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The Politics of Romancing Arthur in Early English Literature,

Geoffrey of Monmouth to John Milton

By Emilee' S. Le Clear

A dissertation presented to the

Graduate Faculty of Middle Tennessee State University

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

May 2011

UMI Number: 3464540

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The Politics of Romancing Arthur in Early English Literature,

Geoffrey of Monmouth to John Milton

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Acknowledgments

My great thanks go to Dr. Michael Allen, Dr. Peter Cunningham, and the College of Graduate Studies for the award of a Provost's Writing Fellowship, which allowed me to concentrate my efforts on composing and completing my dissertation.

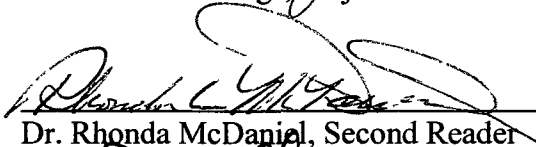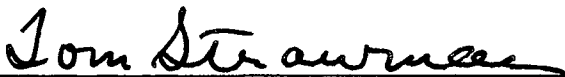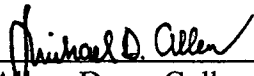The director of my dissertation, Dr. Marion Hollings, who has overseen the research and development of this work over several years, deserves my immense gratitude for providing time, effort, and guidance in this project and many others during my work in the graduate program. The land of Faerie, which you introduced me to, continues to fascinate me and drives me to explore it further.

The members of my dissertation committee—Dr. Rhonda McDaniel, who has seen this project evolve from the early work completed during a directed reading under her supervision and Dr. Philip Phillips, whose graduate course in Milton led me to the time period in which to conclude my examination of Arthur—put forth time, work, and guidance that benefited not only the work within this dissertation, but also the researcher and writer who developed throughout the lengthy process. I have learned invaluable lessons from both of you that I hope to carry through my career as an instructor and researcher.

The support of colleagues and friends assisted in ways outside of writing and researching that contributed to the completion of this work. In particular, I want to thank Kirsten Boatwright and Gloria Morrissey for providing forums in which we could vent frustrations and discuss progress in the non-judgmental environment created by those who are also experiencing the process.

Abstract

While scholars such as Helen Cooper address the form of English romance over time to reveal the separation of the audience from the familiarity of its motifs, the specific ways in which the trans-temporal matter of romances engage with their historical moments also often become obscured. My study attempts more precisely to historicize each contribution to the tradition that I address within this time frame (ca. 1136-1670) in order to demonstrate the continued and particular uses of Arthurian matter to contemporary political discourses. In Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniæ* (ca.1136), Arthur functions as a centralizing figure in reaction to questions of succession after the death of Henry I in 1135, resulting in the extended conflict between Stephen and Matilda (1135-1154). Likewise in Sir Thomas Malory's *Morte Darthur* (ca. 1460s and 1485), Arthur functions as a unifying ideal, suggesting the importance of domestic political stability in reaction to the turmoil caused by the Wars of the Roses in the early 1460s and 1470s between Henry VI (r. 1422-1461 and 1470-1471) and Edward IV (r. 1461-1483). In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (ca. 1375-1400), composed during the relatively calm succession of Edward III (r. 1327-1377) and Richard II (r. 1377-1399), Arthur's purpose moves from that of a galvanizing force among contested factions to a figure more representative of the cultural ideals, such as those associated with the chivalric code, that maintain social and political coherence. In Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* (1590 and 1596), Arthur, while ostensibly put forward as the exemplum of the virtues that will ensure imperial and cultural significance for England on an international stage, in practice, yields to the figures of Artegall, his half-

brother, and Britomart, whose progeny, Elizabeth I (r. 1558-1603), displaces him in a political context that superannuated both his functions as symbol of national identity and paragon of chivalric conduct. In John Milton's *The History of Britain* (1670), Milton recognizes Arthur as definitively exhausted of cultural and political capital in an emerging republic, repudiating the practices of court and kingship as treasonous. The changing treatments of Arthur map a trajectory whereby the dismissal of Arthur as paragon of kingship and virtue beginning in Spenser and culminating in Milton defines a new national identity with an international profile maintained by a new—early modern— set of cultural virtues and ideals.

Preface

> The generall end therefore of all the booke is to fashion a gentleman or
>
> noble person in vertuous and gentle discipline: Which for that I conceiued
>
> shoulde be most plausible and pleasing, being coloured with an historicall
>
> fiction, the which the most part of men delight to read, rather for variety of
>
> matter, then for profite of the ensample: I chose the historye of king
>
> Arthure. (Spenser, "Letter of the Authors" 714-5)

Edmund Spenser outlines an ambitious plan for his epic *The Faerie Queene* in his

"Letter of the Authors" to Raleigh, and the poem, which illustrates specific virtues

through individual knights and Arthur as an ideal who possesses all of the virtues,

contributes to the tradition of Arthurian literature. Unrestricted by circumscribed literary

guidelines or by genre, English Arthurian literature and the figures within the works

evolve through genres over centuries.[1] Arthurian literature transforms between Geoffrey

of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniæ* completed in 1136 and John Milton's *The*

History of Britain published in 1670 as does the figure of Arthur, who never disappears

from English culture or literature despite his diminished status in the early modern era.

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[1] For a collection of full texts and excerpts of medieval chronicle and romance

works concerning Arthurian material as well as critical works about the tradition and

texts, see *Arthur King of Britain: History, Chronicle, Romance & Criticism with Texts in*

Modern English, from Gildas to Malory. Ed. Richard L. Brengle. New York: Appleton-

Century-Crofts, 1964.

English works which recount stories of Arthurian matter include prose as well as verse histories and romances over centuries of political development in the kingdom. Connections between works such as *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, *Le Morte Darthur*, and *The Faerie Queene* may appear superficial yet exist beyond surface levels as found through examinations of the texts in terms of their times of composition and publication. From the mid-twelfth to the mid-seventeenth century, English Arthurian literary works reflect, comment upon, criticize, and participate in the political climate contemporary to authors and their texts. Arthur along with the stories that feature him function as political tools for the English until the advent of empiricism and changing political climates alter the handling of Arthurian material.

In this study, the examination of the use of Arthur begins and ends with histories, Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniæ* and Milton's *The History of Britain*, both of which recount ancient British history. Arthur, as a "national" figure, appears in early chronicle histories before appearing in prose and verse works of later centuries, but his origins are neither clear nor concrete.[2] In *The Figure of Arthur*, Richard Barber argues that Arthur is a figure "transferred in the eighth century to Wales itself. There, in an

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[2] For the purposes of this work, the discussion of the origins of Arthur focuses on the figure of Arthur used in written works and cultural applications. The historical authenticity of Arthur will not be argued and will only be examined as a factor in the changing depictions of Arthur as influenced by empirical modes of study, reflected in the decisions of writers not to use the figure for these reasons.

atmosphere of national resurgence, he was transformed into the pseudo-historical and legendary figure who has held men's imaginations ever since" (136).[3] The figure of Arthur, native to Wales or not, assumes political connotations early in his use. Arthur transitions into English politics as writers approach British history and as England exerts political control over Wales. Arthur's associations with English culture and politics occur regularly over centuries, developing beyond their beginnings in Arthurian literary traditions. In *King Arthur and the Myth of History*, Laurie A. Finke and Martin B. Shichtman "contend that King Arthur has been used by historians—medieval and modern—as a potent, but empty social signifier to which meaning could be attached that served to legitimate particular forms of political authority and cultural imperialism" (2). Finke and Shichtman argue that Arthur functions as a political figure who can be adapted to a particular time or idea. The adaptability of the figure allows authors of history or fiction as well as English monarchs to fashion portrayals of Arthur which serve particular purposes without degrading the figure as it was known to general audiences.

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[3] Richard Barber has published several studies on the figure of Arthur in England. For his other studies, see Barber, Richard. *Arthur of Albion: An Introduction to the Arthurian Literature and Legends of England*. 1961. New York: Barnes and Noble, 1971; *King Arthur: Hero and Legend*. 1961. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986; and *King Arthur in Legend and History*. 1973. Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Littlefield, 1974.

Modern scholars follow traditions of medieval and early modern scholars in questioning the authenticity of historical accounts of British history, especially the Arthurian material. Even the language used by scholars can reveal attitudes toward early works. N. J. Highman in *King Arthur: Myth-Making and History* states, "The character of Arthur was developed by two British writers to establish particular perceptions of their own people within insular history, for specific and contemporary purposes" (218). The manufactured perceptions disclose a deliberate political purpose by early writers. These perceptions are created through the "character" of Arthur, and Highman's use of the term "character" carries the connotation of fiction, indicating an opinion regarding the credibility of the writers and their texts. Alongside credibility, authenticity remains an issue for historical treatments of Arthur, particularly in Geoffrey of Monmouth's work. The romances which developed from chronicle traditions avoid questions of authenticity because they present Arthurian material in fictional works.

The romance tradition of Arthurian literature begins not in the island of Britain where Arthurian legends originate but in France where the stories were transferred during the Norman era.[4] The vernacular French works of Wace, Marie de France, and Chrétien de Troyes establish the literary genre, and the French traditions highly influence

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[4] For definitions of the term "romance," see "Romance." Def. 1a. *Oxford English Dictionary Online (OED)*. 2nd ed. March 2010. Web. 6 June 2010 and Def. 2a. *Oxford English Dictionary Online (OED)*. 2nd ed. March 2010. Web. 6 June 2010. The literary genre of romance is far more nuanced and complex than the definitions of the term itself.

Arthurian romance as it develops in England.[5] The French influence continues to play a

large role in the creation of English romances for centuries after the early works. In his

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[5] For further reading on the genre of romance, see Allen, Rosamund. "Female

Perspectives in Romance and History." *Romance in Medieval England*. Eds. Maldwyn

Mills, Jennifer Fellows, and Carol M. Meale. Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1991. 133-47;

Baugh, Albert C. "Improvisation in the Middle English Romance." *Proceedings of the

American Philosophical Society* 103 (1959): 418-54; Brunner, Karl. "Middle English

Metrical Romances and Their Audience." *Studies in Medieval Literature in Honor of

Professor Albert Croll Baugh*. Ed. MacEdward Leach. Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania

P, 1961. 219-27; Burlin, Robert B. "Middle English Romance: The Structure of Genre."

The Chaucer Review 30 (1995): 1-14; Cooper, Helen. *The English Romance in Time:

Transforming Motifs from Geoffrey of Monmouth to the Death of Shakespeare*. Oxford:

Oxford UP, 2004; Crofts, Thomas H., and Robert Allen Rouse. "Middle English Popular

Romance and National Identity." *A Companion to Medieval Popular Romance*. Eds.

Raluca L. Radulescu and Cory James Rushton, Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2009. 79-95;

Field, Rosalind. "Romance as History, History as Romance." *Romance in Medieval

England*. Eds. Maldwyn Mills, Jennifer Fellows, and Carol M. Meale. Cambridge: D. S.

Brewer, 1991. 163-73; Finlayson, John. "The Marvellous in Middle English Romance."

The Chaucer Review 33 (1999): 363-408; Griffin, Nathaniel E. "The Definition of

Romance." *PMLA* 38 (1923): 50-70; Hume, Kathryn. "Romance: A Perduable Pattern."

College English 36 (1974): 129-46; Kelly, Douglas. *Medieval French Romance*. New

prologue to *Le Morte Darthur*, William Caxton discusses the undeniable influence of French romances on the prose work, stating "Syr Thomas Malorye dyd take oute of certeyn bookes of Frensshe and reduced it into Englysshe" (2). At the end of the fifteenth century, Arthurian authors continue to create romances by turning to French works. French Arthurian romances influence the English tradition throughout the medieval era, turning British history into literary fiction. The English branch of the genre develops as the Normans transplant their culture, including literary traditions, onto the island of Britain after the conquest. In his work *English Medieval Romance*, W. R. J. Barron describes the transplantation of the French tradition as

> piecemeal without discriminating between the various subject-matters, between early versions and late, between aristocratic idealism and popular adventure stories. Nor was the English tradition merely derivative; its makers showed their independence in selection of source material, in the

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York: Twayne Publishers, 1993; Ker, W. P. *Epic and Romance: Essays on Medieval Literature*. 1896. London: MacMillan, and Co., 1926; Varty, Kenneth. "Medieval Romance." *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*. Eds. Alex Preminger and T. V. F. Brogan. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1993. *751*-4; Vinaver, Eugene. *The Rise of Romance*. New York and Oxford: Oxford UP, 1971; Vitoux, Pierre. "The Mode of Romance Revisted." *Texas Studies in Language and Literature* 49 (2007): 387-410; and Witting, Susan. *Stylistic and Narrative Structures in Middle English Romances*. Austin and London: U of Texas P, 1978.

radical nature of their redactions, and the freedom with which they

intermixed them with native folklore. (8-9)

The English romance style becomes an amalgamation of multiple literary practices

removed from restrictions of established French traditions even though English authors

turn to French texts for influence. English works can incorporate various literary

elements to serve purposes beyond depictions of chivalric knights and courts engaging in

the practices of courtly love.

English Arthurian romances stress the chivalric aspects of romances and, like

French Arthurian romances, create ideals of chivalric behavior. However, within the

stories of chivalry, the English Arthurian romances address political or national issues

alongside social issues. W. T. H. Jackson in "The Nature of Romance" examines the

traditions of early romances, particularly those of Chrétien de Troyes, and the portrayal

of Arthur's court within these works. Jackson contends that "the Arthurian court, as it is

portrayed in the fully developed romance, exists only as a stage for these exploits [of love

and questing], not as a political entity. It does not rule a land—or if it does, that rule is of

no significance. It fights no wars, it has no political enemies" (18). In French romances,

which influence medieval English romances, Arthur's role as a reigning monarch and the

role of the court as seat of government appear to serve little purpose other than as a

starting or ending point for quests. In the English traditions, however, Arthur and his

court perform political functions as recounted in tales of his war with Rome, his conflict

with Mordred, and his victories over the Saxons. The elements of the English literary

works along with the elements of English culture create political associations and meanings in the figure of Arthur from which he cannot be separated.

Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia* marks a beginning of Arthurian literary traditions in England while influencing the subsequent romance traditions in France and England. The number of Arthurian romances, even when limited to those works composed in English, is too great to be comprehensively or adequately studied in a single work. Therefore, I have limited the texts to the aforementioned two histories and three Arthurian romances written between the times of the two histories, the verse works *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and *The Faerie Queene* by Edmund Spenser and the prose work *Le Morte Darthur* by Sir Thomas Malory. The works span centuries, attesting to the popularity of the Arthurian matter within English society and literary culture. The tales within the romances exemplify virtues that others could hope to attain in reality, and in fact, Spenser states that the purpose of his book is to mold a gentleman. However, that purpose of using the works to exemplify virtues for an Englishman, whether monarch or courtier, can only be achieved if the "lessons" within the fictional work affect society.

Romances offer examples of noble behavior from their own times, extolling the medieval virtue and practice of chivalry, but the social as well as moral aspects may not have had a measurable impact on the societies toward which the authors aimed. In *Arthur of England: English Attitudes to King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance*, Christopher Dean argues that because higher English social classes in the Middle Ages learned of Arthur's chivalry and performance through literary works, expectations exist concerning the influence of Arthurian material on

chivalry and daily life for aristocrats, yet the reality is that the material has no effect on English life (32). If Dean's argument is accurate in that the works did not function as handbooks to teach contemporary audiences virtues, the social and cultural values of the works in England could be reduced, but not eliminated, because the romances present ideals not realities. Romances cannot be removed from the societies in which they were created although the values and virtues stressed may be those toward which the authors believed the audiences should strive rather than those actually practiced. The English romances look to Britain's past as a time they should emulate, creating nostalgia for social orders and political accomplishments. In English romances centered on Arthur, the imperial conquests, domestic peace, and chivalric code denote the greatness of the king, the kingdom, and the society.

The *Gawain*-poet, Malory, and Spenser participate in the traditions of English Arthurian romance by infusing their works with social values alongside political ideas. The incorporation of political concerns into medieval and early modern Arthurian works follows the tradition established by Geoffrey of Monmouth. The later works rely upon a tradition of Arthur as a monarch, positioning him as an inherently political figure, and audiences would be aware of the traditions associated with the figure even if the author modifies Arthur's position. The English romances draw upon the "historical" tradition of Arthur as a great king of the distant past. However, the romances of the late medieval and early modern eras transform Arthur, the British hero, into an English ideal who loses status as England gains a more secure national identity domestically and internationally. Arthur embodies the chivalric virtues celebrated in the literature while functioning as a

political device during times of political unrest. These traditions, as well as his political views, affect Milton's approach to Arthurian material, and Milton questions the veracity of the material, expressing doubts about Arthur in his prose work *The History of Britain* in which Arthur returns to his original role as a pre-Norman Briton who defeats the Saxons. Whether as chronicle, romance, or a proto-empirical history, Arthurian literature becomes entangled in political issues of succession, empire, and national identity through authors, monarchs, material, and tradition. Arthur exists as a figure which cannot be separated from the political arena into which he is entered by monarchs and authors as he rules an idealized court which provides standards for chivalric behavior.

The Latin works of Geoffrey of Monmouth and John Milton require unique citations. For the quotations from Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniæ*, I use Latin quotations from Acton Griscom's edition along with English translations of the quotations from Lewis Thorpe's edition. When creating the parenthetical citations for these quotations, I include the book and chapter numbers as well as the specific page numbers on which the Latin quotations appear directly after the Latin and the book and chapter numbers as well as the specific page numbers on which the English translations appear directly after the bracketed English quotation. For the quotations from John Milton's *Epitaphium Damonis* and *Mansus*, I use the Latin quotations and the English translations from Merritt Y. Hughes's edition. When creating the parenthetical citations, I include the line numbers for the Latin verse directly after the Latin quotations along with the page numbers on which the prose translation appears directly after the bracketed English quotation.

Table of Contents

Introduction

While scholars such as Helen Cooper address the form of English romance over time to reveal the separation of the audience from the familiarity of its motifs, the specific ways in which the trans-temporal matter of romances engage with their historical moments also often become obscured. My study attempts more precisely to historicize each contribution to the tradition that I address within this time frame (ca. 1136-1670) in order to demonstrate the continued and particular uses of Arthurian matter to contemporary political discourses. In Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniæ* (ca. 1136), Arthur functions as a centralizing figure in reaction to questions of succession after the death of Henry I in 1135, resulting in the extended conflict between Stephen and Matilda (1135-1154).[1] Likewise in Sir Thomas Malory's *Morte Darthur* (ca.

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[1] The date of the *Historia Regum Britanniæ* remains under question. In his edition of the Latin text, Acton Griscom discusses the publication year of the *Historia*, using the dedications found within manuscripts, mentions of the text, and the actions of men to whom Geoffrey of Monmouth dedicated the work to determine the year (1136) that he puts forward "within four years" of possible publication years (42). For detailed discussions of the publication date of the text and editions, see Griscom, Acton. *The Historia Regum Britanniæ of Geoffrey of Monmouth with Contributions to the Study of Its Place in Early British History by Acton Griscom, M. A., Together with a Literal Translation of the Welsh Manuscript N⁰ LXI of Jesus College, Oxford by Robert Ellis Jones, S. T. D.* London, New York, and Toronto: Longmans, 1929 and Thorpe, Lewis.

1460s and 1485), Arthur functions as a unifying ideal, suggesting the importance of

domestic political stability in reaction to the turmoil caused by the Wars of the Roses in

the early 1460s and 1470s between Henry VI (r. 1422-1461 and 1470-1471) and Edward

IV (r. 1461-1483).[2] In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (ca. 1375-1400), composed

during the relatively calm succession of Edward III (r. 1327-1377) and Richard II (r.

1377-1399), Arthur's purpose moves from that of a galvanizing force among contested

factions to a figure more representative of the cultural ideals, such as those associated

with the chivalric code, that maintain social and political coherence.[3] In Edmund

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Introduction. *The History of the Kings of Britain.* 1136. Trans. Lewis Thorpe. London:

Penguin, 1966. 9-47.

[2] Sir Thomas Malory's Arthurian work has a complicated textual and publication

history. The prose work is thought to be composed in the 1460s because Malory dates the

text himself in his final paragraph. William Caxton's edition of Malory's text is produced

first in 1485, reprinted by his apprentice and successor Wynkyn de Worde, and was

considered to be the authoritative text until the discovery of the Winchester manuscript in

1934. Eugene Vinaver produced the scholarly edition of Malory's work using Caxton's

edition and the Winchester manuscript, an edition that was first published in 1947 and

last published in 1991. James W. Spisak, based upon the work of William Matthews,

created the latest scholarly edition of Caxton's edition of Malory's work, and the Spisak-

Matthews remains the scholarly edition of Caxton's printing since its 1983 publication.

[3] *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*'s composition is dated between 1375 and

1400 based upon the age of the manuscript, but, like the identity of the poet, the exact

Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* (1590 and 1596), Arthur, while ostensibly put forward as the exemplum of the virtues that will ensure imperial and cultural significance for England on an international stage, in practice, yields to the figures of Artegall, his half-brother, and Britomart, whose progeny, Elizabeth I (r. 1558-1603), displaces him in a political context that superannuated both his functions as symbol of national identity and paragon of chivalric conduct.[4] In John Milton's *The History of Britain* (1670), Milton recognizes Arthur as definitively exhausted of cultural and political capital in an

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date of the poem remains unknown. The language and described settings provide a regional location for the poet in Northwest England along the Welsh border. Unlike Geoffrey of Monmouth, the *Gawain*-poet provides no dedications which could narrow the publication dates with the last quarter of the fourteenth century.

[4] Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* is published in parts with Books I-III in 1590 and with Books I-VI in 1596, and the Cantos of Mutabilities are included with Books I-VI in the first folio in 1609. Spenser writes much of his epic in the 1580s and portions of Books IV-VI in the early 1590s; the dates of composition are indicated by contemporary historical events, such as the execution of Mary Queen of Scots and the defeat of the Spanish Armada, which influence events which Spenser creates in Faerie, such as the Duessa's trial and punishment. *The Faerie Queene*'s long publication history results in numerous editions, including the 2007 publication of A. C. Hamilton's second edition of the epic.

emerging republic, repudiating the practices of court and kingship as treasonous.[5] The

changing treatments of Arthur map a trajectory whereby the dismissal of Arthur as

paragon of kingship and virtue beginning in Spenser and culminating in Milton defines a

new national identity with an international profile maintained by a new—early modern—

set of cultural virtues and ideals.

The selection of primary texts within this study results from the consideration of

their prominence within the corpus of English Arthurian literature as well as similarities

in contemporary political climates in which the texts were produced. Geoffrey of

Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniæ* and Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*

represent two significant points of medieval Arthurian works, and both works, which

promote Arthur as a unifying figure, emerge in times of a contested succession. Edmund

Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* signifies the declining status of Arthur and the romance

genre in English literature while defining English national identity through the emerging

empire by focusing on colonial ventures in Ireland. The choice of *Sir Gawain and the*

Green Knight above the vast number of medieval English Arthurian texts is based on a

parallel political situation to *The Faerie Queene* in which a stable succession prevents a

civil war, allowing England to focus on colonial enterprises that expand the kingdom's

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[5] Although published in 1670, much of John Milton's *The History of Britain* is

believed to be written in the 1640s and 1650s during the Commonwealth. Milton does not

indicate explicitly the dates of the work or what sections of *The History of Britain* are

composed in which decade, and scholars debate which material is composed before or

after the Restoration.

power. John Milton's *The History of Britain* illustrates the diminished status of Arthur during the turbulent years of the Civil War, Commonwealth, and Restoration as Milton abandons the Arthurian projects proposed in his poems *Mansus* and *Epitaphium Damonis* whereas Katherine Philips' poem "On the Welch Language" demonstrates that Arthurian material retains cultural significance to segments of the English empire.

As with the primary texts, the secondary works present a challenge due to the breadth of the time frame. This study addresses, primarily, six bodies of scholarship, one for each author and one for Arthurian matter, making a comprehensive overview of criticism too large to discuss adequately. The scholarly works surveyed, representing a selection of texts used within the study, briefly examine the multiple bodies of scholarship to explore ideas upon which I build or within which I situate my study. Helen Cooper's *The English Romance in Time: Transforming Motifs from Geoffrey of Monmouth to the Death of Shakespeare* illustrates the development of selected themes, such as restoring heirs, desire, quests, and unsuccessful magic, in the corpus of English romances, ending her exploration with Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* and Shakespeare's plays. She briefly discusses the role of Arthur in *The Faerie Queene* and his relationship to the Tudor dynasty in her chapter focused on the restoration of a rightful heir. Cooper's work encompasses a similar time frame to my study, which continues until 1670. My examination focuses on the works of five specific authors of Arthurian works rather than the broad scope of English romance that Cooper approaches. The concentration on selected texts and authors allows for a closer scrutiny of the works and their relationship to contemporary politics over the arc of Arthurian literature from ca. 1130 to 1670 than a

broader study of either romance or Arthurian literature would permit. Christopher Dean in *Arthur of England: English Attitudes to King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance* uses literary presentations of Arthur in both chronicles and romances to explore cultural views of Arthur from the twelfth through the sixteenth century. He demonstrates Arthur's prominence in the medieval era and declining status in the early modern period by tracing occurrences of and references to Arthur in literary works until the 1640s. My study draws upon the cultural prominence of Arthur as illustrated by Dean to examine how four authors use Arthurian matter in relation to their contemporary political situations—civil wars, stabilized successions, and colonial ventures—and why Milton rejects an Arthurian epic.

