur's court as a spy and conceiving Mordred with Arthur, her unwitting brother, an act that will, of course, have great consequences later. Arthur's early reign is anything but easy and peaceful. In contrast, in the *Historia regum Britanniae* it takes just a few pages for Arthur to achieve peace in Britain, subduing the Saxons, Scots, Picts, and Irish in quick succession and "restor[ing] the whole country to its earlier dignity" (ix.9),[288] before turning to conquest.

All of these battles allow Arthur to demonstrate his prowess and fitness to rule – he is king "by adventure and by grace" (III.2, Vinaver 97). But fighting in his own land and slaughtering the men who ultimately owe him allegiance can also be problematic. Merlin perhaps recognizes this danger when he counsels Arthur to take it easy in his battle against the eleven kings in Book I (I.17, Vinaver 36). Certainly Malory stresses again and again the "pité" of the battle between Arthur and the eleven and the wasteful deaths of all the good knights. Perhaps King Ban best identifies the crux of the issue: he says their opponents "ar the beste fyghtynge men and knyghtes of moste prouesse that ever y saw other herde off speke. And tho

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[288] "totius patrie statum in pristinam dignitatem reduxisset" (62r.152). English translation of the *Historia regum Britanniae* is from Lewis Thorpe's *History of the Kings of Britain.* Latin text is taken from Neil Wright's edition of the Bern, Burgerbibliothek MS. 568.

eleven kyngis ar men of grete worship; and if they were longyng to you, there were no kynge undir hevyn that had suche eleven kyngis nother off such worship'" (I.16, Vinaver 34-5).

The Roman campaign, in contrast, allows for some uncomplicated victories. We see Arthur as a king and warrior in his prime, at the height of his prowess. From the start Arthur is his most kingly: he is holding court when the advisors arrive. He treats them respectfully and calls a council, showing both hospitality and wisdom. As in other versions, the messengers are so impressed that they praise Arthur's nobility to Lucius. Lucius is so worried about defeating Arthur that he makes pacts with giants and Saracens to fight against him. When the battle begins, Arthur is in the midst of things: "he russhed here and there thorow the thychyst prees more than thirty times" (V.8 Vinaver 222) and ultimately kills Lucius himself. Thereafter he sets about restoring peace and order in France (he "sette lawys in that londe that dured longe aftir" and "tirraungtys destroyed" V.9, Vinaver 227). In contrast to his source for this book, the Alliterative *Morte Arthure,* in the scenes following the victory over Lucius, Malory downplays his rapaciousness and the violence of his conquest of France and Italy, including, for example, the siege of Metz. Though he is a conqueror, the emphasis in Malory is not on the violence of his campaign, but its justness: everywhere he goes he appoints good governors and establishes good laws. In fact, almost the last word on Rome concerns the orderly, kingly improvements Arthur has brought: he "leffte good governaunce in that noble cité and all the contrays of Rome for to warde and to kepe" (V, Vinaver 246).

In the course of these early books Arthur has proven himself as a king in every possible way: his pulling the sword from the stone proves he is God's choice; his birth proves he is of royal blood; his character—his generosity, prowess, mercy, wisdom, justness, and ability to establish and keep order—proves he is deserving of kingship. Finally his conquests abroad, by

which he continues to demonstrate these traits while also making Britain the greatest land in Europe, establish him as a truly great and legendary king, one who attracts the best knights in the word to his service; one who, having established peace in his realm and beyond, can now enjoy the delights of his court: hunts, jousts, adventures, and feasts.

The considerable time Malory spends on Arthur's glory days and building up the portrait of the battle-tested king in the first books of the *Morte Darthur* contrasts sharply with the portrayal of Arthur later and serves to heighten the pathos of the final books. By the time we arrive at the climax of the story in the last book it has been a long time since Arthur has played a central role. In the middle books Arthur is the classic ceremonial king of romance. He rarely participates in adventures; rather, his court is the starting and end point and he and his queen are the ones who preside over tournaments, hear accounts of adventures after they are complete, and receive defeated knights. Arthur also becomes more emotional as the tale goes on. Never one to shy away from tears—crying does not appear to be unmanly in medieval romances, and knights in the *Morte* frequently weep—Arthur's role as head of court narrows to mostly showing emotions and only occasionally being involved in the action.

This is perhaps why he appears so ineffectual when called on to play an active role once again in the final books. He is incapable of defending his queen, either from the (false) charges of treason in the incident of the poisoned apple or from the charges of adultery with Launcelot. Even though these last are true, Arthur hardly seems to relish executing his queen, yet feels beholden to do so because "the law was such in tho dayes" (XX.7, Vinaver 1174), even though even Gawain advises him to "nat to be over hasty" (XX.7, Vinaver 1174). Arthur claims powerlessness, but this advice from Gawain reminds us that he could act if he wanted to.   For this reason Gawain feels justified in disobeying Arthur's order to "Make you redy…in youre

beste armour…to brynge my quene to the fyre and there to have her jougement" (XX.8, Vinaver 1176). Gawain, ever assertive and bold, in stark contrast to Arthur in this final book, says, "'Nay, my moste noble kynge,…that woll I never do, for wyte you well I woll never be in that place where so noble a quene as ys my lady Dame Gwenyver shall take such a shamefull ende. For wyte you well…my harte woll nat serve me for to se her dye, and hit shall never be seyde that ever I was of youre counceyle for her deth'" (XX.8, Vinaver 1176). Arthur is cowed by Gawain, and it will not be the last time. Throughout the quarrel with Launcelot Arthur is unable to temper Gawain's rage or make him see the need for a peaceful compromise. Indeed, the fact that Arthur is so willing to compromise with Launcelot, though understandable, almost makes our impression of him at this point worse: having committed to his nephew's cause and embarked on this disastrous war, he does not even have the spine at this point to stick to it and would happily make peace.[289]