N. J. Highman's *King Arthur: Myth-Making and History* briefly describes the scholarly debates that occur in the second half of the twentieth century concerning Arthur's historical existence before exploring the figure in texts created prior to the Norman Conquest. His argument that Arthur was not a prominent figure in the chronicle tradition until Geoffrey of Monmouth's work supports the presentation of Arthur in the *Historia Regum Britanniæ* as a significant point in the development of Arthurian traditions. Michael Curely's overview of the chronicle author in *Geoffrey of Monmouth* situates Geoffrey of Monmouth in twelfth-century England while examining the influence of existing chronicle works upon the British history recounted in the *Historia* as well as references to contemporary Anglo-Norman events. Curley's political analysis focuses on the depiction of Henry I within Geoffrey of Monmouth's text whereas my study of the Arthurian section of the *Historia* concentrates on the civil war between

Stephen and Matilda for the English crown. Barbara Sargent-Baur's article "Dux

Bellorum/Rex Militum/Roi Fainéant: The Transformation of Arthur in the Twelfth

Century" explores the change in Arthur's role in literature from Geoffrey of Monmouth

to Chrétien de Troyes as the romance genre develops, and the figure transitions from a

powerful king creating an empire to a passive king celebrating his knights, a king who is

"depicted as unworthy of his glorious reputation" (40). The shift that she marks occurs

before the Arthurian romance tradition moves to England and English authors begin to

recreate Arthur using the traditions of chronicle and romance.

Ad Putter, in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight *and French Arthurian Romance*,

centers his analysis primarily on comparisons between the late fourteenth-century English

romance and the twelfth-century romances of Chretien de Troyes regarding specific

themes, such as honor, hospitality, and seduction games. While illustrating the *Gawain-*

poet's knowledge of French romance tradition, Putter's examination removes the poem

from English traditions and contemporary events. My analysis of *Sir Gawain and the*

Green Knight acknowledges the French influence but concentrates on the reflection of

contemporary political situations of succession and colonization of Wales. Ordelle Hill's

Looking Westward: Poetry, Landscape, and Politics in Sir Gawain and the Green

Knight" analyzes the Welsh influence, specifically on the landscape, the character of

Bercilak, the beheading game, and the political influences of Edward III, the Black

Prince, Hugh Calveley, and Henry Grosmont upon the text. The political events which

Hill explores occur prior to the 1360s, for he argues that audiences' memories of events

and people would affect views of Wales in the last twenty-five years of the fourteenth

century. In "The Ends of Enchantment: Colonialism and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," Lynn Arner examines the poem in terms of English colonialism in Wales in the 1370s and 1380s, focusing on Morgan le Fay along with descriptions of landscapes to reflect the tensions between the English and Welsh. My exploration of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* concentrates on influences contemporary to the composition of the poem, primarily the stability of the succession that enables colonial pursuits.

The scholarly works focused upon Malory's *Le Morte Darthur* discuss the importance of the two editions of the text known to modern audiences and the dangers associated with producing the work in the Wars of the Roses. Covering select works of Arthurian literature, Finke and Shichtman's *King Arthur and the Myth of History* examines the figure of Arthur in three historical periods—the centuries of Norman Conquest, the Wars of the Roses, and Nazi Germany. The authors focus on four chronicles from the twelfth and early thirteenth centuries as well as Hardyng's *Chronicle* and Caxton's edition of Malory's *Le Morte Darthur* during the Wars of the Roses. Finke and Shictman explore issues of patronage with Geoffrey of Monmouth and William Caxton in terms of contemporary political situations and the lasting creation of "symbolic capital" (51) in the chronicle which Geoffrey of Monmouth produces. They discuss Caxton's precarious position in printing Malory's work in the tumultuous political climate of 1485 England and the contributions the work made toward creating a standardized language. Dorsey Armstrong, in "Gender and the Script/Print Continuum: Caxton's *Morte Darthur*," examines selections from the two editions of *Le Morte Darthur* to distinguish the treatment of gender within the two texts and to determine the

differences in audiences between Malory's composition of the work and Caxton's printing of it. *Le Morte Darthur* presents challenges to scholars as a result of the time between composition and printing and the existing texts edited by William Caxton and Eugène Vinaver.

The studies of the early modern works emphasize the development of nationalism, national identity, and views of historical material to illustrate the political discourses in which Arthur is used by Edmund Spenser and John Milton. Charles Bowie Millican's *Spenser and the Table Round: A Study in the Contemporaneous Background for Spenser's Use of the Arthurian Legend*, which is dated both in its original publication (1932) and reprint (1967), analyzes the use of Arthurian material as propaganda by Henry VII and Spenser's use of the material. However, current Spenser scholarship expands far beyond Millican's early criticism, and in studies of Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*, Arthur is typically discussed to justify English colonialism in Ireland. Andrew Hadfield, in his seminal work *Edmund Spenser's Irish Experience: Wilde Fruit and Salvage Soyl*, explores the definition of English national identity against the cultural identity of the Irish that Spenser creates in *A View of the Present State of Ireland* and *The Faerie Queene*. Hadfield briefly examines Spenser's reconfiguration of the matter of Britain and reliance upon the audiences knowledge of Arthurian material. My analysis of *The Faerie Queene* focuses on Spenser's use of Arthur to support England's developing imperial identity and his monarch more than establishing an identity against the "Other."

Early Modern authors question the veracity of Arthurian matter from chronicle traditions as empirical studies of history emerge throughout the period, and scholars, such

as Andrew Escobedo in *Nationalism and Historical Loss in Renaissance England: Foxe, Dee, Spenser, Milton*, examine evolving attitudes toward British history. David Loewenstein's *Milton and the Drama of History: Historical Vision, Iconoclasm, and the Literary Imagination* explores Milton's interactions with history through his prose works and the division within Milton's *The History of Britain* between mytho-historical and impartial representations of ancient British history. Loewenstein's examination of Milton's attitude toward history and *The History of Britain* demonstrates Milton's problems in fashioning presentations of history. My analysis of Milton's treatment of Arthurian material reflects his republican political views, which instigate his creation of new national heroes, and his contribution to a developing English national identity built upon his treatment of British history. Existing studies of Arthurian literature frequently address political influences and nationalism within a single work or time frame. Studies of multiple works of Arthurian literature often focus on Arthurian romances in both French and English. This study examines the portrayals of Arthur in English Arthurian texts in relation to the stability of England, the succession, and the development of English national identity by five authors each composing in a different century under various states of political stability while contributing to developing political discourses within the English Arthurian literary tradition.

Chronicle works, which recount the "history" of the island's inhabitants including the events of Arthur's life as related by early English historians, occupy an important place within Arthurian traditions. However, the inclusion of chronicle works both before and after Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniæ* as well as fictional works

would create a study which cannot be adequately completed in a single volume or work. The two "histories," Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniæ* and John Milton's *The History of Britain*, represent the literary genre of history rather than the empirical study of history, and these works reflect the complicated relationship between "history" and "literature" in early eras of English literature. The distinction between "literature" and "history" begins to be stressed in the sixteenth century, for, as Sir Philip Sidney recounts in his *Defence of Poesie* (1595), "[t]he Historian" states "what men have done" and "the Poet...dooth growe in effect into another nature, in making things either better then Nature bringeth forth, or, quite anewe" (88).[6] Sidney explores the interactions between the arts of men and "Nature," but his distinctions between historians and poets are not finite because authors of fiction do present their works as "histories" when they recount past events, real or imagined, as Edmund Spenser does in his epic when he refers to *The Faerie Queene* (1590 and 1596) as an "antique history" in the Proem to Book II (II.Proem.1). This study examines the selected works critically in terms of literary traditions to examine how the selected authors portray Arthur, not to establish his historical existence.

From the literary beginnings of Arthur in Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia*, the figure continually evolves, so the Arthur of one century is not identical to the Arthur of another century. Christopher Dean offers an explanation for the discrepancies that he

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[6] Sidney's *Defence of Poesie* is published posthumously after his death in 1586 with an unauthorized edition in 1595 printed by Ponsonby and Olney and an authorized edition in 1598 printed by Sidney's sister, Mary Sidney Herbert, Countess of Pembroke.

finds within the figure of Arthur, arguing that Arthur appears in multiple forms that create multiple reactions and that the historical, chivalric, and Christian figures of Arthur are separate figures with distinct meanings (163). Dean's reading of the figure of Arthur from the Middle Ages to the early modern era consigns a particular presentation of Arthur to a historic, chivalric, or Christian figure with no blending of interpretations. Reducing the multi-dimensional figure to a one-dimensional one robs Arthur of cultural, political, and literary influences that shape him, limiting the manner in which artists, authors, and monarchs use him. For the English, Arthur is the domestic figure who spans the reigns of monarchs, represents power, and manufactures nostalgia, the use of which rises and falls throughout English history in relation to political stability. The transformation of Arthur of Britain to Arthur of England represents the transformation of England from a splintered realm to a stabilized nation developing into an empire.

Geoffrey of Monmouth and Edmund Spenser link the English kingdom of their own historical moments to the distant, and questionable, past to create a representation of their realm that could stretch beyond the island's borders. Philip Schwyzer, in his work *Literature, Nationalism, and Memory in Early Modern England and Wales*, examines nationalism in late-sixteenth century literature. Schwyzer defines nationalism as connected to history:

> nationalism involves a special understanding of the relationship between the present and the past, and a peculiarly intimate communion with the national dead. For the nation to live in the imagination of its members, they must come to recognize that those who lived in "other days," and

whose customs, politics, and even language may at first glance appear dauntingly alien, were all along members of the same community—that "they" were in fact "us." (2)

The connection to the past represents an integral part of developing a national identity. Arthur is a central figure which authors use to fashion a strong domestic past while allowing the post-conquest English to diminish the role of the Anglo-Saxons in English history and national identity.[7] Using ancient British history, Geoffrey of Monmouth moves to establish an "English" identity separated from the Anglo-Saxon and Anglo-Norman identities as he promotes the stabilization of England under a strong monarch.

The figure of Arthur represents tensions between the Welsh (descendants of the British from whom Arthur sprang) and the "New English" of the post-Conquest eras, the need for a strong monarch, and the power of the kingdom.[8] Geoffrey of Monmouth, the

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[7] English writers of the twelfth century began the practice of detaching English greatness from the Anglo-Saxons, but they were not the last group of English writers to make such a political decision. N. J. Highman examines this deliberate disconnection by English writers, arguing that "two world wars fought against Germany took a heavy toll of the entire Anglo-Saxonist/Germanist historical enterprise, driving a great wedge between the patriotic vision of what it meant to be British and its roots in a Germanic past" (2).

[8] For readings on Arthur's connections to Celtic areas of England and the otherworld, see Loomis, Roger Sherman. "King Arthur and the Antipodes." *Modern Philology* 38 (1941): 289-304; Russell, J. C. "Arthur and the Romano-Celtic Frontier."

Gawain-poet, Malory, Spenser, and Milton all must consider the political implications of Arthur and Arthurian matter when contributing to the corpus of Arthurian literature as well as to what degree each employs the figure of Arthur. The political implications, as well as questions regarding historical accuracy, influence Milton's abandonment of an Arthurian epic since the glorification of monarchs contradicts the republican ideals that drive his support of the Commonwealth government. Although Milton's choice does not signal the death of Arthur, the prominence of Arthur as a political figure outside literature fades, continuing a process of diminishing Arthur's role which gains prominence with Spenser's treatment of him in the sixteenth century.

English authors of the early modern era who reject or reduce the role of Arthur due to questions surrounding historical veracity of Arthurian matter remove the gilding from an era presented as an ideal within literature from multiple centuries. The manufactured nostalgia makes an unknown period of time far greater than it was in actuality, manipulates reactions to works, and turns sixth-century Britain into a more enlightened, safer nation than modern history would find it. Discussing the settings of Chrétien's Arthurian works and the treatment of the past in works of romance in *The Allegory of Love*, C. S. Lewis contends, "These phantom periods for which the historian searches in vain—the Rome and Greece that the Middle Ages believed in, the British past of Malory and Spenser, the Middle Age itself as it was conceived by the romantic revival—all these have their place in a history more momentous than that which

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Modern Philology 48 (1951): 145-53; and Williams, Mary. "King Arthur in History and Legend." *Folklore* 73 (1962): 73-88.

commonly bears the name" (24). Later eras, removed not by decades or generations but by centuries, fashion the ideals within presentations of these ancient eras, and writers of Arthurian material also manufacture these ancient ideals beginning with Geoffrey of Monmouth in the 1130s and continuing through Edmund Spenser in the 1580s.

The connection to a stronger, more established, or more ideal time or realm than their own indicates a level, whether conscious or unconscious, of political interest in the construction of nation and history. In his article, "From Britannia to England: *Cymbeline* and the Beginning of Nations," Andrew Escobedo examines Shakespeare's presentation of political tensions in England. According to Escobedo, the attitude toward history held by early modern authors was one of continuity:

> Medieval and Renaissance imperial communities usually saw themselves as protractions of ancient Persian, Greek, and Roman empires. These communities were coextensive with history, not products of it. Renaissance writers trying to represent an emerging sense of national community likewise sought to extend its origins back to antiquity, however unpersuasive such extensions may now seem to us. ("From Britannia to England" 63)[9]

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[9] Spenser employs Roman history to create connections to a classical past. For a reading of Shakespeare's use of English and Roman history, see Dean, Paul. "Tudor Humanism and the Roman Past: A Background to Shakespeare." *Renaissance Quarterly* 41 (1988): 84-111.

The extension of the ancient past as an unbroken continuum gives credence and support to imperial designs. Although not of classical antiquity, Arthurian elements of British antiquity support England's imperial ambitions because Arthur reigns over a native kingdom that develops into an empire beginning with Geoffrey of Monmouth's depiction of Arthur's international military success in the *Historia Regum Britanniæ*.

The establishment of Arthur as the head of an empire provides a basis for later English imperial claims.[10] As England and English identity evolve, Arthur's role as a conqueror fluctuates. He begins as the epitome of kingship during an era in which the monarch needs to function as a strong active military leader physically engaging in combat alongside his men. In early chronicle works of English Arthurian traditions, Arthur's primary role is explicitly that of the political ruler. Chapter One, "Establishing Arthur of Britain in Geoffrey of Monmouth's Chronicle and the Politics of Arthurian Literary Traditions," focuses on Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia*, which establishes Arthur within the literary tradition and centers on the portrayal of Arthur as an imperial and military success while initiating traditions of threats posed by female characters to argue that Geoffrey of Monmouth's creation of a centralized Arthur reflects a desire for a strong monarch in an era of a contested succession that causes civil war. In exploring Geoffrey of Monmouth's intentions in creating his chronicle and following traditions

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[10] Richard Barber recounts "Edward III in a letter of 1301 to the Pope, actually quotes the *History* [*Historia Regum Britanniæ*] in support of his claim to [Scotland]" (*King Arthur* 45). Arthur's conquest of the neighboring country provides English monarchs with support for their own ambitions.

practiced in other countries, Richard Barber argues that "[h]e seems to be attempting to provide the Britons with an emperor-hero to whose golden age they could look back with pride....It is the concept of the emperor-hero that he has adopted" (*King Arthur* 44). Barber's interpretation focuses on ideas of nation and empire. However, Geoffrey of Monmouth reaches beyond justification for colonial efforts and aspirations to outline the manner of monarch which England requires during the 1130s. During the civil war over a questioned succession, the figure of Arthur presented in the *Historia Regum Britanniæ* provides a nostalgic reference to a time of British greatness as a political empire to advocate the strong king that Geoffrey of Monmouth desires as the head of the kingdom, for his Arthur dominates on the battlefield while establishing a time of peaceful stability for England.

The imperial concerns expressed in the chronicle work of Geoffrey of Monmouth—and the chronicle-based works which followed, such as Wace's *Roman de Brut* and Laȝamon's *Brut*—become inherent elements of Arthurian traditions, even in romances which do not focus on those concerns. Arthurian romances lack the epic scale of chronicles regarding British antiquity, but the "historical" elements operate implicitly as aspects of which the contemporary audience would have knowledge. In his work *Arthurian Literature and Society*, Stephen Knight examines the development of what he terms the "European Arthur" (38) through the works of Geoffrey of Monmouth and Chrétien de Troyes. In noting the differences between the authors, Knight states that "Geoffrey presented royal and national dramas characteristic of the century and Chrétien defined the problems faced by ambitious individuals within that larger structure" (38-9).

Chrétien's Arthurian works change the figure in the early French romance tradition by removing Arthur to the background and focusing on courtly love, knighthood, and quests, influencing subsequent French and English authors of Arthurian romance.

Chapter Two, "Englishing Arthur in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," examines the poet's compliance with romance traditions by placing Arthur in the background and Gawain in the forefront, and the poet's exploration of English colonial ventures through the political tensions between England and Wales as depicted in Arthur, the female characters, and the settings in the late fourteenth-century poem to claim that the *Gawain*-poet reduces the role of Arthur in reaction to the uncontested succession of Richard II. The *Gawain*-poet begins his poem with a very brief discussion of Britain's founding mythology, but the explicit connection to chronicle tradition ends quickly before the tale of the quest commences. The *Gawain*-poet introduces his Arthur as the head of a court celebrating not a military victory but a holiday: "Þis kyng lay at Camylot vpon Krystmasse" (37). The court appears secure in the state of their kingdom prior to the disruption of the Green Knight. The threat that the Green Knight poses tests the court's social fabric through the behavior of Gawain and the actions of the women at Castle Hautdesert as well as trying the domestic power of the monarchy, but the threat dissipates as a result of Gawain's chivalric actions, which reassert Arthur's authority. English colonial desires expressed in Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia* also appear in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* albeit in a more localized area than appears in the chronicle tradition. The tensions between the native Welsh and colonial English in the late fourteenth century are depicted in the setting, the figure of Arthur, appropriated by

the English from Welsh legends, the two courts within the poem, and the women which Gawain encounters. The Arthurian conquest within this romance is a cultural one that remains an undercurrent rather than an explicit component of the story, just as Arthur himself remains a minor figure in the course of the action. Because civil strife does not threaten the kingdom, which has a stable succession, the *Gawain*-poet feels no need to establish or promote a warrior king.

The composition of *Le Morte Darthur* by Malory (ca. 1460s) and the publication of the work by Caxton (1485) are separated by a number of years, yet both times face a contested succession. In Chapter Three "Gendering the Round Table and Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*, explores the presentation in Malory's work, as edited by Caxton, of an Arthur whose prominence fluctuates throughout his reign, functioning as a central figure until Britain's stabilization and during Britain's fall, and the two women, Morgan le Fay and Guenevere, whose actions present credible threats to the kingdom, asserting that Malory's Arthur reflects the contested successions in the 1460s between Henry VI and Edward IV and in the 1480s between Richard III and Henry VII to advocate stability, which will allow England to develop on an international stage. Both versions of Malory's text, the Winchester manuscript and the Caxton edition, recount Arthur's imperial accomplishments in his defeat of the Roman emperor, which establishes Britain's power along with an extended era of peace. When examining the Roman war episode in the Caxton edition, Finke and Shichtman argue, "The political implications are likewise significant. For an England ravaged—brought nearly to the point of chaos—by political and social disintegration, Caxton's version of Arthur's wars

with Lucius provides the foundation for the imagined community desired by the

publisher's wealthy patrons and his reading audience" (170). Subjected to years of

political strife centered on an unstable succession, Malory and his editor Caxton promote

a monarch who possesses the strength to achieve military victories and maintain peace

which would allow society to stabilize.

Although Malory's Arthur gains power early in his reign with the defeat of

Emperor Lucius, he cannot retain it throughout his reign. He becomes a background

figure in the peacetime adventures of his knights, who embody chivalric virtues, and the

women who influence their actions.[11] The machinations of Morgan le Fay and Guenevere

threaten the stability of Arthur's rule. Morgan le Fay intentionally acts against Arthur

through deception and magical skills but fails to achieve her intended goal of Arthur's

death, allowing society to reassert itself. Guenevere's affair with Launcelot endangers the

kingdom by fracturing it, causing Arthur's death. The internal threats to Arthur's Britian

are more dangerous than the external risks of foreign wars, reflecting the domestic

instability as Henry VI and Edward IV struggle for the throne over a ten-year period from

1461 until 1471 and as Richard III and Henry VII battle for the throne in 1485. The

instability of the succession during the 1460s when Malory composes the work and

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[11] The roles of female characters within Arthurian literature become prominent in

the medieval romance tradition. For reading on women in Arthurian literature and

tradition, see Fries, Maureen. "Women in Arthurian Literature." *Approaches to Teaching

the Arthurian Tradition*. Eds. Maureen Fries and Jennie Watson. New York: Modern

Language Association of America, 1992. 155-8.

during the years of 1483 to 1485 when Caxton produces his edition affect the

presentation of Arthur because both the author and editor avoid direct involvement in the

conflicts but advocate for what they want England to be—a powerful, stable, peaceful

kingdom that mirrors the greatness achieved in Arthur's time.[12]

With a stabilized succession and government under the Tudors beginning with

Henry VII (r. 1485-1509) through Elizabeth I (r. 1558-1603), Arthur transforms once

more as literary and historical practices evolve. In Chapter Four, "Edmund Spenser's

Disappearing/Reappearing Knight" Spenser's use of Arthur as a recurring background

figure in the quests of other knights is explored as a reflection of political stability that

shapes developing national identity in the 1580s and 1590s, and the female figures who

represent Elizabeth I maintain significant influence over Arthur and his half-brother

Artegall while allowing the male knights to practice and embody chivalric behavior to

claim that Spenser diminishes Arthur within the poem to reinforce Elizabeth's authority

as England grows into an empire. The Tudors, who begin their rule with Henry VII's

deafeat of Richard III in 1485, draw upon the figure of Arthur, perhaps more so than

other dynasties in England, to bolster a weak claim to the English throne in the 1480s and

to strengthen their claim in the early sixteenth century. N. J. Highman observes that

Arthur

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[12] Finke and Shichtman discuss the political situation in England and the

complications of depicting an historical Arthur, noting "that Caxton might want to create

plausible deniability by dissociating himself from the cultural hero" (165).

was successively used for political and cultural purposes by Edward IV,

Henry VII, Henry VIII and Elizabeth, then James VI and I, variously as a

source of dynastic legitimacy and imperial status, as a Protestant icon, as a

touchstone of nationalism and the new identity of the realm with the

monarch's own person, and as a source of courtly ideals and pageantry.

(239)

The Tudor promotion of Arthur lessens from Henry VII's reign (r. 1485-1509) to his

granddaughter Elizabeth I's reign (r. 1558-1603). The changing inquiries into history

influence the waning of Arthurian matter as fact as opposed to fiction. While the

historical aspects of the figure are called more strongly into question during the Tudor

period, Arthur continues to be an important political figure.

In the 1580s, Edmund Spenser composes an Arthurian romance without Arthur as

a central figure to convey the poet's views of English colonial policies in Ireland and his

country's emerging imperial ambitions. The existence of a strong successful monarch at

the height of her power eliminates the need to advocate for a strong English monarch, and

the promotions of a strong *male* monarch during Elizabeth's reign could have proven

dangerous or construed as treasonous. Although Elizabeth had not named her successor

in the 1580s as Spenser is writing *The Faerie Queene*, the questions surrounding the

succession appear a matter of form as James Stuart (James VI of Scotland), a Protestant

adult male of Tudor descent, is the presumptive heir.[13] Despite the lack of legal

formalization by Elizabeth, little conflict surrounds the succession, reflected in Arthur's

diminished role within Spenser's epic. The female figures which represent Elizabeth in

The Faerie Queene gain the power that the recurring figure of Arthur loses in his

depiction as a knight.

Spenser's Arthurian work concentrates less on an issue of succession and more on

domestic political concerns regarding religious conflicts between Protestants and

Catholics, focusing also on the imperial ambitions of Elizabeth and her government

toward Ireland and the Americas. *The Faerie Queene*'s setting addresses colonial

concerns, as does *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*'s setting, for although Spenser never

reveals the exact location of Faerie, the colonial enterprises in Ireland and the landscape

of the country influence its creation. Arthur's projected eventual dominance of Faerie,

which never occurs in the unfinished work, indicates the English perspectives on their

right to rule Ireland. In his examination of the imperial ambitions tied to Arthur and the

material used in *The Faerie Queene*, Bart Van Es, in *Spenser's Forms of History*,

contends that Arthur's Britain "had worked to represent a unified Britain under an

'original' native monarchy, but it was also to carry other associations. Not only could it

be used in support of an expansionist foreign policy about which the Queen herself had

the gravest doubts, it could also imply the particular means by which empire was to be

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[13] James Stuart, the son of Mary Queen of Scots and Henry Stewart, Lord

Darnley, is the great-grandson of Henry VIII's older sister Margaret, who was married to

James IV of Scotland.

achieved" (158-9). Spenser's Arthur portrays the growing national belief in an English empire. The actions of Arthur and other knights within the poem promote the manner in which Spenser, as a poet and colonial official, believes the English government should administer their claims of sovereignty over Ireland. The social order and power structure of Elizabeth's England must be maintained for the health of the realm, and the female figures of *The Faerie Queene* who represent Elizabeth I adhere to the social values while occupying positions of power and dominating the actions of Arthur and Artegall.

Spenser's poem is the last fictional Arthurian work examined in the study since Milton's seventeenth-century work returns Arthur to the genre of historiography. Changing studies of history and questions surrounding the historical accuracy of Arthurian matter affect the use of the material in subsequent literary works. Chapter Five, "Arthur's Return to the "Historical" Realm and John Milton's Republican Ideals," examines the influences of the tumultuous decades of the Civil War, Commonwealth, and Restoration and his republican ideals upon Milton's attitude toward Arthur in various poetic works along with his presentation of Arthur in his history, arguing that Milton abandons an Arthurian project presenting Arthur as a national hero in order to create new English national heroes who embody republican and Protestant ideals. Milton proposes in *Mansus* and in *Epitaphium Damonis* that he will write an English epic focused on Arthurian material; however, he abandons the project and fictional accounts of Arthur during the mid-seventeenth century, composing, instead, a work of British history which includes Arthur among many other figures of British history. Milton returns Arthur to the chronicle tradition in which he begins in English literary traditions but not without

expressing misgivings about the historicity of the material itself. Examining Milton's

treatment of Arthurian material and British history in his work *Nationalism and*

Historical Loss in Renaissance England: Foxe, Dee, Spenser, Milton, Andrew Escobedo

argues, "That Milton refuses to exclude the early history signals how deeply he values a

complete nation story. On the other hand, that Milton gives up on his nation's history

when he reaches the Norman Conquest signals Milton's realization of how obscure the

truth of the English past remains" (193). Milton leaves an unfinished project because the

Arthurian material presents problems in developing empirical approaches to the past,

since ancient British history, particularly the history presented in Geoffrey of

Monmouth's chronicle, cannot be validated through reliable sources and can be viewed

as "Fable," the term which Milton uses in *Paradise Lost* in relation to Arthur and

Arthurian material (*Paradise Lost* 1.580). Milton appears unable to use the Arthurian

matter to promote England or his country's political concerns, unlike his predecessors in

the English literary corpus, because the authenticity of the material remains suspect.

English political aspirations cannot be represented by a most likely fictional monarch,

particularly in the tumultuous political situation of the 1640s in which Milton begins his

historical composition, *The History of Britain*.

While Geoffrey of Monmouth, the *Gawain*-poet, and Malory advocate national

policies or a desired manner of monarch for their own times, Milton addresses national

politics to advocate a government without a monarch throughout his writings after the

mid-1640s and the publication of *Poems 1645* in which *Epitaphium Damonis* and *Mansus*

appear. Incorporating Arthur into a work addressing domestic concerns would counteract

his support of a republican government because audiences and authors view the figure as an ideal monarch for much of post-Conquest English history, and the nostalgia often associated with Arthur and Arthurian material creates problems in the promotion of England's future under a new government by advocating the emulation of the past. The political motives that influenced the creation of Arthurs in previous English works prevent Milton from creating an Arthur in an epic of English origins and political greatness. Even Spenser's approach to Arthur, which lessens his role and title, relies on historical aspects of Arthurian traditions to a greater degree than that with which Milton is comfortable. Milton decisively breaks from Arthurian traditions employed by previous authors, such as Spenser, Malory, and the *Gawain*-poet, and removes the figure from the chivalric traditions which Arthur represents in romance, stripping Arthur of associations with knighthood and chivalric behavior.

As England develops a strong imperial presence on the international stage as a military and colonial power with the defeat of the Spanish Armada in 1588, a more decisive presence and control in Ireland, and new world discoveries in North America, the need for the idealized figure of Arthur as a political tool lessens because the current monarch, Elizabeth I, serves as the icon of English greatness. The development of a concrete English national identity in the later sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries eliminates the need to reach for the imperial greatness of the British past. The succession stabilizes after Henry VII's reign and lacks the dynastic struggles which influence earlier Arthurian writers to call for a peaceful stable realm. The stabilization achieved during Elizabeth's reign ends in the 1640s under Charles I (r. 1625-1649), but the instability of

the Civil War does not restore Arthur to the centralized role he held in Geoffrey of

Monmouth's *Historia*. The Arthurian material in the *Historia* cannot be autheticated, the

romance genre diminishes during the early modern era, and, consequently, the Arthur of

the romance tradition fails to function in the seventeenth century in which Milton writes.

Chapter One:

Establishing Arthur of Britain in Geoffrey of Monmouth's Chronicle

and the Politics of Arthurian Literary Traditions

The origins of the figure of Arthur remain unknown since no concrete records

dating the first appearance in an historical or literary format exist. The figure may have

roots in British mythology or folklore, typically preserved through oral traditions. The

written compilations of these native works produce records which date the manuscripts

but not the material within them. Although the native origins of Arthur remain under

question, the textual origins of the figure as known by modern audiences can be found in

the early chronicles produced during the Anglo-Saxon and Norman eras of England.[1] In

the 1130s, the figure of Arthur attains a new prominence in the chronicle tradition

through the work of Geoffrey of Monmouth. Geoffrey of Monmouth's chronicle, the

Historia Regum Britanniæ (ca. 1136), expands upon the Arthurian material present in

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[1] The terminology used to refer to the island nation can indicate an historical time

period or state of nation. The terms "England" and "Britain" will be used throughout but

not interchangeably. "England" will be used to refer to the kingdom after Anglo-Saxons

control of the island into the modern era, and "Britain" will be used to refer to the

kingdom before Anglo-Saxon control. This distinction signifies the historical separation

marked by Geoffrey of Monmouth who concludes his chronicle with the rise of the

Anglo-Saxons as the end of ancient "British" history. Arthur is the last great British

figure before their fall and the rise of the Saxons, representing an historical moment

which becomes an integral part of later traditions.

existing chronicles to establish his place as a great British ruler. The Arthurian sections of

the *Historia* heavily influence early Arthurian romance traditions and later Arthurian

literary traditions throughout the centuries.[2] In the *Historia Regum Britanniæ*, Geoffrey

of Monmouth creates an Arthur who centralizes power while expanding his empire in

reaction to the contested succession in England after the death of Henry I (r. 1100-1135).

The literary figure of Arthur begins to develop in the twelfth-century *Historia.*

Geoffrey of Monmouth fashions new aspects of Arthurian legend, which later provide the

basis of Arthurian matter, and a new purpose for the figure itself. Arthur moves from a

figure that represents the interests of the Welsh community to one that represents the

interests of the entire English kingdom.[3] N. J. Highman in *King Arthur: Myth-Making*

and History describes the colonial appropriation of native traditions, including the figure

of Arthur. Highman credits the transfer of Arthur to Geoffrey of Monmouth, an "Oxford

cleric, probably an Austin canon of St. George's, who was himself of mixed Celtic-

Norman birth and had grown up within the cross-cultural world of south-east Wales,

where he had developed a deep fascination with the idea of an ancient British history

stretching,..., from Brutus to King Arthur and beyond" (222). Highman presents an idea

that Geoffrey of Monmouth creates the *Historia* in the 1130s to integrate Welsh and

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[2] In his article "The Exhumation of King Arthur at Glastonbury," W. A. Nitze

calls the *Historia Regum Britanniæ* "the fountain-head of Arthurian romance" (355).

[3] The British of whom Geoffrey of Monmouth writes in the *Historia* are the

ancestors of the Welsh and are labeled as Welsh by the Anglo-Saxons who conquer the

British in the sixth century.

Norman cultures, but the *Historia* does not glorify the ancient British as a means of promoting the incorporation of Welsh elements into the Norman culture of twelfth-century England to create a mixed cultural identity.

Geoffrey of Monmouth appropriates aspects of Welsh traditions and beliefs in British history that includes the figure of Arthur without creating further strife in England by supporting ideas of Welsh national feelings in the 1130s.[4] John Edward Lloyd, in his article "Geoffrey of Monmouth," argues, "Nowhere does he [Geoffrey of Monmouth] show any interest in the Welsh of his day or betray any desire to do them honour. On the contrary, they are represented as of little account, by comparison with their noble kinsmen from across the Channel" (467). The British history that Geoffrey of Monmouth shapes can be used by Norman officials to justify their rule of England, not to argue for the prominence of current descendants of ancient British peoples or to unite the multiple

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[4] For further reading on Arthurian material, nationalism, and Wales, see Feibel, Juliet. "Vortigern, Rowena, and the Ancient Britons: Historical Art and the Anglicization of National Origin." *Eighteenth-Century Life* 24.1 (2000): 1-21, Jones, Timothy. "Geoffrey of Monmouth, *Fouke le Fitz Waryn*, and National Mythology." *Studies in Philology* 91 (1994): 233-49, Lamont, Margaret. "Becoming English: Ronwenne's Wassail, Language, and National Identity in the Middle English Prose *Brut*." *Studies in Philology* 107 (2010): 283-309, Pryce, Huw. "British or Welsh? National Identity in Twelfth-Century Wales." *The English Historical Review* 116.468 (2001): 775-801, and Roberts, P. R. "The Union with England and the Identity of 'Anglican' Wales." *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 22 (1972): 49-70.

peoples of the kingdom in a society which represented all races.[5] Written during a time of domestic English political strife, Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniæ* presents an account of Arthur as a central warrior-king who creates an empire to function as an ideal monarch, to argue for a stable kingdom, and to justify English conquests. Geoffrey of Monmouth's portrayal of Arthur continues in English literature through the verse history created by Laȝamon in 1220 under the reign of Henry III (r. 1216-1272), the grandson of Henry II (r. 1154-1189) and great-grandson of Matilda, the daughter of Henry I (r. 1100-1135) and mother of Henry II.[6]

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[5] Medieval, and later early modern, concepts of race are based upon ethnic backgrounds or affiliations rather than skin color as are modern concepts of race. Therefore, racial distinctions could exist between the Welsh or British world from which Arthur rose and the Anglo-Norman community in which Geoffrey of Monmouth lived, and he could have depicted those distinctions throughout his chronicle. For further reading on race in the medieval world, see Bartlett, Robert. "Medieval and Modern Concepts of Race and Ethnicity." *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 31 (2001): 39-56; Cohen, Jeffrey Jerome. "On Saracen Enjoyment: Some Fantasies of Race in Late Medieval France and England." *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 31 (2001): 113-46; and Hahn, Thomas G. "The Difference the Middle Ages Males: Color and Race before the Modern World." *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 31 (2001): 1-37.

[6] Laȝamon's verse work, *Brut* (1220) is an English translation of Wace's *Roman de Brut* (1155). For information on Laȝamon's *Brut*, see Treharne, Elaine. "Laȝamon's

Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia* is not solely an account of Arthur and his reign; the chronicle provides an historical account of the rise and fall of the Britons. As Geoffrey of Monmouth states in the Dedication of his work, he wants to tell the stories of the ancient British kings because "gesta eorum digna æternitate laudis constarent" (I.x p. 219) [the deeds of these men were such that they deserve to be praised for all time] (I.x p. 51).[7] While Geoffrey of Monmouth expresses a desire to praise certain men for all time, he has not always been the recipient of praise over the almost nine centuries since the *Historia*'s publication in 1136. In *The Legend of Arthur in British and American Literature*, Jennifer R. Goodman asserts that "[t]he *Historia regum Brittaniae (History of the Kings of Britain)* ranks among the most enduringly influential and controversial

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Brut." Old and Middle English c.890-c.1400, An Anthology. Ed. Elaine Treharne. Malden, MA, and Oxford. Blackwell, 2004. 359-60.

[7] All translations of Geoffrey of Monmouth's work are from the Lewis Thorpe translation, see Geoffrey of Monmouth. *The History of the Kings of Britain.* 1136. Trans. Lewis Thorpe. London: Penguin, 1966. 49-284. For Thorpe's scholarship and explanations concerning his own translation, see Thorpe, Lewis. Introduction. *The History of the Kings of Britain.* 1136. Trans. Lewis Thorpe. London: Penguin, 1966. 9-47. I chose to use Thorpe's translation as Maureen Fries refers to Thorpe's work as "[t]he definitive English translation" ("Part One: Materials" 4). Before choosing the Thorpe translation, I worked with the Sebastian Evan's translation as revised by Charles Dunn. For Evans edition, see Geoffrey of Monmouth. *History of the Kings of Britain.* Trans. Sebastian Evans. Rev. Charles W. Dunn. New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., 1958. 3-265.

works of its day" (14). Although many audiences accepted Geoffrey of Monmouth's

work as an historical account, the work was not viewed wholly as an authoritative history

by his contemporaries or successive generations. Describing the reception of Geoffrey of

Monmouth's chronicle, Robert W. Hanning, in *The Vision of History in Early Britain:*

From Gildas to Geoffrey of Monmouth, states that "[t]o his detractors, Geoffrey has

always seemed a liar pure and simple, the unscrupulous fabricator of a legendary British

past, and as such deserving of no serious consideration whatsoever" (122)[8]. Despite

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[8] Many questions surrounding Geoffrey of Monmouth's work and its historical

veracity center on the source which he claims to have received from "walterus

oxenefordensis archidiaconus" (I.i p. 219) [Walter, Archdeacon of Oxford] (I.i p. 51) and

is "quendam britannici sermonis librum uetustissimum" (I.i p. 219) [a certain very

ancient book written in the British language] (I.i p. 51). Debates concern the existence of

the source itself as well as the authenticity of the material supposedly included within it.

The practice of claiming a source which may or may not exist is not unique to Geoffrey

of Monmouth and represents a practice of fiction writers which continues into twentieth-

century works. For further reading on issues of traditions of sources in English literature,

see Henige, David. "Authorship Renounced: The 'Found' Source in the Historical

Record." *Journal of Scholarly Publishing* 41.1 (2009): 31-55 and Ziolkowski, Jan M.

"Cultures of Authority in the Long Twelfth Century." *JEGP: Journal of English and*

Germanic Philology 108 (2009): 421-48. The debates over the source or sources for

Geoffrey of Monmouth's Arthurian material also involve influences or material from

Celtic areas of Western Europe. For further reading, see Ashe, Geoffrey. "'A Certain

detractors, Geoffrey of Monmouth's work establishes a lasting presence as a source of

British "history" until empirical inquiry relegates the text to literature. Before the

sixteenth century, dissenting views of the *Historia*'s veracity appear to be a minority, and

the work was viewed as credible history for several centuries, particularly regarding

Arthurian material for which the work remains known to modern audiences. Richard J.

Moll in *Before Malory: Reading Arthur in Later Medieval England* describes the effects

of the *Historia Regum Britanniæ* and its role in the corpus of Arthurian literature,

observing, "The *Historia* culminates with the reign of Arthur, Britain's greatest king. His

narrative would become the standard historical account of Arthur's reign for some five

hundred years, as the *Historia* quickly spread over all of Europe" (12). Whether viewed

as factual or fictional, Geoffrey of Monmouth's chronicle becomes an authoritative,

influential work inside and outside England. While participating in an existing chronicle

tradition, Geoffrey of Monmouth adapts British history and historical writing traditions to

serve his purposes in arguing for political stability in England.

The *Historia Regum Britanniæ* relates several centuries of ancient British history

before Arthur's life and the brief time after Arthur's death, yet the Arthurian matter gains

prominence over material which relates the stories of other British rulers, such as Brutus

and Lear. Geoffrey of Monmouth ends his close examination of British monarchs with

the king who would become the ideal monarch for generations and an exemplum for a

contemporary claimant to the English throne, but Geoffrey of Monmouth reshapes the

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Very Ancient Book': Traces of an Arthurian Source in Geoffrey of Monmouth's

History." Speculum 56 (1981): 301-23.

existing figure of Arthur to manufacture the ideal he wants to promote for the Norman

aristocracy.[9] In *Geoffrey of Monmouth*, Michael J. Curley states,

> The culmination of the *HRB* is Geoffrey's account of the magnificent
>
> career of Arthur, son of Utherpendragon and Ygerna, which occupies
>
> about 20 percent of the entire *HRB*. Geoffrey could count on his
>
> audience's knowing something of Arthur, but the details of the British
>
> warrior's life as preserved in the sources, Nennius, the Welsh Annals, and
>
> Welsh literary and oral traditions were conveniently vague and
>
> contradictory enough to allow Geoffrey to exercise his customary
>
> independence and to give free rein to his fertile imagination. (75)

Geoffrey of Monmouth modifies existing traditions of Arthur as a British leader, which

may be undeveloped or part of the fringe cultures of the island kingdom, to promote the

views that he determines to be important to his audience of the dominant Norman society

in England, and in doing so, Geoffrey of Monmouth begins a literary tradition in which

authors of English Arthurian literature reshape existing Arthurian matter to suit their own

purposes and in which Arthur begins a new life as a hero of a powerful, unified English

kingdom.

Geoffrey of Monmouth does not write his *Historia* to present ancient British

history as an altruistic measure to preserve the past glories of Britain as he indicates in his

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[9] For reading on the Anglo-Norman court, see Hollister, C. Warren. "Courtly

Culture and Courtly Style in the Anglo-Norman World." *Albion: A Quarterly Journal

Concerned with British Studies* 20.1 (1988): 1-17.

dedication. The work was composed during a time of political turmoil after the Norman

Conquest during which the succession to the throne was contested between two

claimants—Stephen, who reigned as king, and Matilda, the daughter and heir of the

previous monarch, Henry I.[10] This conflict occurred approximately seventy years after

the Norman victory at the Battle of Hastings and could have undermined rather than

solidified Norman rule in England. In his article "The Topical Concerns of Geoffrey of

Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britannie*," Paul Dalton discusses the purposes of the

chronicle as a means of "peacemaking," arguing that "Geoffrey wrote this work with an

eye to current political affairs and blended history, prophecy, and topicality in a way that

reflected and appealed to contemporary concerns about the civil war and the threat it

posed to the continuance of Norman domination of England" (690). The authority and

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[10] For reading on Geoffrey of Monmouth's purpose in the *Historia Regum*

Britanniæ and its uses and views by later authors, see Dalton, Paul. "The Date of

Geoffrey Gaimar's *Estoire Des Engleis*, the Connections of His Patrons, and the Politics

of Stephen's Reign." *The Chaucer Review* 42 (2007): 23-47; Flint, Valerie I. J. "The

Historia Regum Britanniae of Geoffrey of Monmouth: Parody and Its Purpose. A

Suggestion." *Speculum* 54 (1979): 447-68; and Keeler, Laura. "The *Historia Regum*

Britanniae and Four Mediaeval Chroniclers." *Speculum* 21 (1946): 24-37. For

information on themes within Geoffrey of Monmouth's work, see Fries, Maureen.

"Boethian Themes and Tragic Structure in Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum*

Britanniae." *The Arthurian Tradition: Essays in Convergence*. Eds. Mary Flowers

Braswell and John Bugge. Tuscaloosa, AL, and London: U of Alabama P, 1988. 29-42.

claims of the Normans to rule England could have been weakened by internal conflicts of the ruling house between cousins Stephen (r. 1135-1154) and Matilda. Geoffrey of Monmouth creates a handbook of kingship promoting Arthur as an example to which Matilda's son Henry, later Henry II (r. 1154-1189), could aspire when establishing his own English kingship. The appropriation the figure of Arthur and manufacture of a new tradition surrounding him allows Geoffrey of Monmouth to provide an avenue by which the Normans support their authority through a hereditary claim over the realm.

Geoffrey of Monmouth departs from works produced by other English chronicle authors, such as William of Malmesbury, author of *Gesta Regum Anglorum* (ca. 1125), and Henry Huntingdon, author of *Historia Anglorum* (1129), of the Norman era. Geoffrey reaches to the ancient past of the island to support political views, including credibility for Norman monarchs as well as the need for a stable monarch and succession through the lessons which historical works often offer. Highman discusses the work of William of Malmesbury and Henry of Huntingdon in composing histories of England during the early part of Norman rule, stresses that their works focused on Anglo-Saxon history and sources, but notes that "Anglo-Saxon history was ill-suited to legitimizing the new Norman regime in Britain" (222). The new cultural dynasty could not rely upon the history of the peoples whom they had conquered to support their rule of the kingdom without contest, and a justification based upon a reason other than military conquest benefits the Normans. Highman argues that the *Historia Regum Britanniæ* supplies this justification and other needs of its contemporary audience:

In particular, it provided the new Anglo-Norman kings with a predecessor

of heroic size, a great pan-British king in a long line of monarchs capable

of countering contemporary pressures for decentralization, as had occurred

in France, and reinforcing claims of political superiority over the Celtic

lands. Existing claims that the Normans were descended from the Trojans

gelled easily with the descent of the Britons from the same stock. (223)

Geoffrey of Monmouth's chronicle fashions a legal claim through a common descent

from the Trojans, making the Norman claim one of inheritance rather than military

conquest to support the claim to the throne of William of Normandy (known in English

history as William I [1066-1087] or William the Conqueror) as Edward the Confessor's

heir rather than through victory at Hastings over Harold and, possibly, Matilda and Henry

Plantagenet's claims as direct heirs to Henry I (r. 1100-1135) as opposed to Stephen's

claim as an indirect male heir to Henry I.[11] Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia* can be

interpreted as an argument for the inheritance of the throne as well as a unified England

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[11]Stephen of Blois was Henry I's cousin and not in direct succession from

William I. Henry's direct heir was his daughter Matilda, the former Holy Roman

Empress and current wife of Geoffrey Plantagenet, Duc d'Anjou. For a concise

examination of the contested succession between Stephen and Matilda as well as short

explorations of the lives of English monarchs within their contemporary political

situations, see Erickson, Carolly. *Royal Panoply: Brief Lives of the English Monarchs.*

New York: St. Martin's Press, 2003.

under a single powerful ruler as the kingdom was under Arthur, whose reign functions as a political ideal for Norman kings.

Beginning his literary life as an ideal monarch, Geoffrey of Monmouth's Arthur exists in simpler terms than he does in works succeeding the *Historia*. The basic "facts" of Arthur's life (the civil unrest leading to his conception, Merlin's involvement, his accession to the throne at a young age, his marriage to Guenevere, the defeat of the Saxons and the Romans, the betrayal by Mordred, and his death in battle) recounted throughout Arthurian literature have literary origins in the *Historia*. However, the personal complications which color later Arthurian tales do not dominate Geoffrey of Monmouth's account of Arthur's life. In the Arthurian sections of the *Historia*, Arthur is the central figure, and this portrayal of Arthur's dominance is replicated in chronicle-based works as Wace's *Roman de Brut* and La3amon's *Brut* while decidedly altered in romances. In "King Arthur and Politics," Gordon Hall Gerould argues that Geoffrey of Monmouth's conception of Arthur "persisted in all the romances except a few late ones of English derivation. If Arthur became the centre for the exploits of the knights of the Round Table, but himself took small part in them, it was because his position had been fixed by Geoffrey as a world-conqueror: he was too lofty a person to be involved in adventures by the way" (49). Because Geoffrey of Monmouth reshapes Arthur as a warrior who conquers vast European territories in his establishiment of an empire, the British king can participate only in large-scale and international activities, setting the precedent for later presentations of the figure. Unlike the romance writers whom his work influences, Geoffrey of Monmouth's intent is to illustrate the qualities of monarchs

needed to create a secure, unified kingdom, not the practices of chivalry. His work

focuses on the successes of Arthur as Conqueror because he represents ideal kingship

over a unified kingdom and eschews times of peace for times of conflict and conquest.

While warfare occupies his reign in the *Historia*, the accession of Arthur to the

British throne occurs through a peaceful and desired transfer of power from father to son.

Perhaps reacting to the controversy over the English throne in which a rightful heir

(Matilda) has been denied the throne by a close relative (Stephen), Geoffrey of

Monmouth eliminates doubts concerning legitimacy from Arthur's reign despite Uther's

disloyal actions toward his vassal Gorlois leading to Arthur's conception. Uther's desire

for Ygerna results in a small civil war, but, in Geoffrey's account, Arthur's legitimacy is

not questioned as a result of his parents' conduct before his birth as it is in later Arthurian

romances, such as Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*. Arthur is the recognized, undisputed heir

to the throne: Geoffrey of Monmouth recounts that after Uther's death, "conuenerunt ex

diuersis prouinciis proceres britonum in ciuitatem silcestrie ad dubricium urbis legionum

archiepiscopum. suggerentes ut arturum filium regis in regem consecraret" (IX.i p. 432)

[the leaders of the Britons assembled from their various provinces in the town of

Silchester and there suggested to Dubricius, the Archbishop of the City of the Legions,

that as their King he should crown Arthur, the son of Uther] (IX.i p. 212). In Geoffrey's

narrative, Arthur's right to the throne passes uncontested. In fact, his father's vassals

insist upon his proper, timely coronation because they need their king to ensure the

welfare of the realm. The peaceful transfer of power directly contrasts contested

successions early in Norman rule over England, specifically those concerning William

the Conqueror (r. 1066-1087), Stephen (r. 1134-1154), Matilda, and Henry II (r. 1154-1189).

Unlike real-life Norman monarchs, Arthur neither has to struggle for nor prove himself worthy of kingship. His personal qualities present him as an example for his people despite his youth, for "Erat autem arturus .xv. annorum iuuenis inaudite uirtutis atque largitatis. in quo tantam gratiam innata bonitas prestiterat.'ut a cunctis fere populis amaretur" (IX.i p. 432) [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 of the people] (IX.i p. 212). When Geoffrey of Monmouth introduces Arthur to the audience, Arthur is already imbued with the qualities that make the teenager an ideal man supported by his nobles and loved by almost all of his subjects, and he has no need to prove his worth through strength in battle. Michael A. Faletra believes the personal qualities of the king illustrate a connection to the society to which Geoffrey of Monmouth writes. In "Narrating the Matter of Britain: Geoffrey of Monmouth and the Norman Colonization of Wales," Faletra argues, "Arthur's great deeds are always attributed, in proper Norman fashion, to his individual abilities and never to the general goodwill of the Britons" (72). To represent an ideal for Norman monarchs, Arthur needs to function according to Norman values even though he represents part of Britain's glorious past. The personal qualities given to Arthur by Geoffrey of Monmouth portray the figure as something other than a warrior to develop a multi-dimensional Arthur although these personal or social qualities receive less attention than his martial attributes in the account.

Arthur's courage and generosity play integral roles in his early actions as king as he serves his vassals and protects his kingdom; his first actions after his coronation are to gather an army to battle the Saxons. Geoffrey of Monmouth explains the connection of generosity to warfare, stating, "Arturus ergo quia in illo probitas largitionem comitabatur.'statuit saxones inquietare. ut eorum opibus que ei famulabatur ditaret familiam. Commonebat etiam id rectitude. cum tocius insule monarchiam debuerat hereditario iure obtinere" (IX.i p. 433) [In Arthur courage was closely linked with generosity, and he made up his mind to harry the Saxons, so that with their wealth he might reward the retainers who served his own household. The justness of his cause encouraged him, for he had a claim by rightful inheritance to the kingship of the whole island] (IX.i p. 212). His decision results from two reasons—to gain goods and property, which he then bestows upon his men to demonstrate his worthiness as a leader and a king, and to assert his claim over the entire island, including Saxon territories. Although Arthur believes his legal claim of inheritance justifies his military actions, his first reason to attack the Saxons rests in a desire for wealth which he needs to demonstrate his generosity to his own people once his own wealth is gone. To modern audiences, the act of war appears mercenary rather than just because his primary motivation mixes greed with pride since he desires the treasure to appear generous to his own people. However, ideals of kingship require Arthur to distribute military gains among his men. The two intertwined aspects of his kingship drive his actions against the Saxons and benefit his people as well as himself, for his people gain wealth as well as security with the elimination of the Saxon threat during his reign. Arthur seeks to protect his kingdom

while unifying areas of Britain under his reign in accordance with the traits that engender love for the king within his people.