Finally, in stark contrast to his establishment of good governors in Italy and France following the war with Lucius, it is hard to see how Arthur could have made a worse choice than Mordred for regent in his absence. Has he forgotten Merlin's prophesy, that the child conceived with his sister "shall destroy [him] and all the knyghtes of [his] realme" (I.20, Vinaver 44)? Has he forgotten having all the boys born at the same time of the year murdered in a futile attempt to avoid this prophesy? Has he forgotten Mordred's history of bad behavior, from his part in the murder of Lamorek to his stirring up of trouble between Arthur and Launcelot? Just a few pages prior to leaving his kingdom in Mordred's decidedly incapable hands Arthur has cursed him for his role in the current trouble (XX.9, Vinaver 1184). And yet, "bycause sir Mordred was kynge

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[289] Gawain feels the same way and uses this point to shame his uncle into continuing his quarrel: when Launcelot sues for peace and all of Arthur's councilors support it, Gawain taunts, "My lorde, myne uncle, what woll ye do? Woll ye now turne agayne, now ye ar paste thys farre upon youre journey? All the worlde woll speke of you vylany and shame" (XX.19, Vinaver 1213).

Arthurs son, he gaff hym the rule off hys londe and off hys wyff" (XX.19, Vinaver 1211). The plot—and tradition—demand it, of course, but it is hard to miss the contrast with King Arthur in his heyday—when the young king knew better than to leave traitors in charge when he was away and chose, instead, "sir Baudwen of Bretayne, an auncient and an honorable knyght, for to counceyle and comforte; sir Cadore son of Cornuayle, that was at the tyme called sir Constantyne, that aftir was kynge aftir Arthurs dayes" (V.3, Vinaver 195)—both much more worthy of the task.

Arthur's glory is tarnished somewhat: he is an older man; his best days are now behind him; the great fellowship, which was his highest achievement and his legacy, is breaking apart. Is it any wonder he becomes nostalgic? Arthur's frequent lamentations in the final book for the break up of his fellowship are the yearnings of a nostalgic who longs for the irretrievable past even while acknowledging its loss. While Arthur has many such laments in the last book alone,[290] the one most often quoted shows the king in the throes of a painful bout of nostalgia, complete with melancholic longing for the past and anger and disappointment about the present. Only part of Arthur's mourning is typically quoted, but this one is worth looking at in full for the way it sets the present against the past:

> 'Well,' seyde Arthure, 'the deth of [Gaherys and Gareth] woll
> cause the grettist mortall warre that ever was, for I am sure that
> whan sir Gawayne knowyth hereoff that Sir Gareth ys slayne, I
> shall never have reste of hym tyll I have destroyed Sir
> Launcelottys kynne and hymselff bothe, othir ellis he to destroy
> me. And therefore…whyte you well, my harte was never so hevy
> as hit ys now. And much more I am soryar for my good kyghtes
> losse than for the losse of my fayre quene; for quenys I myght have
> inow, but such a felyship of good knyghtes shall never be togydirs
> in no company. And now I dare sey…there was never Crystyn
> kynge that ever hyld such a felyshyp togydyrs. And alas, that ever

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[290] Laments appear on pages 1174, 1183, 1184, 1192, and 1235.

Sir Launcelot and I shulde be at debate! A, Aggravayne,
Aggrevayne…Jesu forgyff hit thy soule, for thyne evyll wyll that
thou haddist and sir Mordred, thy brothir, unto Sir Launcelot hath
caused all this sorow.'

And ever amonge thes complayntes the Kynge wepte and
sowned. (XX.9, Vinaver 1184)

The past was a time of fellowship, when great knights worked together, and when Arthur's role

in assembling that fellowship made him the greatest Christian king. The present is a time of

betrayal, internecine war, and broken fellowship.

The king is not the only one thinking about the past and its contrast with the present as

the Round Table breaks apart. The knights also look back over their heyday, remembering—and

reminding the audience—of their former glory; indulging, that is, in nostalgia. Launcelot takes a

trip down memory lane, reminding Gawain and Arthur of the ways he has proven useful in the

past, and in the process recalling some of the glorious adventures of the Round Table at its prime

(XX.15, Vinaver 1198).   He and his knights are set grieving when they think about the contrast

of those glory days with the present. Launcelot laments having to leave; the knights lament the

change sure to come to Camelot in his absence: "in thys realme [wyll be now no quyete], but

ever debate and stryff, now the felyshyp of the Rounde Table ys brokyn. For by the noble

felyshyp of the Rounde Table was Kynge Arthur upborne, and by their nobeles the kynge and all

the realme was ever in quyet and reste" (XX.18, Vinaver 1203-3).