The courage and generosity initially stressed as the motivating factors behind his attack on the Saxons fades as his military prowess grows. Arthur, as depicted by Geoffrey of Monmouth, soon appears driven by conquest during the early years of his reign; Arthur will not achieve satisfaction until all threats, both on and off the island, are eradicated, allowing his kingdom to enjoy tranquility. While acts of war bring peace to the victorious realm, Arthur's exploits in battle produce questions about his courageous and generous character that Geoffrey of Monmouth introduces at the young king's coronation. After defeating the Saxons, Arthur takes his army to Scotland to help his nephew Hoel, and his actions against the Scots are not simply defensive, resulting in an ambivalent victory. Geoffrey of Monmouth relates that after a brief skirmish with the Irish, who are quickly defeated, Arthur brutally attacks the Scots: "Potitus ilico uictoria. uacauit iterum delere gentem scotorum atque pictorum.'incommutabili seuicie indulgens. Cumque nulli prout reperiebatur parceret" (IX.vi p. 442) [Once he had conquered the Irish, he was at liberty once more to wipe out the Scots and the Picts. He treated them with unparalleled severity, sparing no one who fell into his hands] (IX.vi p. 219). The bloodthirsty leader, who attempts to commit whole-scale genocide, appears to be a different person than the paragon of virtue introduced at his coronation. The monarch beloved by his own subjects for his virtues callously destroys another people in his quest for victory, making their deaths, which are attributed directly to Arthur, appear as executions rather than as casualties of war.

Only after the men of the church come to Arthur bearing relics as they beseech him to have mercy upon the conquered Scots does Arthur mitigate his brutal conquest of the Scots. Geoffrey of Monmouth describes the change which comes over the king: "Cumque regem in hunc modum rogassent.'commouit eum pietas in lacrimas. sanctorumque uirorum peticionibus adquiescens. ueniam donauit" (IX.vi p. 442) [When they had petitioned the King in this way, their patriotism moved him to tears. Arthur gave in to the prayers presented by these men of religion and granted a pardon to their people] (IX.vi p. 220). The clergy, not the general population, intercede on behalf of the Scots, and their pleas move Arthur to display the virtues of mercy and generosity that he demonstrates to his own people. The episode remains ambiguous if Arthur exists as an ideal English monarch. The massacre of the Scottish people can reflect contemporary views regarding conflicts with Scottish lords along the border and the Scottish king's support of Matilda, stress Arthur's human frailties, or portray an extreme example of conquest. However, the Scottish war may serve a more direct purpose within the narrative. Curley argues, "Arthur's campaigns against the Picts and the Scots following the expulsion of the Saxons serve as a bridge to his international conquests" (77). The Scottish war sets the stage for further conquests, which start with the enemies geographically closest to Britain before expanding across Europe.

The victories over Scotland and the Saxons unify the island of Britain under a strong single ruler. Arthur achieves the stabilization of the island's politics that the Normans seek themselves. Arthur's domestic political victory does not end his military quests to establish dominance over external threats to his kingdom. His next conquest is

over the Irish, close neighbors and established adversaries, who attack Arthur on his earlier journey to Scotland, and "Adueniente deinde sequenti estate. parauit classem suam. &. adiuit hÿbernie insulam quam sibi subdere desiderabat" (IX.x p. 445) [As soon as the next summer came round, Arthur fitted out a fleet and sailed off to the island of Ireland, which he was determined to subject to his own authority] (IX.x p. 221). Arthur targets the Irish in retaliation for their attack during the Scottish war as well as their proximity since Arthur seeks to expand his realm beyond Britain's borders.

Unlike the Scottish episode, the Irish episode concentrates on describing the Irish and their actions in battle, not Arthur's military performance against them. Geoffrey of Monmouth recounts that the Irish army "eius nuda & inermis misere lacerata ilico confugit.'quo ei locus refugii patebat. Nec mora captus est etiam gilmaurus. & dedicioni coactus. Unde ceteri prinicipes patrie stupefacti exemplo regis. deditionem fecerunt" (IX.x p. 445) [which was naked and unarmed, was miserably cut to pieces where it stood, and ran away to any place where it could find refuge. Gilmaurius himself was captured immediately and forced to submit. The remaining princes of the country, thunderstruck by what had happened, followed their King's example and surrendered] (IX.x p. 222). The description depicts Irish weaknesses in capture while indirectly stressing Arthur's strengths through the Irish's choice to flee and surrender. The episodes in Scotland and Ireland are important to the establishment of a British empire within Geoffrey of Monmouth's narrative along with the English imperial aspirations by Norman rulers and also successive generations. As J. S. P. Tatlock recounts in "Geoffrey of Monmouth's Motives for Writing His *Historia*," the *Historia Regum Britanniæ* "was quoted as

affording early historical precedent for domination by England over Scotland and Ireland" (695). The Irish surrender to Arthur legitimizes British, as well as later English, rule, establishing the legal precedent used to justify control over Ireland by the Normans and successive English ruling houses.

In the *Historia*, the defeat of the Irish is Arthur's first conquest outside of the island of Britannia. Subsequent conquests occur through battles as well as pre-emptive surrenders that result from Arthur's reputation. Geoffrey of Monmouth quickly recounts the successes in the building of a British empire; after Arthur's military victory in Iceland, "Exin diuulgato per ceteras insulas rumore quod ei nulla prouintia resistere poterat.'doldauius rex gotlandie & gunhpuar rex orcadum ultro uenere. promissoque uectigali. subiectionem fecerunt" (IX.x p. 445-6) [A rumour spread through all the other islands that no country could resist Arthur. Doldavius, King of Gotland, and Gunhpar, King of the Orkneys, came of their own free will to promise tribute and to do homage] (IX.x p. 222). Arthur is a warrior of such renown that monarchs willingly concede their autonomy to this young man whose military campaigns begin shortly after his coronation at fifteen years of age. According to Curley,

> Arthur's conquests of Ireland, Iceland, Gotland, and the Orkneys are
>
> swiftly accomplished in the course of the next summer. This brief section
>
> of the *HRB* reveals once again that one of Geoffrey's principal strategies
>
> in inflating Arthur's career to epic proportions was to present him as both
>
> the epitome and the apex of previous British accomplishments. He repeats
>
> the deeds of his predecessors, but on a larger scale. (78-9)

Early in his reign, Arthur completes greater achievements than previous British rulers, and his imperial expansion establishes peace within Britain, unthreatened by internal or domestic conflicts. However, a peaceful Britain does not need a warrior-king, so the narrative omits the twelve years of peace, resuming when Arthur arms himself in the conquest of Gaul and Scandanavia. Goodman argues that these conquests tie the figure closely to the Norman rulers of England since "Arthur's conquests span the Norman sphere of influence, from their Scandinavian point of departure as Viking raiders to the great Norman conquests in France and England" (17). These conquests present Arthur as an ideal ruler who controls every area associated with Norman society. He achieves the imperial ambitions toward which a ruler in Geoffrey of Monmouth's time can aspire.

As a warrior-king, Arthur briefly recreates an empire which includes Britain and Rome by defeating the armies of the Roman emperor Lucius Hiberius. Within this imaginary empire, Britain controls Rome, inverting the structure of the Roman empire, which fell in the late fifth century. Tatlock maintains that Geoffrey possessed the awareness that the depiction of Arthur holding dominion over Britain, the other countries on the island of Britain, Ireland, Iceland, the Scandinavian nations, Gaul, and Rome "would be highly gratifying to the Norman dynasty and its supporters" (703). The conquest of this large part of Europe by a monarch who has barely reached the beginnings of middle age while remaining beloved by his people demonstrates to the Normans what the monarch of a unified, stabilized England can accomplish, but without political stability, this dominance cannot be maintained. The Roman episode effects the

political pinnacle of Arthur's reign, and Arthur with his knights leaves on an extended

continental campaign with domestic security well-established.

Since Arthur's role is that of a warrior-king, Arthur leads his army against the

Romans and receives credit for the victory; however, Geoffrey of Monmouth refrains

from attributing to the British king the Roman emperor's death, a death which establishes

a British triumph. Describing the battle, Geoffrey of Monmouth recounts, "Tunc multa

milia romanorum conciderunt. Tunc tandem lucius imperator infra turmas occupatus.

cuiusdam lancea confossus interiit" (X.xi p. 494) [Many thousands of the Romans were

killed. In the end, Lucius himself, their general, was brought to bay in the midst of his

troops. He fell dead, pierced through by an unknown hand] (X.xi p. 256). The Britons

defeat the Romans, but Lucius Hiberius's death cannot be claimed directly by any one

member of the British army, including Arthur. Arthur's distance from the Roman

emperor's death suggests a political decision. As king of Britain and head of the army,

Arthur asserts a conqueror's rights over Rome with Lucius Hiberius's defeat. However,

questions of usurpation and execution can arise to taint the conquest if Arthur directly

kills Lucius Hiberius on the battlefield. Yet, the British triumph over Rome as well as the

British empire is short-lived. Hanning argues, "As Geoffrey brings British history to its

great climax, he emphasizes the contrast between the political heights which a united

Britain is capable of scaling under a powerful monarch, and the sudden depths into which

monarch and nation alike are suddenly thrown" (148). Before Arthur can obtain his

ultimate triumph by appearing in Rome to claim dominion, fully realizing British

imperial ambitions, he receives word of domestic as well as familial betrayal that leads to the kingdom's disintegration from within itself.

Arthur's betrayal by his sister's son instigates a new civil war, establishing British civil wars at the beginning and the end of Arthur's life. Arthur creates peace through his martial strength, but his domestic success fades at the moment that his international success peaks. When Arthur prepares to leave Britain to fight Lucius Hiberius, he appoints a regency in his absence: "arturus modredo nepoti suo atque ganhumere regine britanniam ad conseruandum permittens" (X.ii p. 468) [he handed over the task of defending Britain to his nephew Mordred and to his Queen, Guinevere] (X.ii p. 237). He leaves his nephew to govern in his absence, but Mordred reaches beyond regency to usurp the British throne. Arthur's prompt return and military prowess fail to achieve the success which he has gained in the past and to prevent the kingdom's fall. Even on the battlefield, Arthur no longer triumphs despite his army's defeat of Mordred and his forces. In an advance by Arthur, "Condicit namque nefandus ille proditor. & multa milia secum" (XI.ii p. 500-1) [the accursed traitor was killed and many thousands of his men with him] (XI.ii. p. 261). Mordred himself no longer poses a threat, but the elimination of Mordred results in grave consequences to the realm politically as well as to Arthur physically. Geoffrey of Monmouth recounts, "Set et inclitus ille rex arturus letaliter uulneratus est qui illuc ad sananda uulnera sua in insulam auallonis euectus. constantino cognato suo....diadema britannie concessit" (XI.ii p. 501) [Arthur himself, our renowned king, was mortally wounded and was carried off to the Isle of Avalon, so that his wounds might be attended to. He handed the crown of Britain over to his cousin Constantine]

(XI.ii p. 261). Arthur survives to name his successor, essentially abdicating his throne, before he leaves for Avalon. The civil war concludes the glory of pre-Anglo-Saxon Britain, for no British monarch after Arthur obtains domestic peace and international success as he did.

Arthur's fall, which initiates the British fall, warns monarchs to address domestic concerns before international aspirations of conquest or colonization. Because he seeks to defeat Lucius Hiberius, who challenges Arthur's authority in Britain, Arthur neglects internal dangers which may already exist. Curley does not interpret the fall of Arthur, and consequently Britain, as the result of overreaching imperial designs. Curley asserts that Arthur's search for glory and material gains lead the British king in his assault against Rome, and "within its larger context, Mordred's revolt is thus part of a long and unhappy pattern in the *HRB* of individuals pursuing their own personal gratifications at the expense of communal welfare" (98). The monarch must place national concerns above personal accomplishments, and Arthur's kingdom splinters because his desire moves beyond the nation's defense to self-aggrandizement. This interpretation, however, requires the separation of the king into private and public personas. Geoffrey of Monmouth concentrates on Arthur as king with only brief glimpses, such as his marriage to Guenevere, beyond his political authority. Arthur's achievements on the battlefield are Britain's achievements as an empire, and Arthur's failures as a monarch to place British welfare above his own are Britain's failures as a stabilized kingdom. The story of Arthur's life depicts an example of an ideal monarch for the Norman rulers, existing as a warning of the dangers of English domestic instability to audiences of the *Historia* in

Geoffrey of Monmouth's own historical moment. Dalton contends that Geoffrey of Monmouth "was intent on using history and prophecy to teach his powerful contemporaries that, unless they mended the errors of their ways and terminated the civil war [between Stephen and Matilda] in which they were engaged, they would lose their power over England to foreign invaders" ("The Topical" 694). The Normans, although foreign conquerors, may learn from British history, particularly Arthur's story, to preserve their rule, recognizing the ever-present danger of losing England as a result of domestic upheaval.

The civil war between Mordred and Arthur leads to the political demise of Arthur and Britain, but the betrayal that produces domestic strife is not Mordred's alone because Arthur's wife also participates in the usurpation. Guenevere is one of three women spoken of in the Arthurian section of the *Historia*; the other two are Arthur's mother Ygerna and his sister Anna. Each female character, as either wife, mother, or sister, plays a limited but pivotal role in Arthur's rise and fall.[12] Guenevere occupies the prominent female role in the Arthurian section of the *Historia*. As Arthur's queen, she functions as a significant element of Arthur's reign from their marriage until his death, including contributing to his fall. Arthur's first acts as king consist of military actions against the

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[12] As Arthurian traditions develop, the character of Ygerna becomes Igraine. However, the character of Anna disappears, and Arthur gains two sisters or half-sisters, depending upon the work, Morgause and Morgan or Morgan le Fay. As the characters of his sisters evolve, they ultimately play larger roles in Arthur's life, significantly influencing the action within the works.

Saxons and Scots. When he returns from those excursions victorious, he serves his kingdom by marrying Guenevere who "ex nobili genere romanorum editam. que in thalamo cadoris ducis educta. tocius insule mulieres pulcritudine superabat" (IX.ix p. 445) [was descended from a noble Roman family and had been brought up in the household of Duke Cador. She was the most beautiful woman in the entire island] (IX.ix p. 221). The introduction of Guenevere presents her as an ideal woman for Arthur's society, married for her lineage and beauty without indications of love between the couple or of Guenevere's feelings. In the Arthurian material in Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia*, Guenevere plays significant roles in Arthur's life when he leaves the kingdom to fight against the Romans and when he returns to Britain to reclaim his throne, but she remains ambiguous because the reasons behind her actions or decisions are not revealed. Despite the uncertainty, audiences can infer her intelligence along with her political savvy, which Arthur acknowledges and uses when he leaves Britain. When Arthur learns of the preparations of Emperor Lucius Hiberius and his client kings and vassals, "arturus modredo nepoti suo atque ganhumere regine britanniam ad conseruandum permittens" (X.ii p. 468) [he handed over the task of defending Britain to his nephew Mordred and to his Queen, Guinevere] (X.ii p. 237). Arthur's naming of his wife as co-regent indicates significant trust in her to administer to the kingdom's needs in his absence as well as the value of her abilities, not simply her beauty.

During Arthur's reign from the time of their marriage until his departure to Rome, Guenevere adheres to the status quo, supporting her king and kingdom, as displayed in her participation in the plenary court. However, in Arthur's absence, Guenevere no

longer acts bound to her role as Arthur's queen, which she has previously upheld.

Guenevere's and Mordred's actions reach Arthur while he marches on Rome. He learns

that Mordred now possesses his throne as well as his wife: "reginamque ganhumaram

uiolato iure priorum nuptiarum eidem nefando uenere copulatam fuisse" (X.xiii p. 496)

[this treacherous tyrant was living adulterously and out of wedlock with Queen

Guinevere, who had broken the vows of her earlier marriage] (X.xiii p. 257). The

description stresses Mordred's treachery without explicitly mentioning Guenevere's

treason. The rejection of her vows to Arthur is the rejection of her vows to the king,

making her betrayal of her husband a political betrayal of the kingdom. Guenevere's

treason appears to be of her own accord; she breaks her marriage vows, living with

Mordred as his queen without apparent coercion from Mordred. She undermines

Arthur's past conquests by aligning herself with Mordred and his army, which comprises

Picts, Irish, and Saxons who had previously threatened the kingdom, because she

represents Britain as Arthur's queen and as a regent in his absence. Guenevere's decision

to betray Arthur is not the whim of a capricious girl, for her intelligence is implied

through her status as co-regent in Arthur's absence. Therefore, she knowingly violates

Arthur's trust along with the British people's trust by opening the kingdom to invaders.

Her actions subvert the integrity and strength of the kingdom which she has been

entrusted to protect.

Her alliance with Mordred in his usurpation of the British throne signifies the

demonstrable shift in Guenevere's political acts, which display concern for herself more

so than for the kingdom. When she learns that Mordred regroups his army after an initial

defeat, Guenevere acts deliberately: "Quod ut ganhumare regine nuntiatum est.'confestim sibi desperans. ab eboraco ad urbem legionum diffugit. atque in templo iulii martiris inter monachas earum uitam suscepit.'& caste uiuere proposuit" (XI.i p. 498) [When this was announced to Queen Guinevere, she gave way to despair. She fled from York to the City of the Legions, and there in the church of Julius the Martyr, she took her vows among the nuns, promising to lead a chaste life] (XI.i p. 259). Guenevere exhibits agency in her decisions to flee both from Mordred and Arthur, seeking sanctuary in a religious life as a nun, yet her motivations remain unknown in Geoffrey of Monmouth's account, which fails to clarify her actions as self-preservation against the victor of the civil war or as penance to atone for or alleviate guilt resulting from her treason against her husband and kingdom. No male figure forces her to break her marriage vows to her husband, to betray her kingdom, or to join the religious order, revealing that Geoffrey of Monmouth's Guenevere exists as more than an ornamental, properly-behaved figure in Arthur's court, despite her sporadic occurrence in the narrative. The audience learns of Guenevere's character through the inference of Arthur's actions in making Guenevere regent as well as against her alliance with Mordred, which reveal her importance to promoting or undermining the kingdom. Tatlock asserts that Geoffrey of Monmouth does create important female characters in the first half of his work in the four queens—Guendoloena, Cordeilla, Marica, and Helena—who display virtuous qualities as a means of supporting the claims of Matilda to the throne (702). Geoffrey of Monmouth fashions distinct female characters concerned with the welfare of the kingdom, but in the Arthurian sections of the *Historia Regum Britanniæ*, Guenevere's actions, which center

on her own welfare, not the kingdom's, represent a danger to Britain because she abandons her king, her role as queen, and the kingdom. Guenevere's abandoment of her proscribed roles detracts from arguments supporting Matilda's claim to the English throne by stressing the perfidy of women and the danger of their rule. Geoffrey of Monmouth's work may not support Matilda's claim but may, possibly, support Henry II's claim through his mother—Matilda—that is more acceptable to the Norman barons due to his gender. Guenevere occupies a significant political role within the *Historia* despite the character's number of appearances and lack of development in the Arthurian section of the *Historia*. Geoffrey of Monmouth's Guenevere establishes precedents for the figure of Guenevere, which evolve throughout the literary traditions developed by Chretien de Troyes and English authors such as Sir Thomas Malory.

The evolution of the literary tradition commences in the romances within the century following the *Historia Regum Britanniæ*. The Arthurian romances of the twelfth and early thirteenth centuries, primarily written in French, begin with the work of Robert Wace . Wace creates his *Roman de Brut* (1155) based upon the material of the *Historia* and may have utilized Geoffrey of Monmouth's approach to the material as well as his material.[13] In "Wace's *Roman de Brut* and the *Variant Version* of Geoffrey of

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[13] Robert Wace creates his verse translation of Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia* in the French vernacular. Wace's *Roman de Brut* (1155) is written during the reign of Henry II (1154-1189) and Eleanor of Acquitaine, introducing elements, such as the Round Table, which become standards in Arthurian traditions. For a modern English translation of the *Roman de Brut*, see Wace. Le Roman de Brut: *The French Book of*

Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniæ*," Robert A. Caldwell asserts that "[f]or the most part, Wace did not translate his primary source so much as he adapted it, used it as a point of departure, paraphrasing, expanding, and elaborating on it as seemed best to him" (678). The romance and chronicle traditions of Arthur share the practice of a writer drawing from earlier sources, forging the new work in the fashion that he desires.[14] Arthurian romance traditions flourish in French literature through the poetic works of Wace and Chrétien de Troyes before the Arthurian literary tradition returns to England through the English vernacular verse history of Laȝamon in the reign of Henry II's grandson, Henry III (r. 1216-1272).

Laȝamon's *Brut* recounts ancient British history based upon Geoffrey of Monmouth's material as adapted and translated through Wace's work. Laȝamon offers the material in the vernacular, making his work accessible to a larger English audience than Geoffrey's Latin chronicle or Wace's French verse. Laȝamon removes Arthur from the domains of the aristocracy who were fluent French and the educated who were fluent

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Brutus. Trans. Arthur Wayne Glowka. Tempe, AZ: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2005.

[14] Arthurian matter transforms quickly between Geoffrey of Monmouth and Laȝamon. For reading on the changes to Arthurian material in the early years of the tradition, see Brown, Arthur C. L. "Arthur's Loss of Queen and Kingdom." *Speculum* 15 (1940): 3-11 and Bruce, J. D. "Some Proper Names in Layamon's *Brut* Not Represented in Wace or Geoffrey of Monmouth." *Modern Language Notes* 26.3 (1911); 65-9.

in Latin to begin the connection of Arthur with England instead of Britain.[15] Composing

in English connects the work to the Anglo-Saxon and the distant British pasts of the

realm rather than contemporary aristocratic Norman society in thirteenth-century

England. La3amon promotes an English identity in relation to the figure of Arthur as

opposed to Geoffrey's overt support of Norman society through a British identity. In

"La3amon's Ambivalence," Daniel Donoghue analyzes the connections of the work to

Anglo-Saxon or Old English society that continued to influence lower levels of society in

England.

> There is no internal evidence in the *Brut* that nationalism was a concept
>
> that appealed to La3amon or, for that matter, to his audience. If La3amon
>
> truly wanted his chronicle to affirm national unity, it is hard to explain
>
> why he would choose a diction and style that draw so heavily from Old
>
> English literature and (with some isolable exceptions) eschew overt
>
> French influence. The anti-Anglo-Saxon content is clothed in an Anglo-

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[15] For a modern English translation of La3amon's *Brut* in prose form, see

La3amon. *La3amon's* Brut: *A History of the Britains*. Trans. Donald G. Bzdyl.

Binghamton, NY: Center for Medieval and Early Renaissance Studies, 1989. For excerpts

and their modern English translations, see La3amon. *Brut. Old and Middle English*

c.890-c.1400, An Anthology. Ed. Elaine Treharne. Malden, MA, and Oxford. Blackwell,

2004. 360-9 and La3amon. *La3amon's Arthur: The Arthurian Section of La3amon's* Brut

(Lines 9229-14297). Trans. and Eds. W. R. J. Barron and S. C. Weinberg. Austin: U of

Texas P, 1989.

> Saxon style. Moreover, the competing parties in his chronicle are defined
>
> by race (*leoden*), and he is careful to keep the two main races, the *Brutten*
>
> and the *Anglen*, distinct. Their relationship never approaches the unity of
>
> nationhood. (Donoghue 556-7)

La3amon's choice to write in English using Anglo-Saxon poetic practices, such as

alliterative half-lines separated by caesuras, does not indicate support for a unified

kingdom or peoples to shape a continuous sense of history or to promote current

monarchs. He contributes to the growing corpus of Arthurian literature, establishing

English influences through the vernacular language, the development of characters, such

as Mordred and Guenevere, and the enlargement of episodes from Wace's verse.

La3amon composes his work after the romances of Chrétien de Troyes (1170-1190),

which alter the Arthurian material significantly in content as well as purpose, and the

changes to the structure of Arthurian literature in romances, but he employs the older

chronicle tradition to restore Arthur to England.[16]

La3amon's *Brut* continues the traditions of relating British history as found in a

British source while presenting a unique version of Arthur of Britain, traditions begun by

Geoffrey of Monmouth in the *Historia Regum Britanniæ*. In the eighty-four years which

separate the two works, the character evolves from imperial ruler to chivalric ideal within

the French tradition. The evolution distinguishes shifts in literary genres: chronicles focus

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[16] For reading on the work of La3amon, see Cannon, Christopher. "La3amon and

the Laws of Men." *ELH* 67 (2000): 337-63 and Le Saux, Françoise H. M. *La3amon's*

Brut: The Poem and Its Sources. Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1989.

upon the kingdom's history while literary romances focus upon the court's chivalric ideals. Barbara N. Sargent-Baur, in "Dux Bellorum/Rex Militum/Roi Fainéant: The Transformation of Arthur in the Twelfth Century," argues that the abrupt change in Arthur's character and the shift of Arthurian material from history to romance occur simultaneously: "Arthur at this point was shifted to the background and changed from a leading actor at the center of events to a supporting player, almost a decoration, while others moved forward to claim our attention" (29). The shift from foreground to background has not yet occurred in English Arthurian literature when Laȝamon composes his *Brut*, because the English romance tradition developed later than the French. In Laȝamon's verse, Arthur maintains a more traditional role as a conqueror who fashions an empire within the work of British history, although characters, such as Arthur and Guenevere, receive more development than they do in the *Historia*. Geoffrey of Monmouth's promotion of a strong king who stabilizes and expands the realm drives his depiction of Arthur as a warrior creating a unified Britain. Although he draws upon Arthurian traditions initiated by Geoffrey and developed in French romances of Wace and Chrétien de Troyes, Laȝamon refrains from advocating overt nationalistic political statements for a strong Norman government in England. However, Laȝamon makes a political statement through the creation of an Arthur removed from a dominant French influence, prominent within Anglo-Norman society from 1066 until the fifteenth century. He connects Arthur to the peoples living in England prior to the Norman Conquest by creating a chronicle-based work rather than creating a romance, the genre in which Arthurian material grew in the French tradition between Wace's *Roman de Brut* (1155)

and La3amon's *Brut* (1220). By composing the poem in Middle English while using

Anglo-Saxon poetic structures, such as half-lines with caesuras and alliteration, La3amon

provides the groundwork for the development of English Arthurian romances as well as

an English Arthur.