Arthur does have one last burst of glorious martial activity in the final war against

Mordred. As predicted by Merlin, Arthur's end is glorious—and certainly dramatic. He acquits

himself well in the battle: "ever kynge Arthure rode thorowoute the batayle of sir Mordred many

tymys and ded full nobely, as a noble kynge shulde do, and at all tymys he faynted never"

(XXI.4, Vinaver 1236), though the fact that the narrator praises Arthur for not fainting seems a

testament to how low our expectations of his prowess have fallen. The narration of the battle

itself is startlingly short: just a single paragraph to kill off two huge armies in their entirety,

excepting only Mordred, Arthur, Lucan, and Bedevere. In the wake of the battle comes the true

climax of the tale: Arthur spots Mordred across the field and finally regains his decisiveness.

Although his remaining knights beg him not to, although it is against the warnings of the vision

of Gawain who has been sent by God himself to warn Arthur, although it almost certainly means

his own death, Arthur makes his decision—"Now tyde me dethe, tyde me lyff…now I se hym

yonder alone, he shall never ascape myne hondes"—he charges and kills the traitor Mordred. It

is misguided, maybe, but it is also bold and glorious, and reminiscent of the Arthur of the early

books. It is tragic that is takes the deaths of all his men to finally spur Arthur to action.

The book's end is elegiac, which in its wistful mourning is close kin to nostalgic.

Launcelot's death and burial is almost the last thing to occur, including a eulogy for Launcelot

by his brother Ector.[291] Ector's speech recoups Launcelot and reminds us of what made him

great; reminds us that he was the epitome of chivalrous knighthood:

> 'A, Launcelot!' he sayd, 'thou were hede of al Crysten kyghtes!
> And now I dare say… that thou were never matched of erthely
> knyghtes hande. And thou were the curtest [most courteous]
> knight that ever bare shelde! And thou were the truest frende to thy
> lovar that ever bestrade hors, and thou were the trewest lover, of a
> synful man, that ever loved woman, and thou were the kyndest
> man that ever strake wyth swerde. And thou were the godelyest
> persone that ever cam emonge prees of knyghtes; and thou was the
> mekest man and the jentyllest that ever ete in halle emonge ladyes,
> and thou were the sternest knyght to thy mortal foo that ever put
> spere in the reeste.'

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[291] The very last thing Malory covers is the fates of the remaining knights, some of whom return home and others of whom—Bors, Ector, Blamour, and Bleoberis—go on Crusade and eventually die in the Holy Land. Ever the thorough chronicler, he must tell us the fate of every single member of the Round Table.

> Than there was wepyng and dolour out of mesure. (XXI.13,
> Vinaver 1259)

As a description of ideal chivalric knighthood, one could do worse than Ector's eulogy for

Launcelot: Christian, courteous, true friend and lover, kind, good, meek and gentle at court, but

stern in battle. With the passing of Sir Launcelot and all the knights of the Round Table, ideal

knighthood has become a feature of the past, distant and in need of revival.

But Malory does not simply save the nostalgia and longing for the final books; there is an

awareness of the end even in the moments of Arthur's greatest triumph. Whether or not we think

of the *Morte* as one work or many, Malory has a clear sense of the whole and is purposeful in the

way he relates the beginning to the end. The forward-looking stance of the early books

complements the backward-looking stance of the later ones: both serve to underscore the gulf

between Arthur's time and that of the readers and remind them that that world is irrevocably

gone. Most of the prophesies and foreshadowings occur before the soothsayer Merlin is locked

in stone in the beginning of Book IV, since he is most often the one to make these prophecies

(though prophecies and foreshadowing also come in other forms, such as dreams or in the voice

of the narrator). Many of these prophecies are warnings, and foretell the tragic ending in store

for Arthur and the Round Table. For example, Merlin warns that the son Arthur has begotten on

his sister "shall destroy you and all the knyghtes of youre realme," though with the small

consolation that even though Arthur will be punished for his "fowle dedis" nevertheless he will

"dey a worshipfull dethe" (I.20, Vinaver 44). But others suggest the glories in store for the

Round Table, as when Merlin sets up many of the adventures knights will later undertake (II.19,

Vinaver 91), making a bed that drives men mad for Launcelot to destroy, planting a sword for

Launcelot, leaving Balyn's scabbard and sword for Galahad to find. Still others are more

ambiguous, such as those referring to the Sankgreall, which can include the tragedy of the Dolorous Stroke, but also the glory of the quest for the Holy Grail.

These tendencies, to look forward and backward, give readers a sense of the whole story, no matter which book they are reading. Whether or not one agrees with Eugène Vinaver and his followers about these being a collection of works, there's no denying that there is a sense of the completeness of the life of Arthur and the history of the Round Table, no matter which part one is reading. That sense of wholeness, of unity, contributes to the overall feeling of longing and nostalgia: the audience is frequently reminded of both the zenith and the nadir of the Round Table, keeping alive admiration for the knights and their great deeds, as well as sorrow that these knights' time of glory has ended, and so tragically.