Chapter Two:

Englishing Arthur in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*

La3amon's work brings Arthurian romance to England in a form accessible to

levels of society other than the Anglo-Norman elites, who could access the French

romances. The romance tradition in which La3amon participates grows slowly in

England and in the English vernacular. In her discussion of the rise of the literary genre

of romance in *The English Romance in Time: Transforming Motifs from Geoffrey of*

Monmouth to the Death of Shakespeare, Helen Cooper argues that "English-language

romances did not become common until the fourteenth century. There was a flurry of

them, all with French or Anglo-Norman antecedents, composed around 1300, and the

numbers steadily increased over the next three hundred years" (29-30). The heavy

production of literary romances in England occurs two centuries after the works of Wace

(1155) and Chrétien de Troyes (1170-1190), who introduce elements such as the Round

Table, chivalric behavior, and the Grail legend to the Arthurian matter that become part

of the English tradition. Because the French and English romance traditions begin at

different stages in the evolution of the genre, medieval English romances develop

conventions, such as the inclusion of popular cultural figures and folklore, unused in the

French tradition, which the English authors frequently emulate, and create a unique

literary corpus.[1] Medieval English romances are often divided into categories of popular

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[1] Despite the efforts of scholars, the literary genre "romance" cannot be easily

classified to conform to a single standard. W. R. J. Barron explains, "Critics are

increasingly abandoning the concept of a romance genre as unhelpful, recognizing that it

or high literary romances. Popular romances often focus upon historical figures, such as

Guy of Warwick or Richard the Lionheart, while the figure of Arthur typically appears in

high literary romances that strongly emulate French traditions, such as *Sir Gawain and*

the Green Knight, despite the figure's cultural and folkloric status.

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comprises as many types and subtypes as the modern novel" (57). For more detailed

discussions of romance in Medieval England, see Baugh, Albert C. "The Middle English

Romance: Some Questions of Creation, Presentation, and Preservation." *Speculum* 42

(1967): 1-31; Burlin, Robert B. "Middle English Romance: The Structure of Genre." *The*

Chaucer Review 30 (1995): 1-14; Childress, Diana T. "Between Romance and Legend:

'Secular Hagiography' in Middle English Literature." *Philological Quarterly* 57 (1978):

311-22; Fewster, Carol. *Traditionality and Genre in Middle English Romance.*

Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1987; Finlayson, John. "Definitions of Middle English

Romance." *The Chaucer Review* 15 (1980): 44-62; Hume, Kathryn. "The Formal Nature

of Middle English Romance." *Philological Quarterly* 53 (1974): 158-80; Liu, Yin.

"Middle English Romances As Prototype Genre." *The Chaucer Review* 40 (2006): 335-

53; Pearsall, Derek. "The Development of Middle English Romance." *Studies in*

Medieval English Romances: Some New Approaches. Ed. D. S. Brewer. Cambridge: D.

S. Brewer, 1988. 11-35; and Radulescu, Raluca L. "Genre and Classification." *A*

Companion to Medieval Popular Romance. Eds. Raluca L. Radulescu and Cory James

Rushton. Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2009. 31-48. These works provide a brief glimpse

into scholarly attempts to define the subgenre of English romance but do not create a

consolidated definition of a delineated genre.

The late fourteenth-century verse romance *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*

recounts the adventures of one of Arthur's best-known knights without explicitly

promoting an English dynastic succession while implicitly advocating English colonial

policies toward Wales through locations within the poem.[2] Rather than an Arthur who

focuses upon imperial conquests as in Geoffrey of Monmouth's text, *Sir Gawain and the*

Green Knight presents a ruler of a peaceful realm who fades to the background as

Gawain completes his quest. This peacetime Arthurian court reflects the uneventful

succession of Richard II to the throne of his grandfather Edward III in 1377, which he

held until Henry Bolingbroke (Henry IV) usurps his title in 1399. The stable succession

prevents internal dissension within England, allowing the English to focus upon active

colonial rule in Wales during the last twenty-five years of the fourteenth century, the

same time frame in which *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is composed.

Late medieval Arthurian romances, as do the earlier chronicle and chronicle-

based works, employ the distant past in service of contemporary political purposes.

Geoffrey of Monmouth uses the British past and the figure of Arthur to justify Norman

rule in post-Conquest England and to advocate a manner of kingship during a time of

contested succession. The *Gawain*-poet uses the British past of Arthur's reign to promote

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[2] As discussed earlier, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is dated to the last

twenty-five years of the fourteenth century. The lack of a more specific time frame within

the period prevents the connection of the poem to particular historical events in Wales

and England.

practices of kingship and chivalry within his own time.[3] Analyzing the role of "medieval

commentators" and attitude toward chivalric codes, Christopher Dean contends that

"[r]ather than recognizing that chivalry was obsolete and about to be replaced by a new

way of life, they saw only a contemporary falling away from the higher standards that

they imagined had existed in the past. The cure, they believed, was not for society to

adapt to new conditions but for it to return to the ideals they assumed it had lost" (33).

The ideals and practices of the past advocated as solutions to perceived social

degeneration were authorial inventions imposed by contemporary authors upon an

imaginary society of Britain's distant past; fifth-and sixth-century Britons did not adhere

to the social practices created in twelfth-century France and deployed in the verse works

of Marie de France and Chrétien de Troyes. The chivalric conventions and behaviors

concerning knighthood and the treatment of women fashioned by earlier French authors,

particularly Chrétien de Troyes, and superimposed upon the British past become an

integral component of Arthurian romance. English Arthurian romances furnish courtiers

and nobles with a domesticated example of French chivalric behavior. The

superimposition of chivalry onto the past instills a manufactured nostalgia in audiences of

Arthurian romances.

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[3]Geoffrey Chaucer uses contemporary and ancient history within his major poetic

works, *The Canterbury Tales* and *Troilus and Criseyde*. For reading on Chaucer and

history, see Bisson, Lillian M. *Chaucer and the Late Medieval World*. New York: St.

Martin's Press, 1998 and Patterson, Lee. *Chaucer and the Subject of History*. Madison: U

of Wisconsin P, 1991.

While authors and commentators in medieval English society promote through literary means Arthur and the chivalric and political ideals associated with Arthurian traditions, English monarchs from Edward I to Henry VII embraced the figure of Arthur propagandistically to attract their subjects by connecting themselves to Arthur's domestic and international political achievements. In "Edward I, Arthurian Enthusiast," Roger Sherman Loomis argues that "[t]he association of the kings of England with the legends of Arthur" could begin with Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia* and a manuscript dedication to Stephen and continue through the early Angevin kings who lacked serious interest in the subject (114-5). Edward I, however, appears to have had "a strong concern with both the historic and the romantic traditions of Arthur" (115). The relationship between Arthur and English monarchs begun in Geoffrey's *Historia* continues for centuries, although some monarchs may have had a more superficial association with the figure than others. English monarchs found Arthur to be a useful tool to support political claims and promote their own reigns. George R. Keiser in "Edward III and the Alliterative *Morte Arthure*" contends, "Generations of Plantagenet, Lancastrian, and Tudor kings accepted the Arthurian legend as at worst a convenient historical fiction to support their claim for a sovereign England...Several, including Edward I, Edward III, and Henry VII, clearly recognized and exploited its potential as political propaganda for their imperial ambitions" (37). English monarchs exploited the Arthurian figure and legends as propaganda to promote England's strength domestically and internationally despite the existing questions concerning the veracity of historical accounts. As medieval authors employed artificial chivalric values, monarchs actively utilized a possibly

fictional figure and history as propaganda to further their own objectives and personas, firmly wedding Arthur to English political practices.

English monarchs and authors are not the only members of English society to promote political agendas through the use of Arthurian figures, legends, and literature. While high literary romances may have spoken to a contemporary aristocratice audience, Arthur was known in various forms to upper and lower levels of society across England. The Arthurian tale which Geoffrey Chaucer includes within *The Canterbury Tales* (ca. 1387) is told not by the knight, a figure closely associated with Arthurian traditions, but by the Wife of Bath, a female middle-class cloth merchant who demonstrates her own understanding of the romance genre through her tale of one of Arthur's knights.[4]

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[4] The Wife of Bath and her tale are the focus of much scholarship on gender in fourteenth-century England. For reading on the Wife of Bath and gender in Chaucer's works, see Silverstein, Theodore. "Wife of Bath and the Rhetoric of Enchantment: Or, How to Make a Hero See In the Dark." *Modern Philology* 58 (1961): 153-73; Crane, Susan. "Alison's Incapacity and Poetic Instability in the Wife of Bath's Tale." *PMLA* 102 (1987): 20-8; Justman, Stewart. "Trade as Pudendum: Chaucer's Wife of Bath." *The Chaucer Review* 28 (1994): 344-52; Levy, Bernard. "The Wife of Bath's Queynte Fantasye." *The Chaucer Review* 4 (1969): 106-22; Blamires, Alcuin. *Chaucer, Ethics, and Gender*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2006 and "Refiguring the 'Scandalous Excess' of Medieval Women: The Wife of Bath and Liberality." *Gender in Debate From the Early Middle Ages to the Renaissance*. Eds. Thelma S. Fenster and Clare A. Lees. New York: Palgrave, 2002. 57-78; Parker, David. "Can We Trust the Wife of Bath?" *The Chaucer*

Chaucer's Wife of Bath stresses matrimonial or social issues in her tale as she imitates

the aristocracy by telling a romance that incorporates nostalgic elements, including

chivalric practices, set "[i]n th'olde dayes of the Kyng Arthour, / Of which that Britons

speken greet honour" (*The Wife of Bath's Tale* 857-8).[5] The character, as well as the

author himself, indicates that the growing middle-class in medieval England shared

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Review 4 (1969): 90-8; Huppé, Bernard F. "Rape and Woman's Sovereignty in the *Wife*

of Bath's Tale." *Modern Language Notes* 63 (1948): 378-81; Ingham, Patricia. "Pastoral

Histories: Utopia, Conquest, and the Wife of Bath's Tale." *Texas Studies in Literature*

and Language 44 (2002): 34-46; Thomas, Susanne Sara. "The Problem of Defining

Sovereynetee in the *Wife of Bath's Tale*." *The Chaucer Review* 41 (2006): 87-97; Rigby,

S. H. *Chaucer in Context: Society, Allegory, and Gender.* Manchester and New York:

Manchester UP, 1996 and "The Wife of Bath, Christine de Pizan, and the Medieval Case

for Women." *The Chaucer Review* 35 (2000): 133-65; Hansen, Elaine Tuttle. *Chaucer*

and the Fictions of Gender. Berkeley, Los Angeles, and Oxford: U of California P, 1992;

Martin, Priscilla. *Chaucer's Women: Nuns, Wives, and Amazons.* Iowa City: U of Iowa P,

1990; and Nakley, Susan. "Sovereignty Matters: Anachronism, Chaucer's Britain, and

England's Future Past." *The Chaucer Review* 44 (2010): 368-96.

[5] Chaucer's *The Wife of Bath's Tale* focuses on the quest of a knight who fails to

follow chivalric ideals. For reading on the knight and courtliness in Chaucer, see

Coffman, George R. "Chaucer and Courtly Love Once More—"The Wife of Bath's

Tale." *Speculum* 20 (1945): 43-50 and Roppolo, Joseph P. "The Converted Knight in

Chaucer's "Wife of Bath's Tale."" *College English* 12 (1951): 263-9.

cultural knowledge of Arthur, a knowledge which could be utilized to entertain audiences and to discuss political concerns, such as the succession or colonial ventures. The Arthurian prophecies that become popular in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries illustrate the dissemination of Arthur's association with politics among social classes outside the aristocratic elite who had access to literary romances. Describing the transmission of Arthurian material influenced by Geoffrey of Monmouth through prophecies which function as urban political discourse in "Arthurian Prophecy and the Deposition of Richard II," Helen Fulton observes,

> Though it is tempting to read it as commentary expressing views of the London populace regarding the kingship, prophecy was primarily a language of power. Circulating among clerical and political elites in Latin, and among urban commercial classes in vernacular versions, prophecy was a discourse relating to the hegemonic struggle between church, state, and magnate factions. (64)

Social classes below the monarchy—the clergy, aristocracy, and developing middle class—emulate the monarchs' actions by invoking Arthur for political means as the Wife of Bath emulates romance authors to address social practices of marriage, misogyny, and chivalry. Medieval Arthurian prophecies demonstrate that the contemporary populace associated Arthur with both politics and entertainment, and the nostalgia that Arthurian

matter embodies for a late fourteenth-century audience functions as a political tool in popular and high literary works accessible to English society.[6]

The political uses of Arthurian material during the medieval era often focus on dynastic claims, including those related to succession, or territorial claims, particularly those regarding Ireland, Wales, and Scotland. However, imperial interests present embedded political conflicts regarding the English use of Arthur that exist from the beginning of the English appropriation of the British Arthur in the twelfth century. The appropriation of Arthur by medieval, and later by early modern, authors embodies tensions between English and Welsh cultures following the union of Wales with England and the English expansion into Wales. Helen Fulton recounts that

> [m]ore locally, Arthur was also a point of conflict between the English and the Welsh, who were routinely dismissed, patronised and oppressed by their English neighbours. While the English had appropriated their own version of Arthur as a king of Britain, and therefore of England, to the Welsh he remained a Welsh king of the British nation before the coming of the hated Saxons. (67)

As a figure, whether fictional, historical, or cultural, Arthur inherently serves multiple political functions within the overall composition of society in the kingdom. The

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[6] For further reading on Arthur and Prophecy, see Eckhardt, Caroline D. "Prophecy and Nostalgia: Arthurian Symbolism at the Close of the English Middle Ages." *The Arthurian Tradition: Essays in Convergence*. Eds. Mary Flowers Braswell and John Bugge. Tuscaloosa, AL, and London: U of Alabama P, 1988. 109-26.

functions of Arthur operate in diametric opposition, simultaneously representing unification and separation of English and Welsh cultures. Arthur of Britain transforms into Arthur of England, and participation in Arthur's transformation encompasses the support of colonization and the genesis of English imperial ventures, particularly for authors from the border areas of England and Wales, such as Geoffrey of Monmouth and the *Gawain*-poet.

While refraining from the overt dynastic politics of the *Historia*, the anonymous author of the verse romance *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* subtly addresses issues of colonialism regarding Wales. The *Gawain*-poet expresses English and Welsh political and cultural tensions inherent in the figure of Arthur through locations within the poem. Before reaching Castle Hautdesert, Gawain leaves the peace of Arthur's court and travels through dangerous countryside, suggesting the English fears of Wales and the border areas. Ordelle G. Hill examines a significantly different influence than the French romance traditions upon the poem in *Looking Westward: Poetry, Landscape, and Politics in* Sir Gawain and the Green Knight. Acknowledging that most criticism focuses on French, English, and continental influences, Hill argues that the presence of Wales in the poem should be more closely examined (13).[7] Celtic folklore elements such as the Green Man represent a segment of native Welsh culture that have been subjects of scholarly discussion concerning the poem. The influence of the contemporary culture of Wales and

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[7]Wales consistently retains a connection to Arthur in folklore and literature. For further reading on the importance of Wales in the Arthurian tradition, see Loomis, Roger Sherman. *Wales and the Arthurian Legend*. 1956. Cardiff: U of Wales P, 1969.

Welsh border areas could reveal the Welsh and the dominant English perspectives of the colonial process in the late fourteenth century. The figure of Arthur himself does not overtly represent the tensions between England and Wales. The explicit portrayals of the colonial and cultural tensions between England and Wales in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* are portrayed in the two separate courts in the poem and in the wilds through which Gawain travels.

In this late fourteenth-century English romance, Arthur subtly embodies tensions between England and Wales as the head of the cultural power whose representative must subdue the other culture which he encounters, acting as the leader of a colonial enterprise without exercising direct authority. Lynn Arner in "The Ends of Enchantment: Colonialism and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*" argues that *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is "thoroughly tied to England's colonial project in Wales" and "is structured by these colonial conflicts and, appropriately, arises from a border culture" (79). Arner briefly examines the treatment of the Welsh by English overlords and the resulting rebellions against the colonial government throughout the last three decades of the fourteenth century. She argues that within *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, "the inhabitants of Wales and the frontier are positioned as the foes of Gawain and, by extension, as enemies of Arthur's kingdom" (84). The violent conflicts between the colonized Welsh and colonizing English that influence the poem expand beyond Wales and the border areas in which they occur to become concerns of the monarch and the kingdom.

Hill explores the connections of Edward III, the Black Prince, and Richard II to

Arthurian traditions and the composition date of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*

between 1375 and 1400. He contends, "the poet's intention was to tell a tale that would

awaken his audience's memories of a few generations earlier, with gentle warnings about

the need for political reconciliation and social adjustment, especially with their neighbors

to the west" (Hill 19). *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* functions effectively as

propaganda through the presentation of a unified kingdom that includes colonized Wales

under a stable succession from Edward III (r. 1327-1377) to Richard II (r. 1377-1399).

The *Gawain*-poet supports England's claim to Wales without replicating the far-reaching

imperial ambitions described in Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia*. The Arthur of *Sir

Gawain and the Green Knight* rules a kingdom which includes wild areas that should be

colonized to decrease domestic threats and to preserve the kingdom. The English believe

the Welsh must be colonized to eliminate the internal dangers of rebellion. Amer briefly

describes the rebellion of Owain Lawgoch in the 1370s to illustrate the constant colonial

tensions (82). The tensions escalated in the first years of the fifteenth century when Owen

Glendower challenges Henry IV in 1403.

The influence of English colonial practices and Welsh rebellions, such as

Lawgoch's, introduces a specific, contemporary, political concern: the English rule over

Wales creates a subplot with the romance's dominant plot of Gawain's quest to find the

Green Chapel and the Green Knight and the seduction game which tests Gawain's

chivalric behavior. The focus on Gawain's quest and behavior demonstrates the influence

of French Arthurian romance traditions, as developed by Chrétien de Troyes, upon *Sir

Gawain and the Green Knight in which the function of Arthur in the background while a knight in the foreground demonstrate chivalric behavior through his quest. The extent of the French influence upon the poem remains debated. In *English Medieval Romance*, W. R. J. Barron argues that the poem does not indicate a "close dependence" on a French romance, but the poet was familiar with the conventions of French romance (167). The *Gawain*-poet modifies established French romance conventions of the quest and courtly love to create an English romance which addresses contemporary colonial practices toward Wales in late fourteenth-century England.[8] Not all critics, however, view elements of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* as manipulated literary techniques that create a work distanced from French conventions. In Sir Gawain and the Green Knight *and French Arthurian Romance*, Ad Putter examines how *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* adheres to the traditions of the French form.

> [T]he *Gawain*-poet's breakthrough in the English vernacular was achieved
>
> through a profound engagement with inherited forms and styles. The
>
> problem for *Gawain*-criticism has been that, in the case of *Sir Gawain and*
>
> *the Green Knight*, these were the forms and styles of French Arthurian
>
> romance, which flourished two centuries earlier with the works of
>
> Chrétien de Troyes. And if this tradition seemed old-fashioned to Chaucer,
>
> Gower, or Langland, modern critics have found it equally difficult to

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[8] For a collection of reprinted critical essays on *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, see Howard, Donald R., and Christian Zacher, eds. *Critical Studies of* Sir Gawain and the Green Knight. Notre Dame, IN, and London: U of Notre Dame P, 1968.

reconcile the *Gawain*-poet's topicality with his reliance on courtly

Arthurian romances. (Putter 3-4)

Putter's argument that the *Gawain*-poet's "topicality" (4), the recognizable landscapes

portrayed in the poem such as the Green Chapel, creates difficulties for scholars does not

account for the development of English romance traditions. He focuses his analysis on

only formal influences from the French tradition and claims that the innovation exists in

the composition of the poem in English. Putter's interpretation asserts that the *Gawain-*

poet draws upon the past for his material, chivalric ideals, and poetic style within the plot

and character construction. However, interpreting *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* as an

English version of French romance overlooks the cultural and geographical influences

upon the work.[9]

The plot structure of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* illustrates the French

tradition's influences in the *Gawain*-poet recounting a single quest of one particular

knight of Arthur's court who serves as the protagonist while Arthur functions as a minor

figure, a plot structure practiced by Chrétien de Troyes and Marie de France.[10] Authors of

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[9]For reading on the influence of geography and culture on writing from the region

of *Gawain*-poet, see Barrett, Robert W., Jr. *Against All England: Regional Identity and*

Cheshire Writing 1195-1656. Notre Dame, IN: U of Notre Dame P, 2009.

[10] Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Wife of Bath's Tale* offers an English Arthurian

romance contemporary to *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* that also employs elements

of French romance; however, Chaucer does not adhere to the conventions of the French

traditions. In *Gender and Romance in Chaucer's* Canterbury Tales, Susan Crane

Arthurian romances use this plot structure within their works so frequently that the placement of Arthur in the background becomes conventional within Arthurian romance. Explaining that Arthur exists in multiple types of depictions, Christopher Dean describes that

> [a] common situation is for Arthur to appear in a romance that features another knight as its hero. When this happens Arthur, as the head of a renowned chivalrous court, is often only a slight and conventional character. The king and his court are in the poem to set the tone and atmosphere, but all too often the court is merely a jumping-off place for the hero's adventures. (75)

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight adheres to this pattern: Arthur remains static at his court while Gawain evolves through his quest to complete the Green Knight's game. Within the Arthurian tradition, knights have the ability to change; however, Arthur, representing the ideal for society as a man, a knight, and a monarch, has little or no need

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examines *The Wife of Bath's Tale* primary components and claims, "it is not a standard romance" (119). For reading on the structure of *The Wife of Bath's Tale*, see Koepke Brown, Carole. "Episodic Patterns and the Perpetrator: The Structure and Meaning of Chaucer's *Wife of Bath's Tale*." *The Chaucer Review* 31 (1996): 18-35. For reading on Chaucer's use of Arthur, see Carter, Susan. "Coupling the Beastly Bride and the Hunter Hunted: What Lies Behind Chaucer's *Wife of Bath's Tale*." *The Chaucer Review* 37 (2003): 329-45 and Slade, Tony. "Irony in the *Wife of Bath's Tale*." *The Modern Language Review* 64 (1969): 241-7.

to evolve. The experiences of a quest completed by the chivalric or political ideal would have less impact as demonstrations of growth than those of a knight seeking to become an exemplar of chivalric behavior.

Although romance authors maintain the ideal of Arthur, the shift of the character to the background and his knights to the foreground represents a significant deviation from the early chronicle work of Geoffrey of Monmouth and the chronicle-based works of Wace and La3amon. The Arthurian sections of the history-centered works focus on the rise and fall of the protagonist Arthur; however, later medieval Arthurian romances are not often concerned with Arthur's turn on Fortune's Wheel. Some romances, such as the English Alliterative *Morte Arthure*, place Arthur in a central role and can function as warnings to audiences. Rather than a monarch's life and achievements, medieval romances typically focus upon social and cultural values, particularly those values associated with chivalric practices, which drive the fictional kingdoms within the works. Helen Cooper argues that the practices of romance itself influence the roles of knights in works: "[t]hroughout the first four centuries of romance, until the mid-sixteenth century, romance is inseparable from ideas of chivalry, and from the primary exponent of chivalry, the knight" (41). The knight becomes the center of the action which illustrates his chivalrous behavior, both successes and failures, and a knight's failures or weaknesses are as important as his successes in the depiction of chivalry. Cooper explains, "The adventures of the hero, his striving towards something beyond him, show the chivalric virtues in action, and show them as difficult—but all the more necessary to strive for on account of that difficulty" (41). Gawain suffers in his travels to Castle

Hautdesert as the wild terrain and harsh weather challenge his physical and psychological

capabilities and receives relief because his prayers demonstrate his Christian faith. He

also suffers in Castle Hautdesert, which he initially believes offers him safety after his

physical journey, but the exchange and seduction game conducted by Bercilak and his

wife test Gawain's honesty and reputation as one of Arthur's knights. Gawain ultimately

fails at Bercilak's game because he withholds the girdle, which is given to him by Lady

Bercilak on the third morning, when exchanging the day's spoils with Bercilak. The

girdle, given to him by Bercilak after the challenge at the Green Chapel, represents

Gawain's failure to uphold the virtues of honesty and fidelity, serving as a reminder for

Gawain to strive for those virtues. The multiple trials that Gawain experiences on his

quest are conventional components within Arthurian romance traditions.

The *Gawain*-poet draws upon literary and cultural traditions to fashion his

romance, incorporating events from the chronicle tradition although the poem does not

focus upon British history or Arthur's life. The poem opens with a discussion of Britain's

connection to the classical world, and the first line, "Siþen þe sege and þe assaut watȝ

sesed at Troye" (1), creates the link with the mythology of Britain's origins with its

discovery by Brutus, the grandson of the Trojan Aeneas, that culminates in Arthur's

reign. Demonstrating the *Gawain*-poet's knowledge of Arthurian matter, the national

origin material also supports England's early expansions toward empire through territory

on the island. The poet condenses the stories of Aeneas as well as the founding of cities

and kingdoms to reach the founding of Britain by Brutus, which he recounts before

introducing Arthur and his court:

And fer ouer þe French flod Felix Brutus,

On mony bonkkes ful brode, Bretayn he sette3

wyth wynne,

Where werre, and wrake, and wonder

Bi syþe3 hat3 wont þerinne,

And oft boþe blysse and blunder

Ful skete hat3 skyfted synne.