Thus far I have mostly been drawing from the very beginning and very end of the *Morte Darthur*, but in between the martial beginning and the well-known ending are hundreds and hundreds of pages of adventures. Malory's text is unwieldy—whether one considers it separate romances or a more unified single work, it is nothing short of overwhelming. The adventures are intricate, repetitive, and meandering, so much so that critics are quick to forgive what seem to be occasional slip-ups on Malory's part. And in a work of a thousand pages written in prison, mistakes do seem practically inevitable.[292] Some scholars have gone to great lengths to explain slip-ups, like the fact that Tristram's birth is described in Book V, but he has already appeared as a full-fledged knight in Book II, or that Carados is killed in Book V even though he already died

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[292] For a detailed overview (including a list) of the inconsistencies in the *Morte Darthur* see Ellyn Olefsky's "Chronology, Factual Consistency, and the Problem of Unity in Malory."

in Book III, by proposing alternate timelines or different orders for the books or suggesting that particular books take place concurrently.[293]

But if we consider the interest in time and chronology I have demonstrated that Malory displays, we need not take contradictions like these as mistakes; nor do we need to bend over backwards to work out a coherent timeline for the central books. There is a present-ness, an immediacy to the adventures that make up the middle part of the *Morte*—the tales of Launcelot, Gareth, and Tristram. These books are the least concerned with foreshadowing or with reflection on the past.[294] They are also the most typically romance-like, following the tropes of chivalric literature: fair unknowns, *pas d'armes*, lack of motivation for knights' actions. They are all about worship and the winning of it in the here-and-now.[295]

That the winning of worship is the central concern of the middle books does not mean that the knights are the picture of perfection: knights fail and fight and the cracks in the Round Table that will eventually cause it to split apart are clearly evident in some episodes. The murder of Sir Lamorak by the brothers from Orkney is the obvious example, but there are others. Still, the middle portion of the *Morte* is when chivalric knighthood as a lived experience is thoroughly explored. I am not talking about realism exactly: magical and improbable things occur. Nor am I

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[293] For one such complex attempt to erase inconsistencies by reordering the text, see Charles Moorman, *The Book of Kyng Arthur: The Unity of Malory's "Morte Darthur"*; for a look at the inadequacies of Moorman's timeline see Olefsky, especially pages 58-63. Vinaver believed that the inconsistencies did not matter, since it was not one self-consistent text, but several, separate ones (*Works* xxxii).

[294] It is treacherous to make any generalization about a work as long and intricate as Malory's: counter examples could surely be found. And this generalization depends a great deal on how one defines the key terms, "foreshadowing" and "reflection." Is it foreshadowing when Launcelot's love life and his devotion to the queen are discussed at some length in the beginning of the "Tale of Sir Launcelot"? Certainly it is setting up that devotion as on the one hand ideal and on the other hand problematic for the conflict in loyalty it will cause. But it is not really the same kind of thing as when Merlin or the narrator explicitly states that something will come to pass, which happens often in the earlier books.

[295] For more on the winning of worship and its structural importance to the *Morte Darthur* see Andrew Lynch's *Malory's Book of Arms*. Lynch argues that "the winning of knightly worship" is the "predominant meaning of the story" (33).

talking about it being like real contemporary life, though parallels to Malory's time can and have been found. What I mean is that this is the business of knighthood as it was thought to have existed in the past by Malory and his contemporaries and as they wished for it to be again: famous knights on adventure, rescuing ladies, engaging in *pas d'armes*, striking impressive figures on horseback, defeating evil customs, accepting hospitality, jousting, proving their mettle against one another, providing fellowship to one another, traveling the countryside. This is what the readers—and the knights themselves—are nostalgic for when the inevitable ending comes.

Ellyn Olefsky points out that, though it is futile to pin down Malory's exact chronology with any accuracy, the text nevertheless does have a broad chronology, a sense of the passage of time, of a beginning, middle, and end; it is in the details (details, she posits, that the general reader is unlikely to notice) that the time scheme occasionally breaks down (63-64). I would like to suggest that the passage of time is most evident to the reader in the beginning and end. In the middle, it is as if time stops for a while in this magical romance space. Malory invites us to linger and revel in this time. If someone who has died reappears, it hardly matters because time has not really moved on, not until we come to the Sankgreal anyway. The beginning of the quest for the Holy Grail drops the knights, and the reader, back into time. It is no accident that Arthur's lamentations for the loss of the Round Table start with this quest: 'Now,' seyde the kynge, 'I am sure at this quest for the Sankegreall shall all ye of the Rownde Table departe, and nevyr shall I se you agayne holé togydirs" (XIII.6, Vinaver 864); he even anticipates the nostalgia future readers of his life story will feel when they hear about their great deeds: "aftir youre dethe men may speke of hit that such good knyghtes were here, such a day, holé togydirs" (502). For the story of King Arthur to fully inspire nostalgic longing for another time, the delightful suspension

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of time employed in the romance chapters must come to an end and the events of (pseudo-)

history must once again be taken up.

Both the suspension of time in the middle and the passage of time in the beginning and

end are important ways in which Malory heightens the nostalgia of the *Morte.* The first allows

the audience to revel in the exercise of knighthood as it was "those dayes" and long to be a part

of them; the second triggers the melancholy side of nostalgia by emphasizing that these days of

adventure and the knights who partook in them are long gone. Malory allows, however, the

smallest possibility that King Arthur may one day return in all his glory. He reports the belief

("yet som men say…" XXI.7, Vinaver 1242) that Arthur has not died, "but had by the wyll of

Oure Lorde Jesu into another place; and men say that he shall come agayne, and he shall wynne

the Holy Crosse" (XXI.7, Vinaver 1242). Malory shies away from making such a claim, "Yet I

woll nat say that hit shall be so," but does leave things ambiguously, "here in thys worlde he

chaunged hys lyff," and includes the famous epitaph "*Hic iacet Arthurus, rex quondam rexque

futurus*" (XXI.7, Vinaver 1242). In doing so, Malory does not lose credibility by buying into a

fantastical folk tale, but he does give his nostalgic readers a sliver of hope: perhaps it *is* possible

for the glory of Arthur's days to return, along with the great king himself? Perhaps if they

practice knighthood as Launcelot or Gareth or Galahad did Arthur's day will come again?

V. Conclusion: Preserving Nostalgia for the Round Table

It can be hard to see why an audience would be nostalgic for something like the Round

Table: it was a noble idea, sure, but it ends so disastrously! Indeed, one could even argue that the

fellowship was always rather tenuous. From the moment of its founding there were jealousies

and feuds casting a pall over the ideals it represents. And yet for Malory and his audience, living

in a turbulent time of quickly changing and often conflicting loyalties, yet a time when the admiration for chivalric knighthood was at its peak, it is no wonder that the story of King Arthur and his Round Table, complete with its failure, should speak so powerfully and inspire such nostalgia. Though the fellowship must fail, individual knights retain their honor. Irrespective of the politics and the feuds, at the end of the day, knighthood itself reigns supreme. The images that resonate the most, that have been the most memorable to readers down through the ages— Arthur, filled with rage and regaining his might, confronting his treacherous son on that bloody field; Launcelot being remembered after his death not as a traitor, but as the greatest earthly knight; Guinevere taking the veil; Gawain's fierce love for his brothers and desperate need to avenge them; the hundreds of knightly encounters that somehow blend together into an image of chivalric knighthood as brave, civilized, and admirable—show the reader how knighthood can rise above circumstance to be something sublime. The Round Table fellowship turns out to be unsustainable but, as Launcelot's death and eulogy show us, knighthood and chivalry transcend it.

Malory's genius, then, is to take a story of trouble and conflict, something they were no strangers to in fifteenth-century England, and show his audience how greatness is possible even in turbulent times. He captures their interest and delights them by tailoring the values of the tale to their own. And he engages their emotions, especially nostalgia, in the way he manipulates time, bending and stretching it to let them revel in the times of adventure, but eventually reasserting time's inexorable march to make them long for what is over and see themselves as heirs to and revivers of the Round Table.

Chapter 6
Conclusion: Arthurian Nostalgia in Context

Writers in the Middle Ages and even in the Renaissance were no strangers to reinvention, often preferring to retell an old tale rather than invent a new one. Some of our most revered English authors, such as Chaucer and Shakespeare, achieved literary greatness for the way they breathed new life into stories they gleaned from history, legend, and other authors rather than for original plots. "Originality was not a major requirement of medieval authors. Story material in particular was looked upon as common property and the notion that one could claim property rights in ideas is seldom encountered" (Baugh and Malone 114). Indeed, authority was valued so much more than originality that Geoffrey of Monmouth was hardly the only writer to claim an ancient source when he had none.

Likewise, an emphasis on values and ideals in art was central. In medieval literature there is no notion of "art for art's sake," certainly not in narrative genres. Stories are worth telling for the moral they impart and for the examples of virtue or warnings of vice they contain. The ethical value of literature had been a concern since ancient times: Plato attacked poets on the grounds that they were liars, and defenders of poetry worked for centuries to prove him wrong and stand up for the ethical possibilities of literature. In his *Ars Poetica* Horace writes that poetry can either teach or delight—or do both together;[296] medieval thinkers and writers were particularly interested in the dictum to do both: "According to Latin medieval literary theory, literary writing should do some kind of ethical work if it is to be worth its ink" (Johnson 2).[297]

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[296] "Aut prodesse uolunt aut delectare poetae
aut simul et iucunda et idonea dicere uitae" (333-4).
See Niall Rudd's edition of *Epistles Book II and Epistle to the Pisones (Ars Poetica)*.

[297] Isidore of Seville, for example, follows in Horace's footsteps by "specifying that the highest mode of literary experience is that which contributes to the moral understanding of its readers" (Johnson 1). The commentary

This was generally true in practice. Medieval works of literature concern, implicitly or explicitly, ideals for right living. Those ideals shift in relation to the place and time of composition and especially in relation to subject matter and genre. Religious literature of various types advocates Christian ideals; romances and other forms of court literature, chivalric ideas; histories and mirrors for princes, political ideals, and so forth.

Chaucer, famously, explores the values espoused at all levels of society in the *Canterbury Tales*. He is, perhaps, most memorable when treating the vices of truly corrupt characters, such as the Pardoner and the Summoner, as well as the imperfections of more ambiguous characters such as the Wife of Bath, though he also offers some truly exemplary figures, such as the Plowman and the Parson. In the *General Prologue* this is clearly social criticism. Few characters live up to the ideal associated with their station. Nevertheless, the ideal is presented as something to aspire to for the reader, especially as the reader is put in the privileged position of being in on the satire.[298] There is a good deal of humor in the way characters fail to meet the ideal, but that humor can be sharply critical. A reader might laugh at the Pardoner's attempts to swindle the other pilgrims or the Wife of Bath's attempts to marry them in their respective prologues, but would hardly aspire to become like either of them.[299] Langland is similarly biting

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tradition also highlighted the importance of ethics in literary texts, as demonstrated by A. J. Minnis, A.Brian Scott, and David Wallace in *Medieval Literary Theory and Criticism c. 1100-c. 1375*. See especially pages 16-20. See also Albert C. Baugh and Kemp Malone, *The Literary History of England,* page 115: "even where religion is not directly concerned, a moral purpose is frequently discernible in literature, openly avowed or tacitly implied as the justification for its existence. John of Salisbury in his *Policraticus* says that all writings serve a practical purpose and this purpose is to convey useful knowledge and promote virtue."