And quen þis Bretayn wat3 bigged bi þis burn rych,

Bolde bredden þerinne, baret þat lofden,

In mony turned tyme tene þat wro3ten. (13-22)[11]

The discussion of Britain's founding by Brutus adheres to the traditions of British

national mythology which Geoffrey of Monmouth advocates in his *Historia*, and the

Gawain-poet briefly participates in the tradition of promoting Britain as the heir to and

new incarnation of Troy and connecting that national mythology to the reign of Arthur, a

connection made throughout Arthurian traditions by Geoffrey of Monmouth in the 1130s

and four and a half centuries later by Edmund Spenser in *The Faerie Queene*. The

continued use of the Trojan, and thereby Roman, heritage of England illustrates

England's assertion of its right to empire, beginning with colonial ventures in Wales.

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[11] All quotations of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* are in Middle English and

from *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight: A Dual Language Version*. Ed. And Trans.

William Vantuono. New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1991. 4-141.

The historical introduction to the romance establishes the connection of Arthur and Gawain, heroes of British tales, to the heroes of classical antiquity and stresses their inheritance of the greatness of Roman civilization.[12] The descent from the classical figures of Aeneas and Brutus signifies the strength of Arthur's kingdom without the explicit recounting of extensive military conquests. However, this connection contains caution within the praise, for although Aeneas preserves Trojan traditions through his establishment of a classical empire, his behavior hardly exemplifies chivalric behavior, which the British heroes embody. The stories of Aeneas recount betrayals, particularly of Queen Dido, which separate him from the chivalrous knights at the end of his line since his actions toward women should not be emulated by those who embrace chivalric values and behavior. Gawain behaves honestly toward Lady Bercilak fulfilling his chivalric code

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[12] Gawain is a traditional figure in Arthurian romances, but his character can change in the romance tradition depending upon the specific work. For reading on the figure of Gawain, see Boardman, Phillip C. "Middle English Arthurian Romance: The Repetition and Reputation of Gawain." *Gawain: A Casebook*. Eds. Raymond H. Thompson and Keith Busby. New York and London: Routledge, 2006. 255-72; Davenport, W. A. "*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*: The Poet's Treatment of the Hero and His Adventure." *Gawain: A Casebook*. Eds. Raymond H. Thompson and Keith Busby. New York and London: Routledge, 2006. 273-86; and Hahn, Thomas. Introduction: "Sir Gawain and Popular Chilvaric Romance." *Sir Gawain: Eleven Romances and Tales*. Ed. Thomas Hahn. Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institutes Publications, 1995. 1-40.

while respectfully rebuffing her physical advances. Invoking Aeneas creates a familial

heritage for the British royal family that extends for centuries through Brutus, Arthur, and

Gawain. Heredity's importance as a theme lies within the context of the succession.

Heredity provides a verifiable right to rule for males, although for women in the royal

line, such as Matilda in 1135 and Elizabeth I in the sixteenth century, a direct inheritance

could often be contested. During the last quarter of the fourteenth century in which *Sir*

Gawain and the Green Knight was composed, the succession of the English crown

follows stable methods with no challenges. In 1377, the throne passed from grandfather,

Edward III, to grandson, Richard II, without the civil strife which characterized the 1130s

when Geoffrey of Monmouth writes the *Historia*.

The *Gawain*-poet begins the quest to complete the beheading game through his

appointment with the Green Knight at the Green Chapel by introducing the audience to

Arthur's court, the center of power for the kingdom, at a time of peace and holiday

celebrations. The poet establishes Arthur's comparative status as a monarch: "of

Bretaygne kynges, / Ay wat3 Arthur þe hendest" (25-6). As the "hendest" (26) of British

"kynges" (25), Arthur conforms to Arthurian romance conventions in that he needs not

prove himself as a warrior to lead. Neither Arthur nor court must be established as

powers within the kingdom nor defend the kingdom against direct political threats as they

do in Geoffrey of Monmouth's chronicle. The realm exists at a peak of power and

stability, as in the transfer of power from Edward III to Richard II in the larger historical

context, which allows for quests and concentration on social behavior. Nonetheless, the

description of Arthur at the Christmas celebration provokes questions concerning

Arthur's personality, despite his stabilized power. As the *Gawain*-poet recounts,

> He wat3 so joly of his joyfnes, and sumquat childgered;
>
> His lif liked hym ly3t. He louied þe lasse
>
> Auþer to lenge lye or to longe sitte,
>
> So bisied him his 3onge blod and his brayn wylde. (86-9)

The description of Arthur as "joly" (86) with a "brayn wylde" (89) seems hard to

reconcile with the warrior king of Britain who defeats the Saxons in the *Historia Regum*

Britanniæ. Geoffrey stresses Arthur's youth at coronation to demonstrate Arthur's mercy,

strength, and loyalty before he becomes king. The *Gawain*-poet emphasizes Arthur's

youth through the terms "childgered" (86) and "3onge" (89). In *Sir Gawain and the*

Green Knight, the youth of the monarch and court, reinforced by Arthur's continual

movement, results from his childlike excitement at the Christmas feast. Putter examines

this description of Arthur before the Green Knight's arrival, noting, "The joy of Arthur

and his household is here as natural as that of a child, whose life is as yet untroubled by

matters of grave importance. The association of Arthur's court with youth underlines the

appropriateness and harmlessness of their carefree behaviour" (74). The youthful Arthur

of the *Historia* establishes precedent within the literary tradition, but in order to

emphasize Arthur's heroism; however, the youthful Arthur of *Sir Gawain and the Green*

Knight appears untried in battle and unconcerned with threats, either internal or external,

to his kingdom.

The idea of youth in the *Gawain*-poet's handling indicates inexperience among the court of Camelot. Youth and inexperience call into question the greatness of the court, the knights, and their king upon the Green Knight's arrival. Arthur reacts strongly when he accepts the Green Knight's challenge and defends his knights against the visitor's accusations regarding their prowess:

> Ande sayde: "Haþel, by heuen, þyn askyng is nys,
>
> And as þou foly hatȝ frayst, fynde þe behoues.
>
> I know no gome þat is gast of þy grete wordes.
>
> Gif me now þy geserne, vpon Godeȝ halue,
>
> And I schal bayþen þy bone þat þou boden habbes."
>
> Lyȝtly lepeȝ he hym to and laȝt at his honde;
>
> Þen feersly þat oþer freke vpon fote lyȝtis.
>
> Now hatȝ Arthure his axe, and þe halme grypeȝ,
>
> And sturnely stureȝ hit aboute, þat stryke wyth hit þoȝt. (323-31)

Arthur's words appear to chasten the Green Knight's disruptive behavior displaying his own bravery; however, coupled with the emphasis on youthfulness, Arthur's bravery can be seen as rash—the insistence upon his knights' greatness as insecurity. If the court is young and lacks experience, Arthur's words act as surety for his knights' worthiness, which has not yet been proven in critical challenges. Arthur takes the Green Knight's axe and swings the weapon but refrains from striking the Green Knight according to the terms of the challenge, despite his expressed intent to accept the game. The king attempts to

control the situation in which his authority is challenged by accepting the game, but loses credibility in failing to follow through with the contest.

The Arthur of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* boasts his court's greatness and demonstrates his authority through his response to the Green Knight. However, Arthur removes himself from the challenge with little persuasion on the part of the court, including his nephew Gawain. The poet describes the transfer of the challenge after Gawain entreats Arthur not to participate in the Green Knight's game:

> Ryche togeder con roun,
>
> And syþen þay redden alle same
>
> To ryd þe kyng wyth croun,
>
> And gif Gawan þe game.
>
>
> Þen comaunded þe kyng þe kny3t for to ryse,
>
> And he ful radly vp ros and ruchched hym fayre,
>
> Kneled doun bifore þe kyng and cache3 þat weppen,
>
> And he luflyly hit hym laft. (362-9)

Quickly acquiescing to the requests of Gawain and the court without insisting that he be the one to fulfill the challenge, Arthur responds to the court's entreaties by handing over the weapon to Gawain. The transfer of responsibility restores some of Arthur's authority that the court's request has called into question. Arthur reasserts his authority when he commands Gawain, who kneels before his king in obedience, to accept the challenge

from his hands. This quiet acquiescence to the court creates questions regarding Arthur and his worthiness as a monarch.

As a young king, Arthur may be learning to balance his impetuous desires with the exigencies of rule.[13] He accepts the challenge to prove his worth and the worth of his knights, but the court's reaction reminds him of his responsibility to the realm. After all, the challenge threatens his life and thus the kingdom. Arthur cannot accept the challenge without risking the stability of the kingdom and subverting the political power structure by leaving Britain without a king. Arthur's restraint can reflect the care that he has for his nephew, which appears to be greater than the concern he has for himself, and the love behind that care makes the situation poignant since he knowingly risks Gawain's life. To cynical audiences, Arthur's acquiescence may color his acceptance of the challenge; his

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[13] The *Gawain*-poet's contemporary Geoffrey Chaucer explicitly advises a young Richard II in the envoy to his poem "Lak of Stedfastnesse:"

> O prince, desyre to be honourable,
>
> Cherish thy folk and hate extorcion.
>
> Suffre nothing that may be reprevable
>
> To thyn estat don in thy regioun.
>
> Shew forth thy swerd of castigacioun,
>
> Dred God, do law, love trouthe and worthiness,
>
> And wed thy folk agein to stedfastnesse. (22-8)

He outlines the behavior and actions of a good king, and the concern about a young monarch's behavior can be seen in the *Gawain*-poet's depiction of Arthur.

decisions to participate while insisting upon the game's trivialness can be viewed as an

attemp to manipulate a knight to take his place. Such an interpretation would counter the

emphasis on youth and the ideals that Arthur embodies: the actions would then be those

of an experienced, and manipulative, monarch, rather than a young and virtuous king.

Arthur's choices represent those of an impetuous monarch who needs experience to

temper his actions and decisions. He displays some degree of control after the departure

of the Green Knight: "Þa3 Arþer, þe hende kyng, at hert hade wonder, / He let no

semblaunt be sene" (467-8). Arthur prevents the court from seeing his wonder and

presents a calm authoritative exterior in a situation which could threaten the kingdom's

tranquility. He sheds the earlier impetuous behavior to secure peace within the court,

although only after the physical challenge and danger have subsided.

Arthur assumes a serene exterior to protect the kingdom's stability and comfort

the queen. In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Guenevere is revealed to be the true

target of the Green Knight's visit, but her role does not move beyond that of object.[14]

Geoffrey of Monmouth's Guenvere displays agency and develops more deeply than the

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[14] The role of women in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* has been a significant

topic of scholarship. For further reading on gender in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*,

see Cox, Catherine S. "Genesis and Gender in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*." *The

Chaucer Review* 35 (2001): 378-90; Heng, Geraldine. "Feminine Knots and the Other *Sir

Gawain the Green Knight*." *PMLA* 106 (1991): 500-14; and Morgan, Gerald. "Medieval

Misogyny and Gawain's Outburst against Women in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*."

The Modern Language Review 97 (2002): 265-278.

proscriptions of her heritage and beauty would allow. The *Gawain*-poet refrains from presenting Guenevere as anything other than a beautiful woman. He describes her only in terms of place and appearance:

> When þay had waschen worþyly, þay wenten to sete,
>
> Þe best burne ay abof, as hit best semed,
>
> Whene Guenore, ful gay, grayþed in þe myddes,
>
> Dressed on þe dere des, dubbed al aboute,
>
> Smal sendal bisides, a selure hir ouer
>
> Of tryed Tolouse, of Tars tapites innoghe,
>
> Þat were embrawded and beten wyth þe best gemmes
>
> Þat my3t be preued of prys wyth penyes to bye,
>
> > in daye.
>
> > Þe comlokest to discrye
>
> > Þer glent wyth y3en gray.
>
> > A semloker þat euer he sy3e
>
> > Soth mo3t no mon say. (72-84)

The depiction of Guenevere as "comlokest" (81) and "ful gay" (74) reveals nothing about her character and personality. The *Gawain*-poet describes her ornamentality in terms of material goods such as the cloth that surrounds her and the gems that adorn her. Her physical location in the court illustrates her role within Arthur's society. She sits in a place of honor: the knights who sit around her occupy positions of privilege. Guenevere demonstrates a knight's position within the court through his proximity to her, and she

exists as an appropriate representative of a beautiful, courtly woman but remains an object which supports the king's authority and the kingdom's renowned greatness.

Guenevere's role as an ornament attracts the chivalric behavior of worthy knights and is reinforced during and after the beheading of the Green Knight. However, the incident, designed to target Guenevere, appears to leave her unaffected by its "wonder." The *Gawain*-poet describes, not Guenevere's reaction to the game, but Arthur's expressed consolation to his wife after the Green Knight's departure:

> To þe comlych quene wyth cortays speche:
>
> "Dere dame, today demay yow neuer;
>
> Wel bycommes such craft vpon Cristmasse,
>
> Laykyng of enterludeȝ, to laȝe and to syng,
>
> Among þis kynde caroles of knyȝteȝ and ladyeȝ.
>
> Neuerþelece, to my mete I may me wel dres,
>
> For I haf sen a selly I may not forsake." (469-75)

Arthur recognizes the uniqueness of the Green Knight's beheading but downplays its significance to reassure Guenevere that the "craft" (471) is part of the Christmas entertainment. As Albert B. Friedman has noted in "Morgan le Fay in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," "True, Arthur turns to comfort his queen once the Green Knight has withdrawn, gory head in hand, but he takes the time to frame his words elegantly, and from the cheerful style he adopts, it is plain that he is not dealing with a woman in a state of shock" (263). Bercilak later reveals that Morgan desired to induce distress in the queen

through the beheading, but Guenevere's apparent placidity masks a state of mind that remains unknown.

Arthur's speech suggest Guenvere's reaction, or lack thereof, to audiences; his cheer and joviality indicate a woman inured to wonder, not greatly affected by the spectacle. Perhaps his chivalric behavior results from a desire to rescue his wife from distress. Before Arthur's speech, the *Gawain*-poet refers to Guenevere as "comlych" (469), not as terrified or worried, again stressing her physical appearance. The *Gawain*-poet adheres to convention in descriptions of Guenevere's physical appearance but breaks from tradition by removing her agency and her ability to subvert the authority which Arthur represents. In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Guenevere functions in a manner which poses no threat to the domestic peace which Arthur maintains.

The danger posed by female figures occurs without Arthur's court at Bercilak's Castle Hautdesert. While Guenevere functions as part of an ornamental background, the women of Bercilak's home either influence or perform the actions that affect Gawain, although the women remain nameless or unidentified through much of his stay. Lady Bercilak's lack of a specific identity—she is referred to only by her status as Bercilak's wife—fails to detract from her role in her husband's game. Lady Bercilak ultimately functions as the mechanism through which Gawain's character and chivalry are tested. The seduction game depends upon her participation. She demonstrates her agency early in the challenge. On the first morning, she enters Gawain's chamber while he pretends to sleep:

> Hit waty3 þe ladi, loflyest to beholde,

þat droʒ þe dor after hir ful dernly and stylle,

And boʒed towarde þe bed; ...

....

An ho stepped stilly, and stel to his bedde,

Kest vp þe cortyn, and creped wythinne,

And set hir ful softly on þe bedsyde,

And lenged þere selly longe to loke quen he wakened. (1187-9, 1191-4)

The *Gawain*-poet credits the lady with personal agency—she moves across the room, she

pulls back the curtain, and she climbs into his bed. Although her choice in the overall

nature of the game may be beyond her control, Lady Bercilak selects specific actions

deployed while adhering, perhaps, to her husband's instructions as "Master of The

Revels." Sharon M. Rowley, in "Textual Studies, Feminism, and Performance in *Sir

Gawain and the Green Knight*," questions the "performance" of Lady Bercilak, arguing

that "[s]he acts desirous, but whether she is motivated by desire, by her husband's

command, or by something else altogether remains pointedly ambiguous" (171). The

Gawain-poet withholds the lady's motivation; however, the audience need not assume

that she functions as a puppet of either her husband or Morgan le Fay. Bercilak may

direct her to participate in the seduction game, and Morgan le Fay may influence Bercilak

and through him his wife, but through their bedchamber encounters, Lady Bercilak

chooses the specific forms of behavior that test Gawain's reputation and his worth as

Arthur's representative.

Both Lady Bercilak and Guenevere are displayed as beautiful women who serve their husbands' interests, but while Guenevere presents her service as an ornamental ideal, Lady Bercilak performs hers by gracefully and ably tempting Gawain to demonstrate the weakness of Arthur's social order, thereby, undermining the system which he represents. The continued escalation of the seduction game reveals intentions to challenge Arthur's power that creates British stability as represented in his nephew. The *Gawain*-poet refrains from attributing the increased momentum of the game to any one figure of the household; however, Lady Bercilak may intensify the seduction as a consequence of her own initiative. On the third and final morning, she will not allow the knight to sleep "for luf" (1733). The mention of this emotion, which can translate as love, affection, or friendship, indicates that Lady Bercilak perhaps acts for personal motivations while participating within the machinations of her husband's game. Her heightened attempts to seduce Gawain may result from an attraction as well as the exigencies of performance. Lady Bercilak's behaviors on the third morning indicate feelings stronger than friendship.

On the third morning, her visit to Gawain's chambers presents a brazen assault on the knight, for she bedecks herself in expensive cloth and jewels, although strategically "Hir þryuen face and hir þrote þrowen [were] al naked, / Hir brest bare bifore, and bihinde eke" (1740-1). The description of Lady Bercilak parodies the earlier description of Guenevere: both are covered in expensive cloth and jewels; yet, Guenevere's purpose in the finery is to represent heraldically her husband's authority, while Lady Bercilak's purpose is to undermine the authority of Arthur, and the English, as embodied in Gawain.

In her examination of the lady's behavior, Arner argues that "Lady Bertilak preys aggressively upon Gawain" (90). Lady Bercilak's behavior appears "aggressive" and extraordinary for one used to the passively courtly behavior of Arthur's queen, for the descriptions of Guenevere stress her role as an object that displays the wealth of the kingdom and helps to position the worthiness of knights without relaying any actions taken by the queen per se. Yet, in the bedchamber episodes, Lady Bercilak performs a deliberate seduction of Gawain, inverting romance conventions of knights seeking favors of ladies.

The manner in which Lady Bercilak pursues Gawain is not indicated as driven by speeches or actions of others—neither Bercilak nor Morgan le Fay directly instructs Lady Bercilak on dress or gestures in Gawain's bed. However, no direct evidence exists within the poem revealing that Lady Bercilak is solely responsible for her behavior and appearance either. The omission of assigned responsibility creates a continuing ambiguity concerning this female character. Paul Battles, in "Amended Texts, Emended Ladies: Female Agency and the Textual Editing of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, contends that "[in] the end, the Lady remains a complex character. The poem's conclusion makes clear that she is not a slave to her passion, nor is there any reason for believing that she is only passively carrying out Sir Bertilak's orders, especially since both she and her husband ultimately act at the behest of Morgan le Fay" (331). Lady Bercilak's actions and agency make her character difficult to clearly analyze because neither explanation nor justification decisively outlines her motivations. The poet allows interpretations of

her character as either passive object, active subject of desire, or a permutation of both; she does not conform to an ideal upheld to preserve the kingdom, as Guenevere does.

Lady Bercilak attempts to persuade Gawain to disturb the kingdom's moral authority, but she is not the only female figure at Castle Hautdesert with an interest in subverting the power structure that Gawain and Arthur represent. The female figure who holds the most power and wields the most agency never speaks nor reveals her true face. Morgan le Fay, who orchestrated the beheading game to begin with as an hostility against Guenevere, and perhaps to unseat her by disrupting the stability of Arthur's court and kingdom, exercises control indirectly from Lady Bercilak's side as an companion.[15] The

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[15] Morgan le Fay in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* receives more scholarly treatment than the figures of Guenevere and Lady Bercilak. For reading on the figure of Morgan in Arthurian works, see Fisher, Sheila. "Leaving Morgan Aside: Women, History, and Revisionism in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight.*" *The Passing of Arthur: New Essays in Arthurian Tradition.* Eds. Christopher Baswell and William Sharpe. New York and London: Garland, 1988. 129-51; Friedman, Albert B. "Morgan le Fay in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight.*" *Speculum* 35 (1960): 260-74; Loomis, Roger S. "Morgain la Fee and the Celtic Goddesses." *Speculum* 20 (1945): 183-203; Narin, Elisa Marie. "'Þat on... Þat oþer': Rhetorical Descriptio and Morgan la Fay in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight.*" *Pacific Coast Philology* 23 (1988): 60-6; Stock, Lorraine Kochanske. "The Hag of Castle Hautdesert: The Celtic Sheela-na-gig and the *Auncian* in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight.*" *On Arthurian Women: Essays in Memory of Maureen Fries.* Eds. Bonnie Wheeler and Fiona Tolhurst. Dallas: Scriptorium, 2001. 121-48; and Twomey,

Gawain-poet describes the perceived relationship between the women: "Anoþer lady hir lad bi þe lyft honde, / Þat watȝ alder þen ho, an auncian, hit semed, / And heȝly honowred wyth haþeleȝ aboute" (947-9). The "auncian" (948) accompanying Lady Bercilak occupies an important position in the household: the lord, lady, and all members of the small court honor the woman in a manner that indicates that she is not an ordinary companion to the lady of a royal household. The emphasis on the honor and deference shown to the old woman is reminiscent of the privileged position that Guenevere holds within Arthur's court; however, Guenevere's position signals the status of those around her, while the old woman's place demonstrates honor shown to her alone. The attitudes of men within the two courts toward the two women distinguish the power structures of the two courts. While Arthur asserts his authority through his actions toward Guenevere, Bercilak, as the ostensible lord of the household at Castle Hautdesert, defers to his wife's companion, and at the meal, "Þe olde, auncian wyf heȝest ho sytteȝ" (1001). She essentially subsumes the place of reigning lord since Bercilak abdicates authority to her through her physical positioning. As Lady Bercilak's dress mirrors and parodies Guenevere's dress at the Christmas feast, the "auncian" woman's place in Bercilak's court mirrors and parodies Guenevere's place at Arthur's court. The parody of the old woman's placement at Bercilak's court subverts the power structure which Guenevere's positioning supports and in which she finds security.

Michael W. "Morgan le Fay at Hautdesert." *On Arthurian Women: Essays in Memory of Maureen Fries.* Eds. Bonnie Wheeler and Fiona Tolhurst. Dallas: Scriptorium, 2001. 103-19.

The *Gawain*-poet maintains a mysterious silence regarding the level of the old woman's authority until Gawain completes his challenge. After Gawain's failure, exposed at the Green Chapel, reveals the fallibility of Arthur's court, Bercilak discloses his own "true" identity as the Green Knight, as well as that of the honored woman within his home; his own wife's name—and nature—remain unknown:

> "Bercilak de Hautdesert. I hat in þis londe
>
> Þurȝ myȝt of Morgne la Faye, þat in my hous lenges,
>
> And koyntyse of clergye bi craftes wel lerned;
>
> Þe maystrés of Merlyn mony ho taken,
>
> For ho hatȝ dalt drwry ful dere sumtyme
>
> With þat conable klerk; þat knowes alle your knyȝteȝ
>
>> at hame.
>
>> Morgne þe goddes,
>
>> Þerfore, hit is hir name;
>
>> Weldeȝ non so hyȝe hawtesse
>
>> Þat ho ne con make ful tame." (2445-55)

Bercilak honors the old woman, now exposed as Arthur's sister, Morgan le Fay, because "þe goddess" (2452) functions as his benefactress. Through her power learned from Merlin and put at his service, he possesses his lands and authority, which appear to be achieved at a certain cost as she controls him, his household, and his wife. Friedman examines the wording of Bercilak's revelation about Morgan to contend, "By speaking of her as a goddess, the poet deepens the sinister gloom about her" (267). In addition to

enhancing her "gloom," refering to Morgan as a goddess connects the mechanisms of the

Castle Hautdesert more closely with the landscape of Wales and the border areas and

their culture as distinct from the "English" Arthur's. The environment through which

Gawain travels and in which the Green Chapel sits distinguishes itself from the heavily

Christianized culture of Arthur's realm. The goddess embodies the dangers to the

integrity of the court, and her conjured physical appearance provides a successful

disguise against her nephew that allows her to subvert the power structure he knows. She

learned her magical arts from Merlin, but she uses them to control and dominate "others"

(from her perspective) and to destroy the kingdom which, according to Arthurian

traditions, Merlin helped to build.

Bercilak also reveals here that Morgan instigates the game which brought Gawain

to the Green Chapel in the first place. Her intentions were to test the character and

chivalry of Arthur's knight and to kill Guenevere through the shock of seeing the Green

Knight's graphic and immediate beheading. Morgan hopes to throw the kingdom into

chaos without leaving Castle Hautdesert, a feat that requires recourse to power and

influence outside the physical boundaries of Bercilak's lands. Disputing Morgan's power

within *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Friedman offers an alternative view:

> Her effective life in the poem is local, restricted to the few lines in which
>
> Bercilak tells us the reason for his journey to Camelot. If something had
>
> been said or insinuated about Morgan or an unnamed enchantress in the
>
> challenge scene or if the shrivelled hag at the castle had acted in some

sinister fashion, Bercilak's explanation might then have carried a measure

of plausibility. (274)

However, the absence of specific responsibility attached to Morgan fails to strip her of

her power, for the clues expressed within the poem indicate the importance of her role.

The poet does not need to directly express each specific instance of Morgan's magical

power, as supernatural, or "otherworldly," occurences during a knight's quest are

conventions of romance. The magic that allows the beheading game to ensue and the

influence that controls Bercilak at Arthur's court demonstrate that Morgan's power

extends beyond Hautdesert's localized boundaries. Lynn Arner views Morgan le Fay's

role within the poem as being larger than the poem itself. She examines the tension

between England and Wales during the time of the *Gawain*-poet's writing. She argues

that Morgan's control at Hautdesert depicts tension between the Welsh, represented by

Morgan, and the English, represented by Arthur and Gawain (Arner 90). The *Gawain*-

poet draws upon the cultural tensions within the single figure of Arthur and separates it

into two figures from Arthur's family. By assigning the association with Welsh culture to

Morgan, the *Gawain*-poet more strongly associates Arthur with English culture, thereby,

participating in the shift in the tradition's development from Arthur of Britain to Arthur

of England.