[298] Jill Mann's *Chaucer and Medieval Estate Satire* is an excellent introduction to the satire of the *General Prologue*, though she downplays the criticism of Chaucer's portrayals, referring to "Chaucer's *consistent removal of the possibility of moral judgment*" (original emphasis, 197). The fact that Chaucer refrains from judgment in the portrayal of his characters need not prevent the reader from appreciating their distance from the ideal.

[299] In *Practicing Literary Theory in the Middle Ages*, chapter 4, pages 122-165, Eleanor Johnson explores what she sees as the "ethical work" of the *Canterbury Tales*, in which the narrator's moral development stands in for that of the reader.

in his satire of the estates in *Piers Plowman*. In both cases satire is located in an appreciation of the distance between ideals and reality.

Most other medieval genres are likewise concerned with idealism, either portraying ideals or helping the reader work towards achieving them. In religious works the goal is to save the soul of the reader or listener, and so ideals are presented as paths to salvation. Saints' lives, for example, provide instances of perfection manifest on earth with their many examples of martyrs and perfectly spiritual men and women. Devotional literature, sermons, and religious dream visions often deal with the struggles of more average Christians to work towards a spiritual ideal that will gain them entry to Paradise when they die. In *Pearl,* for example, the mourning and confused dreamer, who has lost his "precios perle wythouten spotte" (36), presumably his young daughter, is treated to a vision of heaven as well as theological lessons on things like how God's mercy and salvation work, notably with the maiden's description of the parable of the vineyard. Similarly, drama, especially the morality play when it emerges in the late medieval period, addresses the struggles of an Everyman to resist worldly temptation and vice in favor of embracing Christian ideals of charity, spirituality, and the rejection of worldly goods in the hope of achieving salvation. Handbooks of various sorts address ways of achieving perfection in particular areas of life. Mirrors for princes provide advice to leaders, while chivalric handbooks help knights work toward a kind of perfection appropriate to fighting men. Often these provide not only edicts, but also examples, both ideals to aspire to and negative examples to avoid.

It should come as no surprise that a body of literature that values ancient authority and that often depends on providing exemplars looks to the past for models of the ideal. With the exception of works that prefer allegorical vices and virtues, such as morality plays and dream visions, medieval literature tends to be backward glancing. Models of good and bad behavior

come from classical Greek and Roman history and legend, from Christian tradition, both

scripture and the lives of saints, and occasionally from local legend. For example, in the late

Middle Ages the Nine Worthies figured large in literature, historiography, and iconography.[300]

These three pagan (Hector, Alexander, and Caesar), three Jewish (Joshua, David, and Judas

Maccabeus), and three Christian (Arthur, Charlemagne, Godfrey of Bouillon) historical figures

served as examples of great leaders, knights, and conquerors, though they could also serve as

warnings about the vagaries of fortune.[301] While it may not be surprising that they figure in the

Arthurian tradition,[302] since Arthur is himself among them—for example the Alliterative *Morte

Arthure* presents the Nine Worthies on the Wheel of Fortune, calling to mind both their greatness

and their susceptibility to ill fortune, while Caxton has a considerable digression about them in

his preface to Malory's *Morte Darthur,* emphasizing their idealism as "the best that ever were"

(cxliii)[303]—they also appear prominently in other, non-Arthurian works such as the *Parliament

of Three Ages*, which takes a rather gloomier view of things, presenting them as examples of the

vanity of all earthly things.

Arthurian texts, then, are not alone in their interest in values and expressions of ideals,

nor are they unique in assuming that values were better expressed in the distant past. Indeed, they

represent larger concerns of the age, and are themselves exemplars of medieval taste and

attitudes. Furthermore, because they are not overtly or primarily religious (with some

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[300] The Nine Worthies first appear in the early fourteenth century in *Voeux du Paon* by Jacques Longuyon. In addition to literary works, William Kuskin notes that the Nine Worthies can be found represented in "paintings, statues, woodblocks, murals, tapestries, playing-cards, mummings, and pageants" (514).

[301] See Kuskin, page 513-4 for a discussion of the "structural flexibility" of the trope of the Nine Worthies and how their "exemplary meanings change" across texts.

[302] At least, that is, starting in the fourteenth century, after the first appearance of the Nine Worthies in Longuyon. The tradition appears to have spread swiftly and been heartily embraced by other authors.

[303] Quotations from Caxton's preface to Malory and from the *Morte Darthur* come from Eugène Vinaver's edition of *The Works of Sir Thomas Malory* (3rd edition).

exceptions, like the *Queste del Saint Graal*), medieval Arthurian tales give us a secular view of the values of the society, albeit catering primarily to the highest social and economic class. These values are not stagnant, as my discussions of individual Arthurian texts have shown. And this is where a special quality of the Matter of Britain comes into play: Arthurian romances allow for the development of values and ideals within a set framework. The relatively stable plot brings them into relief, allowing authors to press and change them and allowing us as readers and scholars to appreciate the changes.