The Arthur of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* appears inexperienced and highly

influenced by his youthfulness, although he persuasively asserts authority within his own

court. The *Gawain*-poet stresses the "newness" of Arthur's court: the king and his knights

do not face great military trials that would prove their worth in the kingdom's stability.

The threat to the peace of Arthur's kingdom results not from an outside military source as in the chronicles, but from an internal source within the figure of Arthur himself, symbolized in his "splitting" into his sister, Morgan le Fay. The actions of Morgan and her accomplice Lady Bercilak subvert the authority that Arthur wields and Guenevere supports through her complicity. The women of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* represent splitting tensions between England and Wales heightened during the poem's twenty-five year period (ca. 1375-1400) of possible composition. Lady Bercilak and Morgan le Fay portray the perceived dangers of rebellious uprisings in Wales and the border areas that England heavily colonizes in the second half of the fourteenth century. The threat to Arthur's kingdom cannot be easily defeated through physical might and material power. Gawain accepts the physical challenge the Green Knight offers but fails the ultimate test because he cannot maintain, beyond all temptations, the chivalric behavior his court values.[16] In this "culture war," the *Gawain*-poet addresses the politics

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[16] *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* presents an ideal knight who saves his king and kingdom from danger. The theme of Gawain saving Arthur occurs in a mid-fifteenth-century English romance that shares themes with *The Wife of Bath's Tale*. For reading on the fifteenth-century romance, see *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle*. *Sir Gawain: Eleven Romances and Tales*. Ed. Thomas Hahn. Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institutes Publications, 1995. 47-80; Hahn, Thomas. "*The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle*: Introduction." *Sir Gawain: Eleven Romances and Tales*. Ed. Thomas Hahn. Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institutes Publications, 1995. 41-46; and Bugge, John.

advocated in chivalric behavior for aristocratic audiences and colonial practices toward

Wales that resulted in rebellions such as Lawgoch's in the 1370s, building toward

Glendower's beginning in 1403. (England experiences stability regarding the succession

until Henry IV (r. 1399-1413) usurps Richard II's throne in 1399.) Without disputed

claims to the throne, the *Gawain*-poet's Arthur does not need to justify a particular

claimant, nor does he need actively to seek the establishment of a great European empire

as the figure of Arthur does in Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia*. The threat to the

kingdom—England as well as the fictional Camelot— is both more, and less, completely

interior.

"Fertility Myth and Female Sovereignty in *The Weddynge of Sir Gawn and Dame Ragnell.*" *The Chaucer Review* 39 (2004): 198-218.

Chapter Three:

Gendering the Round Table and Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*

Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*, like Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia*,

provides a basis for the Arthurian works that follow its 1485 publication. Malory's work

bridges two divides: one between manuscript and print culture as an early publication of

England's first printer, William Caxton, and one between the literary genres of chronicle

and romance. Written and printed in the politically volatile decades of the 1460s and

1480s, *Le Morte Darthur* presents both the sometimes peaceful and often turbulent years

in Britain, from the reign of Uther, preceding Arthur's conception, to Guenevere's

choices following his death. The work's episodes engage the uncertainty of England in

the years (1460s and 1480s) during which the succession is contested. The work lacks a

clear sense of continuity and unity evocative of the episodes of the unclear dynastic shifts

in the larger culture. Scholars debate whether the text is one work or a collection of

individual works.[1] *Le Morte Darthur*'s disjointed structure prevents the emergence of a

consistent and definitive picture of Arthur within the text; this ambiguity creates an

Arthur who alternately rises to the forefront and fades into the background as the stories

fluctuate between episodes created in chronicle traditions and those following the English

and French romance traditions. Embracing both traditions, Malory, as evidenced in the

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[1] Debates focused on the structure of Malory's Arthurian work as a single text or

a collection of works are influenced by the content of the work and the two editions of

the work—William Caxton's edition, which treats the work as a single text, and Eugène

Vinaver's edition, which treats the work as a collection of romances.

text which is attributed to him and not by existing statements made by the author, creates a hybrid work in which Arthur cannot maintain the power he gains early on in his reign. Arthur's shifting positions as a monarch reflect the unstable succession in England from 1460 to 1485, and women, notably, influence events that affect the fate of king and kingdom.

Examinations of Malory's work must address scholarly debates concerning the identity of Thomas Malory and the text of Malory's Arthuriad regardless of the study's focus, because questions continue to surround the author's identity and editions of the text. Unlike the anonymous *Gawain*-poet, the name of the author of *Le Morte Darthur* is known by modern audiences, in part due to the preservation of the name in William Caxton's 1485 edition of the text. In this edition, Sir Thomas Malory receives attribution for this Arthurian work, but scholars continue to search for the precise identity of the fifteenth-century "Thomas Malory" whose attribution the prose work carries. Scholars examine judicial records to identify which Thomas Malory composed *Le Morte Darthur*. In the records, Thomas Malory describes himself "as a knight and prisoner" (Fields 1). The self-identification in Malory's final paragraph of *Le Morte Darthur*, in which he asks for "good delyvueraunce" (599) and refers to himself as "Syr Thomas Maleore, kynght" (600), provides scholars a starting point.[2] Some scholars use the self-identification and

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[2] All quotations from Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte Darthur* are from *Caxton's Malory: A New Edition of Sir Thomas Malory's* Le Morte Darthur *Based on the Pierpont Morgan Copy of William Caxton's Edition of 1485*. Ed. James W. Spisak and William Matthews. Berkeley and Los Angles: U of California P, 1983.

recorded crimes, such as robbery and assault, as the basis of their arguments for one

particular Thomas Malory.[3] In *The Life and Times of Sir Thomas Malory*, P. J. C. Fields

argues that the crime Malory which committed could not have been too grievous, for

"[t]he *Morte Darthur*...shows that Malory's long imprisonment was honourable and even

comfortable. He was given conditions in which he could write a substantial and

demanding book, and these conditions included ready access to one of the most

remarkable libraries in the country" (144). The author's self-identification and

composition of the work in the 1460s lead scholars to believe that Malory was a political

prisoner. However, the author withholds the circumstances of his imprisonment, which

could be based on a number of causes other than embroilment in domestic political

contests. In his Introduction to *Caxton's Malory*, James W. Spisak discusses various

identities for Thomas Malory, including a theory which contends that Malory was

imprisoned in France where he could have had access to a library of Arthurian works

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[3] Although certain scholarly theories are more accepted than others, the identity of

the "Sir Thomas Malory" who authored *Le Morte Darthur* remains inconclusive. P. J. C.

Fields states "There were several men called Thomas Malory alive in 1469/70, and no

direct evidence has yet been put forward to link any of them with the *Morte Darthur*" (4).

Fields discusses the options for the identity of Thomas Malory and argues for the man

that he believes to be the author. For the detailed argument as to the identity of Malory,

see Fields, P. J. C. *The Life and Times of Sir Thomas Malory*. Cambridge: D. S. Brewer,

1993.

(610). Determining what type of prisoner Malory was and where he was imprisoned raise

questions impossible to answer definitively based upon existing historical record.

The second significant debate concerns the text itself. Until the 1934 discovery of

the Winchester manuscript, William Caxton's 1485 edition of *Le Morte Darthur* served

as the authoritative text.[4] The discovery of the Winchester manuscript and Eugène

Vinaver's subsequent scholarly edition raised questions concerning issues of authorship,

authorial intent, and editorial intervention regarding the Caxton edition and texts based

upon it. Since Vinaver's 1947 edition, scholars must decide which edition of Malory's

text to study and treat as authoritative. Vinaver in his Introduction to *The Works of Sir*

Thomas Malory argues for the Winchester manuscript as the standard for his edition "not

because it [the text] is…the nearest to the original" in all aspects but because the text "is

as fair as any choice can be" (civ).[5] By and large, Vinaver's edition appears more

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[4] The manuscript was found in Winchester College's Fellows' Library in July of

1934 and may be earlier than Caxton's printing although evidences points to a "roughly

contemporary" date (Vinaver, Introduction lxxxvii). For Vinaver's discussion of the

manuscript and textual differences, see Vinaver, Eugène. Introduction. *The Works of Sir*

Thomas Malory. v.1. 1947. Ed.Eugène Vinaver. Oxford: Clarendon, 1948. xiii-cix.

[5] For reading on Vinaver's views and editorial processes, see Vinaver, Eugène.

Introduction. *The Works of Sir Thomas Malory.* v.1. 1947. Ed.Eugène Vinaver. Oxford:

Clarendon, 1948. xiii-cix and "Malory's *Le Morte Darthur." Arthur King of Britain:*

History, Chronicle, Romance & Criticism with Texts in Modern English, from Gildas to

Malory. Ed. Richard L. Brengle. New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1964. 396-405.

commonly used by modern scholars than the Caxton edition, yet scholars contested the

displacement of *Le Morte Darthur* by *The Works of Sir Thomas Malory* soon after the

latter's publication. While acknowledging the value of Vinaver's text, C. S. Lewis, in

Studies in Medieval and Renaissance Literature, contends, "We should all read the

Works; but it would be an impoverishment if we did not return to the *Morte*" (110). Both

editions of Malory's text have value to the corpus of Arthurian literature as they

demonstrate the transition of a work from manuscript to print culture and the

overwhelming popularity of Malory's work in the late fifteenth century.

The discovery of the Winchester manuscript prompted debates regarding textual

and editorial intervention on the part of Caxton. Scholars argue that Caxton played an

integral role in the presentation of the text and that Caxton's influence changed the work.

However, aside from adding book and chapter divisions, which Caxton notes in his

"Prologue" (3), Caxton's changes to the text cannot be accurately assessed.[6] The precise

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Since Vinaver's first edition, two subsequent editions have been published. For an early

version of Vinaver's edition, see Malory, Sir Thomas *The Works of Sir Thomas Malory*.

v. 1. 1947. Ed. Eugene Vinaver. Oxford: Clarendon, 1948.

[6] For information on Caxton as a printer and editor and his influence, see Kuskin,

William. "Caxton's Worthies Series: The Production of Literary Culture." *ELH* 66

(1999): 511-51; Mukai, Tsuyoshi. "De Worde's 1498 *Morte Darthur* and Caxton's Copy

Text." *The Review of English Studies* 51.201 (2000): 24-40; and Weinberg, S. Carole.

"Caxton, Anthony Woodville, and the Prologue to the *Morte Darthur*." *Studies in*

Philology 102 (2005): 45-65.

roles played by printer and editor have shaped the reception of Malory's work since

Caxton, and perhaps before him. In "'The Hoole Book': Editing and the Creation of

Meaning in Malory's Text," Carol M. Meale addresses what she views as "generations"

of editorial work upon Malory's text (17). Meale argues that "given the lack of an

authoritative copy of the work, it is necessary to conclude that the exemplar which lay

behind the sole surviving manuscript may be as much the product of editorial

intervention as Caxton's or Vinaver's versions" (17).[7] Arguments over the purity of the

text as presented by Vinaver or Caxton presuppose that the text of the Winchester

manuscript was that which Malory supervised and that the process of manuscript

production involved no form of editorial intervention, intentional or unintentional, upon

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[7] After this statement, Carol M. Meale concludes with words about the active

participation of readers: "And as readers of Malory today, in choosing which version we

privilege above the others, we should recognize that we actively participate in the

creation of meaning" (17). Following her words, I have chosen to use the Caxton edition

for this study to examine contemporary influences and political situations in the 1460s

when the work is composed by Malory and in the 1480s when the work is first

commercially published by Caxton. The questions surrounding which text of Malory's

work, either those based upon Caxton's *Le Morte Darthur* or Vinaver's edition of *The

Works of Sir Thomas Malory*, to use when studying Malory continue. For further reading

on this debate, see Kindrick, Robert L. "What Malory Should I Teach?" *Approaches to

Teaching the Arthurian Tradition*. Eds. Maureen Fries and Jennie Watson. New York:

Modern Language Association of America, 1992. 100-5.

the part of scribes or the practices of the scriptorium that produced the Winchester manuscript. The text as known to modern audiences results from complex processes of editing, printing, and publication; arguing for the Caxton edition or the Vinaver edition as the standard really argues for one editorial process over another.

Intentions regarding the textual design of Malory's work also remain ambiguous, however explicitly printer, and implicitly Malory, express their intentions regarding literary genre. In the Prologue to his edition, Caxton refers to the work as a "noble hystorye" (1). *Le Morte Darthur*, unlike earlier Medieval romances such as *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, recounts the life and reign of Arthur in its entirety, as do the chronicle and chronicle-based works of the twelfth and early thirteenth centuries. Although the historical scope of Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia* or Laʒamon's *Brut* is larger, Malory provides a far more detailed version of Arthur's life than the chronicles do. In "Malory and his Sources," Terence McCarthy observes that

> Malory is not a historian but he deals with the stuff of history—the reigns of kings, wars, and political factions. He has the historian's concern to sift information, to withhold misleading facts, to dispense with unreliable sources, and to expose the prejudices of 'makers' or story-tellers, and this approach is something we can trace back to the English tradition of Arthurian literature, which shows a historical interest quite unlike the literary turn of mind of the French *romanciers*. (93)

In his portrayal of Arthur and his court, Malory makes use of chronicle material to address the immediate need in his own historical moment. Malory, thus, participates in an

English tradition—as distinct from the French--that "historicizes" Arthurian literature. English romances shape aspects of history to speak to contemporary situations, such as the colonization of Wales, for instance, or a troubled succession. Malory employs "historical" detail of Arthur's life rather than gesturing to the mythology of Britain's origins (as does the *Gawain*-poet).

To a certain extent, Malory's *Le Morte Darthur* follows chronicle traditions in shaping an English Arthurian literature by recounting the *"realpolitik"* of Arthur's life and his struggles to stabilize the throne; he also follows the romance traditions' treatment of Arthurian matter by recounting the adventures of Arthur's knights.[8] Malory's focus on the knights and their quests during the peaceful times of Arthur's reign prompt readers and scholars, including Vinaver, to view the work as a romance or as a collection of romances. The hybrid classification of the text as "history" and romance results from the lack of unity within the text. The questions of cohesion and unity, however, derive from attempts to force the work to adhere to the standards of one genre. Malory's prose work blends the traditions of chronicle and romance more fully than earlier Arthurian works. *Le Morte Darthur* recounts a variety of episodes which occur over Arthur's lifetime rather than a single era of or incident within his reign, as does the *Alliterature Morte*

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[8] Caxton claims that Malory's sources were French, but they may not have been exclusively French. For reading on sources used by Malory and their incorporation, see Donaldson, E. Talbot. "Malory and the Stanzaic *Le Morte Arthur.*" *Studies in Philology* 47 (1950): 460-72 and Withrington, John. "The Arthurian Epitaph in Malory's 'Morte Darthur.'" *Arthurian Literature* 7 (1987): 103-44.

Arthure (ca. 1350-1400). Addressing the complexity of questions of Malory's method and genre, Charles Moorman, in "Yet Some Men Say…that Kynge Arthure Ys Nat Ded," argues that "Malory is…writing essentially a *Morte* for his own time, the mid-fifteenth century, a work both romance and history, which he and his printer, William Caxton, regard neither as pure fiction nor as pure fact" (192). The work blends chronicle and romance genres, perhaps split more decisively by modern than contemporary audiences of Malory's work. The narration of Arthur's life in its entirety distinguishes Malory's work from previous English and French romances, which typically focus upon a specific quest. Whether using Vinaver's distinction of eight tales or the less thematic divisions into books and chapters made by Caxton, the stories Malory's text represent a larger body of material than either chronicles or other Arthurian romances. In this respect, *Le Morte Darthur* significantly stands apart from both chronicle and romance works, such as the *Historia Regum Britanniæ* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, which preceded it and begins a new segment of English Arthurian literature that includes romances that respond to, and engage with, English historiography.

Malory's *Le Morte Darthur* draws upon the past and received ideals of chivalry and knighthood, shaping and adapting the traditions to portray fifteenth-century values. Malory's adaptation of chivalry reflects changing social attitudes. In "*Chivalry and the Morte Darthur*," Richard Barber examines the role of chivalry in Malory's stories in the context of the revival of late fifteenth-century revival of chivalric practices, stating, "Like many medieval writers, he [Malory] believes that the past is better than the present: hence his allusions to a chivalric past in which men were more loyal and steadfast, both in their

allegiances and in their love" (31). In creating his Arthurian work, Malory plays upon

nostalgic yearnings and participates in his own time's revival of chivalric practices,

fashioning new models for his contemporary audience. In his discussion of the role of

tournaments as examples of revived traditions of knighthood, Barber, in "Malory's *Le*

Morte Darthur and Court Culture under Edward IV," argues that "If he [Malory] had

been writing in the late 1450s, his interest in tournaments could only have been

antiquarian curiosity...By contrast, in the 1460s there was a major revival of the sport in

England, and evidence of royal and courtly enthusiasm for it" (146). The revived

practices of knighthood, such as the tournaments, can be used to establish the date of

Malory's composition. The revival may have increased the popularity of the traditions

and practices portrayed in romances such as Malory's and the demand for them. Malory

incorporates chivalric practices, such the tenets of courtly love that govern the

relationship between Guenevere and Launcelot and the rescue of damsels, into his

Arthurian work while he portrays Arthur in the forefront of episodes that recount a realm

threatened by internal dissent—timely issues for Malory's England in the 1460s.

As in the time of Geoffrey of Monmouth, two branches of the royal family

contest the succession. The Yorkists and Lancastrians divide the kingdom from the 1450s

until 1485 while competing for the throne.[9] Some effort to label Malory as a Yorkist or

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[9] The questions and struggles regarding legitimate succession arise after Richard

II is deposed and direct succession interrupted, and language became an important tool to

address political events that precede the political strife of Malory's lifetime. For reading

on the political use of language in the early fifteenth century, see Strohm, Paul.

Lancastrian based upon internal evidence in *Le Morte Darthur* has been made in the

scholarship; however, not all scholars view the work as a politically partisan text. In his

article "Malory's *Morte Darthur*: A Politically Neutral English Adaptation of the

Arthurian Story," Edward Donald Kennedy argues that the work is neither partisan nor

even political: "unlike some others writing Arthurian chronicles during the reign of

Edward IV, Malory was not writing political propaganda that would support either side,

was not presenting Arthur as a model for Edward, and was not commenting on

contemporary politics" (147).[10] While Malory's text may not provide direct evidence of

partisanship, the wholesale stripping of any engagement with contemporary events in a

sense denies English traditions of Arthur's association with politics. Political themes,

particularly of imperial conquests, present in *Le Morte Darthur* focus on issues other than

the dynastic conflicts that overshadow the kingdom until the accession of Henry VII in

1485. The lack of overt political positioning indicates carefulness and, perhaps, a sense of

self-preservation on the part of a man who did not wish to return to a state of

imprisonment. Discussing Malory's concern over political strife in the 1460s in her

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England's Empty Throne: Usurpation and the Language of Legitimacy, 1399-1422. New

Haven and London: Yale UP, 1998.

[10] Kennedy strongly disagrees with political readings of the text. Later in his

article, he states, "In short, those who have attempted to find historical and political

allusions in Malory's work, other than the very general parallel of the tragedy of Arthur's

divided kingdom corresponding to the tragedy of an England split between Yorkists and

Lancastrians, have been skating on rather thin ice" (Edward Donald Kennedy155).

article "Political Consciousness and the Literary Mind in Late Medieval England: Men 'Brought up of nought' in Vale, Hardyng, *Mankind*, and Malory," Sarah L. Peverley observes that Malory's "persistent emphasis on social hierarchy, civil unrest, and the conflict between personal loyalties and public profit would have surely struck a powerful chord with those who had been exposed to the same political turmoil and propaganda" (27). The pertinent political issues in Malory's text may have been more apparent to a contemporary audience with shared experiences in the dynastic struggle for the throne between Henry VI and Edward IV. The subtle approach to calling for domestic peace, a strong monarch, and a stable succession avoids explicit support for either Henry VI or Edward IV and provides Malory with a form of protection against imprisonment.

The political climate which influences Malory's composition also affects Caxton's printing of the text as *Le Morte Darthur*. Printed in July 1485, shortly before Henry VII takes the English throne in August 1485, Caxton's edition emerges at a time when two claimants to the throne, Richard III (r. 1483-1485) and Henry VII (r. 1485-1509), bring the contested succession to a conclusion, although not a final conclusion.[11]

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[11] After Edward IV's death, the stability he achieved disappears, and the succession becomes disputed again between the house of York in Richard III and the house of Lancaster in Henry Tudor. For reading on Richard III's ascent, see Mancini, Dominic, and Angelo Cato. *The Usurpation of Richard the Third: Dominicus Mancinus ad Angelum Catoneum de Occupatione Regni Anglie per Riccardum Tercium Libellus.* 2nd ed. Trans. C. A. J. Armstorng. Oxford: Clarendon, 1969. For reading on the Tudors' claims and ascent to the throne, see "Summarizing Papal Bull Recognizing Henry VII."

Like Malory in the 1460s, Caxton had to consider the safety of political statements as he

edited and printed the text during Richard III's reign, and his decision to print Malory's

work results not simply from a personal desire to print an Arthurian work but from the

requests and inquiries of his patrons. Caxton explains in his "Prologue" that after his

printing histories of great men, such as "Godefray of Boloyn" (1),

> many noble and dyuers gentylmen of thys royame of Englond camen and
>
> demaunded me many and oftymes, wherefore that I haue not do made and
>
> enprynte the noble hystorye of the Sayntgreal 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 vs Englysshemen
>
> tofore al other Crysten kynges. (1)

Caxton recounts how "many noble men" have pointedly and persistently inquired why he

had not printed an Arthurian work, since he had produced histories "of grete conquerours

and prynces" (1). These "demanding" English gentlemen, who may have included

Anthony Woodville, Edward IV's brother-in-law, before the former's execution in 1483,

are from noble and aristocratic classes who would have had the means to patronize the

printer, and they represent political influence on him from their social and governmental

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The Tudor Royal Proclamations. v.1 Eds. Paul L. Hughes and James F. Larkin. New

Haven and London: Yale UP, 1964. 6-7; Jones, Michael K, and Malcolm G. Underwood.

The King's Mother: Lady Margaret Beaufort, Countess of Richmond and Derby.

Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1992; and Rex, Richard. *The Tudors.* 2002. Stroud,

Gloucestershire: Tempus. 2005.

positions. Anthony Woodville may have been an early patron of Caxton's edition of Malory's work, as the printer published Woodville's works. In "Caxton, Anthony Woodville, and the Prologue to *Morte Darthur*," S. Carole Weinberg notes that "[o]ne of the earliest books Caxton printed at Westminster, in 1477, was *The Dicts or Sayings of the Philosophers*, translated from the French by Anthony Woodville" (49-50). Weinberg also discusses Caxton's printing of Woodville's *Moral Proverbs* in 1478 and *Cordial or Four Last Things* in 1479, both English translations of French works (52). Although he mentions the "gentlymen" (1) multiple times within his "Prologue," Caxton refrains from identifying these men by name or title. This decision to preserve his patrons' anonymity protects both printer and patrons from politically unfavorable turns of events—unwanted political repercussions resulting from changes in ruling parties.

The patrons encouraged Caxton's choice to print an Arthurian work and, quite probably, the choice of the specific work. The gentlemen inquire about a "hystorye" (1) of Arthur, yet Caxton does not at all publish a chronicle or chronicle-based work but a hybrid that combines the story of Arthur with those of his knights. In his "Prologue," he explains, "I haue, ..., enprysed to enprynte a book of the noble hystoryes of the sayd Kynge Arthur and of certeyn of his knyghtes, after a copye vnto me delyuerd, whyche copye Syr Thomas Malorye dyd take oute of certeyn bookes of Frensshe and reduced it into Englysshe" (2). Caxton acknowledges his actions in printing the book but refrains from crediting the person, or persons, who provided Malory's work for publication. In his description of his intentions to print an Arthurian work, Caxton deflects responsibility in the choice of text and in identifying who provided the text to him, perhaps to distance

himself from unfavorable political alliances which would place him and his business in jeopardy by association. Although he avoids recording any particular political affiliations, the edition may not be completely devoid of political intentions. Finke and Shichtman claim,

> Caxton's choice to publish the *Morte Darthur* in 1485 could not have been without a political significance that distinguishes Caxton's printed text from any manuscripts that may have preceded it....Caxton's edition circulated within the institutions of late-fifteenth-century English culture in a number of ways, serving particular political, social, and ideological agendas. (160-1)

The printed text circulates to a larger number of people than the manuscript text and could be employed for varied and multiple means. If patrons intended to use the work to promote Ricard III's reign or Henry Tudor's (Henry VII's) claim, Caxton may have wanted to conceal his associations with them for his own future safety under the victor of the conflict. As Malory may have handled political material subtly to avoid possible punishment, Caxton may have been considering self-preservation when printing the text.

The text as composed by Malory in the 1460s and printed by Caxton in 1485 draws upon Arthurian traditions to recount a glorious era in Britain's past, and Malory creates nostalgia among the audience for a time of safety and stability that allowed the realm of "Britain" to become great, evolving from a fractured kingdom into an international empire. Malory engages in *Le Morte Darthur* a state of affairs evocative of fifteenth-century England beset by civil strife in the eruption of internal fighting in

Britain as a result of King Uther's actions. Christopher Dean observes that "[a]t the

beginning of *Morte d'Arthur*, Britain is a disintegrating and unhappy land. A despicable

civil war breaks out for a base reason, the selfish lust of a despotic king for an unwilling

woman who is not only his subject but also a guest at his court and therefore doubly

under his protection" (93). Uther jeopardizes his kingdom and creates dissension among

his people by placing his personal desires before the needs of his kingdom. His behavior

demonstrates the danger to a kingdom when a monarch fails to uphold responsibilities to

kingdom and subjects, a failure which upheaves culture, people, and realm. Uther's

pursuit of Igraine and war upon Gorlois lead to Gorlois' death and, consequently, to the

brink of civil war upon his own death, as Arthur has been hidden for his own safety,

unrevealed despite Uther's declaration that his son shall succeed him. Only divine

intervention to identify the rightful king settles the discord among the nobles, and Merlin

and the Archbishop of Canterbury oversee the miraculous event that will name the new

monarch on Christmas Day (Malory 36-7). The vassals who owe fealty to their monarch

fail to perform their duties and threaten the kingdom further as a result of the king's

betrayal of them through his attack on Gorlois. The betrayal harms the kingdom in

multiple dimensions—socially, politically, culturally, and materially.[12]

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[12] The culture of the British kingdom in Malory's *Le Morte Darthur* upholds

virtues associated with knighthood and perceptions of masculinity. For readings on

masculinity, fellowship, and fatherhood, see Archibald, Elizabeth. "Malory's Ideal of

Fellowship." *The Review of English Studies* 43.171 (1992): 311-28; Armstorng, Dorsey.