They also offer a stability of outlook, as I have argued throughout these chapters. When Geoffrey of Monmouth created the outlines of the plot, he also imbued it with its inherent nostalgia. Like the values espoused, the character of that nostalgia has evolved over time, but it is nonetheless a fundamental part of the story's appeal. The *Historia regum Britanniae* focuses on the values of ideal kingship, and Arthur, at once a fearsome warrior-king reminiscent of the Germanic heroic tradition and a civilized courtly ruler appropriate to classical tradition, is the locus of nostalgia for a time of anarchy and political uncertainty. Chrétien de Troyes creates a new genre, romance, and a correspondingly new sense of nostalgia. He shifts the attention to Arthur's knights and their peacetime adventures, concentrating on the values of chivalry and the role of love in knighthood. He also takes the sharp historical focus of Geoffrey and softens it, so that time and place are fuzzier, more distant and more elusive, ultimately giving the Arthurian world an evanescent character. The prose *Vulgate Cycle*, by contrast, while in keeping with the romance genre seeks to erase that evanescence. The drive of the prose cycles, and the *Vulgate Cycle* in particular, is to fill in the gaps in the Arthurian mythos. Back-stories are provided, stories left incomplete by Chrétien are taken to their conclusion. The impetus behind this desire for complete knowledge of the story of Arthur and his knights is surely nostalgia. Yet at least one

Vulgate Cycle author, the writer of the *Queste del Saint Graal*, takes advantage of Arthurian nostalgia to further a very different sort of ideology. He is interested in convincing his audience to pursue spiritual perfection, though he is willing to capitalize on nostalgia for Arthurian chivalry to spread that message.

Finally, with the traditions of the Arthurian story, the nature of romance, and the inherent nostalgia of both firmly established by a historian writing in Latin and a series of French vernacular romancers, we returned to Arthur's native land to explore the importance of Arthurian nostalgia in Middle English. Here we find Arthur's role in English literature reasserted in the fourteenth century in a somewhat fragmented way. The author of the Alliterative *Morte Arthure* follows the chronicle tradition of Geoffrey by presenting us once again with a relatively uncomplicated hero-king. In contrast to Geoffrey, he heightens the tragedy and, paradoxically, the nostalgic longing for the lost ideal. A romance version of the death of Arthur written around the same time, the Stanzaic *Morte*, struggles to maintain the nostalgia the author himself seems to feel in the face of the tragic story he adapts from the *Vulgate Cycle*. However, instead of ending in longing, the Stanzaic *Morte* ends in mourning, despite the poet's obvious admiration for the knights. Meanwhile, the author of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, not unlike the author of the *Queste del Saint Graal*, evokes the reader's nostalgia for Arthurian ideals only to undermine those ideals. Gawain carries the symbol of the pentangle, representative of perfection in every conceivable way, but he is forced through the course of his adventure to come to terms with his very human imperfections. In what is perhaps the subtlest use of the nostalgic outlook of Arthurian tales addressed in this study, the author of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* forces readers to recognize the unfeasibility of the ideals of romance and to come to grips with their

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own humanity. He implicitly questions the pride of longing for chivalric ideals and instead stresses the importance of forgiveness and grace.

Sir Thomas Malory's fifteenth-century prose compilation is the capstone of this dissertation, and indeed of Middle English Arthurian romance. It brings together all of the previous traditions discussed: the chronicle tradition of Geoffrey and the Alliterative *Morte Arthure*, represented in the book covering the war with Lucius; the romance tradition begun by Chrétien de Troyes and continued in the long prose compilations of the thirteenth century, perhaps best represented in the meandering adventures of knights that make up the middle section of the *Morte*, though also influential in the Grail Quest and, in the case of the *Vulgate Cycle,* the fateful ending. Indeed, Malory is often translating directly from French sources.[304] The voluminous romance cycles also no doubt influenced Malory's plan to cover Arthur's entire life story in vernacular prose. Finally, Malory was certainly influenced by the other English *Morte*, the stanzaic version, for his treatment of the end of the Round Table. He was very likely attracted to the theme of conflicting loyalties represented in that poem. Yet where the stanzaic poet, though nostalgic at the outset, is forced to concede only tragedy and mourning in the end, Malory is able to explore the difficulties and consequences of conflicted loyalty, even narrating the complete destruction of the Round Table, while preserving the nostalgic tone. One of the chief ways he accomplishes this is through his manipulation of time: early books are forward-looking, full of forms of anticipation such as prophesy and foreshadowing; the final books are backward-looking, elegiac and nostalgic; the middle books are expansive, stretching and bending time to allow the reader to revel in the deeds of knighthood described. This allows Malory considerable freedom to evoke different, seemingly conflicting, genres, like epic and romance.

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[304] Caxton's prologue describes the *Morte Darthur* as a translation: "syr Thomas Malorye dyd take oute of certeyn bookes of Frensshe and reduced it i to Englysshe" (cxlv).

And thematically it allows him to balance a sense of loss with a sense of hope, which is characteristic of the longing of nostalgia.

The nostalgic character inherent in Arthurian legend is precisely what has given it such a long afterlife in modern literature and popular culture. After something of a decline in interest during the Renaissance and eighteenth century—with some notable exceptions, like Spenser's use of Arthurian themes in the *Faerie Queen* and Milton toying with writing about Arthur before settling on the rather loftier subject of "justify[ing] the ways of God to man"—versions of Arthur's life story have never been out of fashion since, from forays in the early nineteenth century by "lesser figures" (Edwards 248), to the elegant poetic compositions of Tennyson in later nineteenth-century England and E. Arlington Robinson in twentieth-century America, to the reimaging of Arthur's life as an adventure tale for boys in new editions of Malory and in new versions like T.H. White's *The Once and Future King*. Modern versions, some geared toward children, others toward women, others toward sci-fi fans abound. Arthur and his knights have appeared on stage, in operas and musical theatre adaptations, as well as in film, on television, and in video games.

Perhaps inevitably, the nostalgia for Arthurian times has sometimes shaded into critique and even satire. Indeed, we have seen how this is part of the tradition since at least the *Queste del Saint Graal*. "Both medieval and modern writers…celebrate Arthurian ideals but simultaneously challenge them by means of comedy, irony, parody, satire, and sometimes outright criticism" (Archibald 139). Andrew Lynch, exploring the combination of nostalgia and criticism in Sir Walter Scott's medieval-inspired works, explains the connection between the two modes: "because the nostalgic subject is required to imagine the absent ideal, and to make strong, implicit demands of the past through which he or she seeks to satisfy longing, nostalgia

can also generate critical dissatisfaction with aspects of the past object of desire that are seen as defective, unable to meet requirements" (202). Nostalgia and satire also turn out to be close cousins, since an overly nostalgic outlook is an easy target for critique and even mockery. Louise D'Arcens notes, as part of a discussion of satire and nostalgia inherent to "comic medievalist tourism" that nostalgia has a "proven amenability…to function as a tool of anti-modernist satire": "Satire's critique of the present, which is its temporal anchor, can of course be as easily conducted through futuristic or fantastic projection as through historical nostalgia; but it shares with nostalgia a fundamentally and powerfully utopian impulse" (179). Cervantes warns of the consequences of an excess of nostalgia for romance and chivalry in his humorous portrayal of Don Quixote, the knight whose overindulgence in nostalgia makes him ridiculous. Mark Twain's *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* and, in more recent times, the comedy troupe Monty Python's film *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* turn the satire in a more specifically Malorian direction, using familiar parts of the legend of Arthur to poke fun at both modern nostalgia for medieval times as well as modern institutions themselves.

What this dissertation has endeavored to show is that these themes—of nostalgia, of the exploration of and search for ideals, of critique—are central aspects of the legend even in its original medieval flowering. By exploring them in their medieval context we learn not only about a central myth of our culture, but also a great deal about the medieval societies that have championed these values.

Finally, even though references to King Arthur and versions of his life can be found in extremely diverse settings—from twelfth-century France, to a Hebrew version composed in Italy in the thirteenth century (Psaki 2), to twenty-first-century films, televisions series, comics, and video games—there is no doubt that the legend of King Arthur has special significance for

medieval England. Although England in the Middle Ages was not always producing the most or

even the best Arthurian tales—that distinction no doubt belongs to France, at least in the twelfth

and thirteenth centuries—when English authors returned to the myth in the fourteenth century,

they found an established tradition of greatness in knighthood and kingship set right in their own

country to draw on. At a time when literature in English was still fledgling, politics were

troubled, and chivalric knightliness desirable but in peril and far from ideal in practice, the story

of King Arthur and his knights provided a sense of national pride. It is no accident that King

Arthur became a tool of political propaganda—that Henry VII, when seeking to establish a

Tudor dynasty, named his heir Arthur; that Edward III would start his own version of a Round

Table fellowship with the Order of the Knights of the Garter; that Edward I would attend and

even host tournaments known as Round Tables and perhaps even have built for himself a literal

round table that still hangs today in Winchester Castle.[305]

This association with patriotism and nation-building, itself tied up with the nostalgia of

the myth since Geoffrey, helps explain the continued interest in Arthur in England and even in

other places, like America, where people long for a heroic originary myth. It also explains why

it is so important to medieval history, culture, and literature to study the evolution of Arthurian

literature and its relation to its readership. Of course, this dissertation has only scratched the

surface of even medieval versions of the tale. By necessity I have had to limit my discussion to

those works that seemed to me to have the most significant impact on the evolution of the myth

up to and including Malory, whose importance to the Arthurian myth for English readers, as well

as to English prose generally, is undeniable. I have therefore been forced to neglect the

substantial—and excellent—German tradition, for example. I have also omitted numerous lesser

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[305] See Martin Biddle, "The Making of the Round Table," especially pages 347 and 360ff. "[T]he Winchester
Round Table can now be shown to be a table of Edward [I]'s time and probably of Edward's making" (386).

Middle English romances. In focusing on the evolution of Arthuriana from its first full version in the *Historia regum Britanniae* to its medieval English culmination in Malory's *Morte Darthur* I hope to have proven the importance of nostalgia and how it can, in fact, be a sophisticated way of representing the past in relation to concerns of the present.

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