Gender and the Chivalric Community in Malory's Morte d'Arthur. Gainesville, FL: UP

The recognition of Arthur as Uther's son and rightful king of Britain does not come easily despite Uther's naming of his successor and his fulfillment of the prophecy. When Arthur removes the sword from the rock, the nobles contest the outcome, and "wherfor ther were many lordes wroth, and saide it was grete shame vnto them all and the reame to be ouergouernyd with a boye of no hyghe blood borne" (Malory 38). The nobles not only resent, but also feel shame that their newly discovered king and Lord to whom they are to owe allegiance is a boy who is not even known to be noble or royal. Unlike the nobles of Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia* who embrace their teenage monarch, the nobles of *Le Morte Darthur* challenge Arthur's right to rule and require Arthur to remove the sword two more times on the holy days of Christmas and Pentecost. Temporarily disrupted upon Uther's death, the succession is reinstated when the common people insist upon Arthur's ascent to rule. Arthur pulls the sword again at Pentecost in front of the nobles and commoners and "alle the comyns cryed at ones, we wille haue Arthur vnto our kyng. We wille put hym nomore in delay, for we alle see that it is Goddes wille that he shalle be our kynge, and who that holdeth ageynst it, we wille slee hym. And therwithall they knelyd at ones, both ryche and poure, and cryed Arthur mercy bycause they had delayed hym so longe" (39). The commoners, not the nobles, end the dispute by demanding Arthur be instated as their king and threatening to rise against the nobles that

of Florida, 2003; Hodges, Kenneth. "Wounded Masculinity: Injury and Gender in Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte Darthur.*" *Studies in Philology* 106 (2009): 14-31; and Rushton, Cory. "Absent Fathers, Unexpected Sons: Paternity in Malory's *Morte Darthur.*" *Studies in Philology* 101 (2004): 136-52.

deny Arthur's right. The nobility appears willing to continue the civil unrest to satisfy their own desires, but the general population wants to end the strife and recognize the king seemingly determined by God's will through the sword and prophecy. Once the lords concede his right and domestic challenges are extinguished, Arthur's reign stabilizes the realm and establishes a state of internal peace that had been unknown for some time. This early episode within *Le Morte Darthur* foregrounds the dangers of unsettled successions within kingdoms and questions of legitimacy and heritage, dangers eminently present in the English politics of the 1460s and 1480s.

The peace established by Arthur's rule stabilizes the kingdom by ending the contest for the throne and enables Arthur's knights to accomplish deeds thought to be righteous rather than militarily defensive. The next severe threat to Britain's stability arrives from outside the kingdom, and the court's presentation of a united front against the foreign threat demonstrates Arthur's power within the realm and his relationship with his knights. When Lucius threatens the country by claiming Britain as part of the empire, Arthur counsels with his lords and responds to the envoys that he does not recognize Lucius' authority. Arthur then asserts his claim to Rome and assigns the envoys a message to return to their emperor:

> And saye to hym that I am delybered and fully concluded to goo wyth
> myn armye with strengthe and power vnto Rome, by the grace of God, to
> take possession in th'Empyre and subdue them that ben rebelle. Wherfore
> I commaunde hym and alle them of Rome that incontynent they make to

me their homage, and to knouleche me for their emperour and gouernour

vpon payne that shalle ensiewe. (Malory 122-3)

In response to Lucius' demands for homage from Britain, Arthur invokes a hereditary

British claim to Rome through Brutus and demands homage from Rome. Arthur's words

are not an empty threat; he knows that he and his knights can leave the realm to battle the

Romans because he has no fears of usurpation, as he is at the height of his domestic

power. The episode represents the growth of Britain into an international power and

reinforces the mythology of Britain's founding. In her discussion of the significance of

the war with Lucius, Elizabeth Archibald, in "*Beginnings*: The Tale of King Arthur *and*

King Arthur and the Emperor Lucius," explains,

> The English sometimes used the legend of Arthur's Roman expedition as
>
> supporting evidence in political claims. In the later Middle Ages historians
>
> were worried by it, since they could find no records of it in continental
>
> chronicles. As historiography developed the veracity of the Arthurian
>
> legend was challenged, and by the mid-sixteenth century there were many
>
> who argued that it had no basis in historical fact. But for Malory, the
>
> Roman campaign was crucial in establishing the reputation of Arthur and
>
> his knights throughout Christendom. This is the last time that we see them
>
> acting (and fighting) together, until the disastrous civil war which destroys
>
> the Round Table fellowship and the Arthurian world. (150)

Early in Malory's work, the episode marks the united triumph of Arthur and his knights,

and ushers Britain into an era of peace and dominance. Malory alters the time at which

the Roman war occurs in Arthur's reign; in earlier works, such as Geoffrey of

Monmouth's *Historia*, the Roman war denotes the beginning of the downfall of Arthur

and the British.[13] In *Le Morte Darthur*, however, the war establishes the beginning of

Britain's "counter-imperialism" and precipitates years of peace. Malory advocates empire

as beneficial to the kingdom, although, at the same time, empire can be accomplished

only in times of domestic stability and prosperity.

Malory establishes the military prowess of Arthur and his knights through

imperial conquest to assert the reputation of Britain early in Arthur's reign, as Geoffrey

of Monmouth also does in his chronicle. Arthur's British army succeeds in preventing

Lucius from harming their kingdom and people and conquers Rome as well. Therefore,

Arthur honors his promise to defeat the Romans and ensures his victory through Lucius's

death, which, unlike the version by Geoffrey of Monmouth, occurs by Arthur's own

hand: "And whanne Kyng Arthur felte hymself hurte, anon he smote hym ageyne with

Excalibur, that it clefte his hede fro the somette of his hede and stynted not tyl it cam to

his breste. And thenne th'Emperour fylle doune dede and there ended his lyf" (Malory

130). Arthur receives the recognition for the battlefield victory, an incident which

instigates a pattern of gaining and asserting authority through military actions over an

opposing leader, and Arthur's actions result not from a random battle fray but from a

conscious decision to "smote" (130) Lucius. According to Elizabeth Pochoda in

Arthurian Propaganda: Le Morte Darthur *as an Historical Ideal of Life*, Arthur's

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[13] The war between Arthur and Lucius occurs in the fifth of twenty-one books in

the Caxton edition and in the second of the eight tales in the Vinaver edition.

triumph has further implications: "The Roman victory is Arthur's, not that of fortune, and it is a victory born first of self-sacrifice and secondly of an ability to command a quasi-religious devotion from his men. England has literally and figuratively become the successor to Rome" (91). The victory over the Roman threat, embodied by Lucius, demonstrates Britain's agency, embodied by Arthur, to participate and triumph in international battles, places Britain, and thereby England, in a line of distinguished and powerful empires, and reasserts the connection between Rome and Britain. This battle represents an acme in the reign of Arthur and the power of the Round Table which cannot last. Unlike Geoffrey of Monmouth's account of the Roman war, in Malory, Arthur's victory in Rome is not immediately followed by the civil war which ends Arthur's reign and life. The changes that stress early in *Le Morte Darthur* Britain's supremacy on an international stage suggest Malory's political advice for his own time, advice similar to that of Geoffrey of Monmouth, that England could gain prominence and power outside its borders if the conflict within its borders ceased. The work offers a glimpse and a promise of a strong England through the depiction of a powerful British empire.

The victory over Rome highlights the strength of the knights of the Round Table and initiates the withdrawal of Arthur from the stories, which begin to relate the quests of various knights and damsels. Arthur returns as a central figure within the work when the fall of his kingdom is imminent, and the conflict which precipitates the fall results not from an outside threat, against which the knights have proven successful, but from internal dissension. The trouble begins with two knights of Arthur's own family: "So in this season, ..., it byfelle a grete angre and vnhap that stynted not til the floure of

chyualry of alle the world was destroyed and slayn, and alle was long vpon two vnhappy knyghtes, the whiche were named Agrauayne and Sire Mordred, that were bretheren vnto Sir Gawayne" (Malory 555). Gawayne's brothers and Arthur's nephews instigate the actions which culminate in the end of Arthur's reign, depicting the dangers of familial struggles upon the kingdom. Mordred's relationship to Arthur is closer than a sister's son since he is also Arthur's son, making the betrayal more significant, and more complex, than a vassal's betrayal of his lord. During Malory's own time, familial connections incite the struggle which consumes the realm because, at its essence, the Yorkist-Lancastrian dynastic struggle for the throne was a contested claim between the descendants of Richard II's uncles, John of Gaunt, the ancestor of Henry VI (r. 1422-1461 and 1470-1471) and Henry VII (r. 1485-1509), and Edmund, Duke of York, ancestor of Edward IV (r. 1461-1483) and Richard III (r. 1483-1485).

Arthur's family, Gawayne's brothers and sons, participate in the actions which divide the knights and direct the kingdom's downfall, but Gawayne, notably, adheres to the values of the Round Table, refusing to participate in the plot to expose and punish Launcelot and Guenevere. Although Launcelot kills his relatives, Gawayne holds them responsible for their own deaths after the ambush and explains to Arthur that he warned them and will not seek revenge, "For I told hem it was no bote to stryue wyth Sir Launcelot, how be it I am sory of the deth of my bretheren and of my sones. For they are the causers of theyre owne dethe, for oftymes I warned my broder Sir Agrauayne, and I told hym the peryls the which ben now fallen" (563). Gawayne may feel sorrow but accepts the deaths as inevitable consequences of battle with Launcelot in which he

refused to engage. However, when his brothers Gareth and Gaheris die at Launcelot's hands as he rescues Guenevere from the stake, Gawayne views the action as a betrayal of him and the Round Table's values, since the two unarmed young men had not instigated the skirmish which results in their deaths. Arthur's family drama exists at the center of the conflicts which endanger their own lives, the lives of others, and threaten the stability of the kingdom.

Driven by the actions of Arthur and his family to defend his love, Launcelot commits not only murder, but also treason for actively rejecting the decree of his monarch, and he erases his innocence in the matter. The act of treason creates a definitive rupture within the Round Table, ending the established peace within Britain. Accounting for the circumstances surrounding the deaths of Gareth and Garehis, Gawayne now seeks the revenge he relinquishes after the earlier deaths of Agrauayane and his sons. Gawayne expresses his intentions to Arthur, "wete yow wel, now I shal make yow a promyse that I shalle holde by my knyghthode, that from his day I shalle neuer fayle Sir Launcelot vntyl the one of vs haue slayne the other. And therfore I requyre yow, my lord and kynge, dresse yow to the werre, for wete yow wel, I will be reuenged vpon Sire Launcelot" (566). Gawayne seeks Arthur's declaration of war against Launcelot to achieve personal vengeance, and this request escalates the violence beyond equal retribution and propels the Round Table to destruction as the knights must choose sides. Beverly Kennedy, in *Knighthood in the* Morte Darthur, argues that Gawayne "was willing to forego vengeance for the deaths of Aggravayne and his two sons in order to protect his uncle's hold on the Crown, but now it appears that there must be civil war in any case. Therefore Gawain

unleashes his pent-up desire for vengeance and swears to take Lancelot's life for the life

of his kinsmen" (321). The bonds of fealty and fellowship break, and Gawayne no longer

feels the need to protect the broken system; he urges his king into war to redress the

treasonous actions of Guenevere and Launcelot as well as the murders of Gareth and

Gaheris. Gawayne's reaction may result from the anger and sorrow over his brothers'

deaths; however, Arthur's desire for the conflict appears to be notably less intense than

his nephew's, even though he has lost nephews, great-nephews, friends, and a wife.

Although the relationship between Arthur's wife and his trusted knight resides at

the center of the conflict, Arthur has no interest in continuing the war against Launcelot

and will abide by the Pope's orders to take back his wife and leave Launcelot in his own

lands.[14] The force behind the continued action remains Gawayne who refuses to accept

any outcome other than death for himself or Launcelot, and to an extent, Arthur appears

unable or unwilling to exert control over his nephew. Christopher Dean argues that

Gawain's dominance in the war with Launcelot reveals Arthur's loss of power over his

nephew and in the war (100-1). Arthur never fully regains the control he loses in the war

with Launcelot, weakening his role as monarch and his kingdom. Arthur no longer

functions as the powerful warrior who conquers Rome to extend the power and influence

of Britain. With the exposure of his weaknesses, Arthur becomes vulnerable in a manner

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[14] Not all betrayed husbands in *Le Morte Darthur* appear as forgiving as Arthur,

particularly his vassal King Mark. For a brief comparison of Arthur and Mark, see

Kennedy, Edward Donald. "Malory's King Mark and King Arthur." *King Arthur: A

Casebook.* Ed. Edward Donald Kennedy. New York and London: Garland, 1996. 139-71.

he has not been since he ascended to the throne. When a king reveals himself to be weak, the kingdom becomes vulnerable. The concern registered in Malory regarding this weakness reflects fears about a weak king, such Henry VI was, ruling the kingdom because such a monarch cannot prevent another outbreak of civil war and cannot ensure a stable succession: Henry VI yields the throne to Edward IV rather than to his own son Edward.

Fears of civil war are confirmed in the events which occur in Britain during Arthur's absence; his lack of control and power in the war against Launcelot influences the domestic events which threaten king and kingdom. During the Roman campaign, Arthur can safely leave to pursue and eliminate the foreign threat to the country because his power remains unquestioned and is strengthened by his actions. However, during the campaign against Launcelot, Arthur must leave the realm without a strong leader, displaying a failure of fealty from his own men. While acting to satisfy the desires of one nephew, Arthur allows the usurpation of his country by his son Mordred. The young knight initiates the events that led to Launcelot's downfall and the subsequent war and takes advantage of his father's trust and the position he holds during Arthur's absence. Arthur's status as a monarch seems to diminish, enabling Mordred to take the throne: "As Syr Mordred was rular of alle Englond, he dyd do make letters as though that they came from beyonde the see, and the letters specefyed that Kynge Arthur was slayn in bataylle wyth Syr Launcelot. Wherfore Syr Mordred made a parlemente, and called the lordes togyder, and there he made them to chese hym kyng" (Malory 584). Mordred fabricates news of Arthur's death and convinces the parliament to crown him king of Britain,

creating a situation in which the country has two anointed monarchs simultaneously—a situation mirrored in the "realpolitics" of Malory's times from 1461 when Edward IV ascends to the throne until Henry VI's death in 1471. The common people seem not to question the transition of power to Mordred nor the veracity of the reports of Arthur's death. Mordred offers what Arthur cannot at the moment, a present monarch concerned with the kingdom instead of an absent king pursuing Gawain's family vendetta against Launcelot. Arthur's failure to exert his authority diminishes his capability to maintain it and spurs Mordred's usurpation of the throne.

When he returns from the war with Launcelot, Arthur finds the country drastically changed as the British commoners now express loyalty to Mordred. Malory describes the situation to which Arthur returns and the faults of the British people who have not remained "pleased" with Arthur: "And soo faryd the people at that tyme: they were better plesyd with Sir Mordred then they were with Kyng Arthur, and moche peple drewe vnto Sir Mordred and sayd they wold abyde with hym for better and for werse" (585). According to Malory, the British people, the commoners who had acclaimed Arthur king upon threat of violence, have deserted their noble king for his son; this change in allegiance indicates Arthur's weakened presence among the common sort and their diminished respect for their king. The common people prefer to the king who is absent and fighting another's battle the king who is present and attending to the affairs of the kingdom. Christopher Dean argues that "[w]hether in the public life of affairs of state or in the private matters of their own hearts, Malory tells Englishmen that they are fickle and unstable. Concerned only with their selfish wishes, they desert principles and

standards for gratifications of the moment" (101). If the knights of the Round Table fail to uphold their own standards, the general population cannot be expected to adhere to the practices. The populace endorse the situation which, in their judgement, would most likely create peace and stability within the kingdom. Arthur's recent actions have not met their approval. The hero of the Roman war is rejected by his own people, forced to fight and kill his own son, and finally departs from the realm to Avalon. Arthur's mortal wounds at his son's hands represent the lethal threat of internal dissension within the realm. Domestic conflicts destroy the ideal of Arthur's kingdom, and Malory's shaping of the material suggests that if Arthur, one of the great British kings, cannot prevent the loss of his kingdom to civil strife and familial demands, a current English king cannot maintain country and power without ending the dynastic struggles and establishing peace.

Mordred's actions are the last but not the first attempt by a family member to destroy Arthur and end his reign, for Arthur's sister tries to assassinate her brother before his power solidifies after the Roman victory. Morgan le Fay's subversive acts begin early in her life, for while in the convent, "she lerned so moche that she was a grete clerke of nygromancye" (Malory 35). She obtains her skills not from Arthur's advisor Merlin, as she does in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, but from her time in a religious enclosure; she subverts the teachings of the Church and the purposes of those who placed her in the convent for schooling. She represents a danger to Arthur's society because she quickly learns to conceal herself and her actions behind a mask of appropriate behavior and refrains from wielding weapons directly against Arthur. Instead, she uses her powers to influence others to participate in her plans, including Arthur's own knight Sir Accolon.

The threats posed by Morgan le Fay to the kingdom pose a greater menace than a military action, because her domestic threats often resemble an assassin's: they have specific targets—such as Sir Accolon—and they remain unknown until the action occurs. Archibald examines the roles of Morgan le Fay and magic in the early tales within the work: "Morgan's power seems much more threatening, because it is exercised unpredictably, and often her agency is only revealed at a late stage" (143). She targets Arthur only in rare circumstances, such as stealing the scabbard, and the majority of her intended malice occurs through the hands of others. Morgan le Fay desires her brother's death but distances herself from the assassination attempts, although she provides Arthur's weapons. However, she actively deceives Arthur "for the swerd and scaubard was counterfeet and brutyll and fals" (Malory 100). She arranges the exchange of weapons and sends her brother a sword and scabbard that offer no defense against his own, which are wielded by his opponent, while appearing to be a loving sister and loyal subject.

Morgan le Fay's intentions and behavior continue to appear proper until the battle with Accolon in which her deception becomes apparent to Arthur. Arthur discovers the true nature of Morgan le Fay's treachery after recovering his weapon and defeating Accolon, who reveals her plan. The power which she uses to influence Accolon results not from her magic but from her own feelings since she loves him, and Accolon explains their plan to Arthur: "Also she loueth me oute of mesure as paramour, and I her ageyne. And yf she mygthte brynge aboute to slee Arthur by her craftes, she wold slee her husband Kynge Vryens lygthtely, and thenne hadde she me deuysed to be kyng in this

land, and soo to regne, and she to be my quene" (Malory 103). Morgan le Fay promises Accolon that they will assume the rule of the kingdom upon the deaths of her husband and brother. Influenced by his love for Morgan le Fay, Accolon's acceptance of her plot reveals a weakness in Arthur's court. His knight willingly betrays him and the bonds of fealty and attempts to usurp his throne. Morgan le Fay initiates the catalyst that drives her lover, yet Accolon gives no indication that he acts against his will. Morgan le Fay proves that she can subvert the structure of the kingdom from within by corrupting and conspiring with a knight of the Round Table while appearing to support the same hegemony. She threatens Arthur's life and the kingdom in an elusive manner which none can perceive or prevent or defend against.

Both Morgan le Fay and Mordred use deception to commit treacherous acts against their king and close kin. Mordred deceives the entire kingdom regarding Arthur's death, and Morgan le Fay deceives Arthur and the court as to her own behavior and actions. Her deceptions occur on a personal scale and involve acts directed at a specific victim as opposed to acts directed at the kingdom at large. Morgan le Fay attempts to assassinate Arthur to gain the throne, to which she has no legitimate claim; Mordred usurps the throne which he holds as regent and could claim as Arthur's son. Morgan le Fay poses risks as a family member who attempts to assert power and claims which she does not have. The political situation surrounding Malory's work is driven by the descendant of Edward III's younger son, Edmund, Duke of York (1341-1402), Edward IV (r. 1461-1483) claiming the throne currently held by the descendant of Edmund's elder brother, John of Gaunt (1340-1399), Henry VI. Henry VI (r. 1422-1461 and 1470-

1471) had a stronger claim through the birth order of the royal brothers, and he directly inherited the throne from his father, Henry V (r. 1413-1422) and grandfather, Henry IV (r. 1399-1413), who usurped the title of his cousin Richard II (r. 1377-1399) in 1399. In 1485 when Caxton prints his edition of Malory, Henry VII (r. 1485-1509), another descendant of John of Gaunt, through his adulterous affair, and later marriage, with Katherine Swynford, claimed the throne from Richard III (r. 1483-1485), a descendant of Edmund, Duke of York, and sole surviving brother of Edward IV after Richard III displaced his brother's two young sons, Edward V and Richard, who disappeared while held in the Tower of London.

Morgan le Fay represents a familial threat to Arthur that he faces and conquers early in his reign, and this victory over a domestic threat allows him to gain strength and power. The danger posed by Morgan to Arthur, the Round Table, and the kingdom exists because she deceives the whole society by declining to act with the transparency and honor that communal values advocate. Dorsey Armstrong, in "Gender and the Script/Print Continuum: Caxton's *Morte Darthur*," examines in both editions of Malory the oath each knight swears to the Round Table and the problems the oath creates in regard to women. Armstrong argues that problems result from "the fact that women in the *Morte Darthur* are not compelled to swear an oath parallel to that of the knights; because their actions are never perceived as needing regulation, they have the potential to become the most dangerous and disruptive members of the community" ("Gender" 141). Women are not bound by their words to uphold the values of the court, yet their participation in the power structure implies complicit agreement to adhere to those values and

expectations. The true disruption occurs when the women of Arthur's court, particularly Morgan le Fay, hide within or utilize the existing hegemonic structure to achieve their own self-interested goals rather than those which advance the common welfare.

After the disclosure of her actions, Morgan le Fay portrays an explicit female threat within Arthur's Britain, but any woman presents a risk to the society in choosing to act against cultural values. In Malory's work, subversive women with agency represent a small number of the female population, since the majority of women function in ways that allow Arthur's knights to demonstrate their worth and strength. In "Following Malory Out of Arthur's World," Joseph D. Parry claims, "Malory's treatment of women reveals, not surprisingly, the deeply ingrained sexism of the male, Arthurian romance narrator...In Malory women characters are still the narrative tools for discussing male concerns of power and politics" (164). The refusal to serve the purposes of men separates Morgan le Fay from other women in *Le Morte Darthur*. While Morgan le Fay rejects a circumscripted role, Arthur's wife Guenevere seems to accept and support her role within her husband's kingdom. She exerts a measure of power as the queen, but her power exists at the discretion of male authority, specifically Arthur's.

Although Guenevere accepts her role in Arthur's court for years, serving his purposes when needed, she alters her position as compliant through her relationship with Launcelot. Their affair conforms to societal standards because they maintain discretion, which allows Arthur and the court to ignore what they suspect and tolerate the lovers's actions, and in the "secrecy," Guenevere continues to support Arthur's rule and kingdom. Guenevere's actions become dangerous to the kingdom only after Mordrd and

Agrauayane force Arthur to recognize publicly his wife's relationship with his knight and thus the implicit treason committed by them. Arthur's son and nephew seek the downfall of both the queen and Launcelot, and set a trap to catch the pair. Along with twelve other knights, they ambush the couple and declare Lancelot a "traytour" (Malory 557).

The forced exposure of the lovers results from the personal animosity of Mordred and Agrauayane toward Launcelot and Guenevere, not from a concern for the kingdom or the danger of their monarch being complicit in their adultery and, therefore, in their treason. Thomas A. Prendergast, in "The Invisible Spouse: Henry VI, Arthur, and the Fifteenth-Century Subject," states, "Indeed, Malory suggests...that the Round Table disintegrates because one of Arthur's knights—Aggravayne—transforms what had hitherto been a hidden, personal matter into a matter of state; he does so by forcing Arthur to gaze upon the queen's body in adulterous union with his greatest knight" (Prendergast). Mordred, Agrauayane, and their adherents commit the direct actions which precipitate the fracture of the Round Table by forcing Arthur's hand against Guenevere, and the exposure of Guenevere's subversive act forces Arthur to address his wife's treasonous actions and sentence her to death by burning. Launcelot's consequent rescue of Guenevere from the stake has far reaching results, including the deaths of Gaheris and Gareth, Gawayne's desire for revenge, Arthur's war with Launcelot, and Mordred's usurpation of the throne.

The events that rupture the Round Table happen around Guenevere as others react to her actions, but Guenevere is not without agency within *Le Morte Darthur*. When Mordred usurps the throne and attempts to force her into marriage to solidify his power,

Guenevere asserts herself against him: "Than Syr Mordred sought on Quene Gueneuer by letters and sondes and by fayr meanys and foul meanys for to haue hir to come oute of the Toure of London. But al this auaylled not, for she answerd hym shortelye, openlye, and pryuelye that she had leuer slee hyrself than to be maryed wyth hym" (Malory 585). Her response to Mordred displays Guenevere's agency, for her rebuke answers Mordred's overtures and discloses her willingness to protect herself against Mordred even if that protection results in her suicide. This time, she will not rely upon a knight to save her, in this case from Mordred, but will exert agency and choose an act which thwarts him. Although she is rescued in the past, the need for rescue supports a position for women in Arthur's court that allows knights to prove their worth and strength. During the civil war, the social structure that constrained Guenevere fails and thus releases her from the compulsion to appear helpless, defenseless, or dependent. Her agency clearly emerges when the kingdom ceases to function as it did when Arthur's power was sure. She actively defends the kingdom as well as herself in refusing Mordred and preserving her position as Arthur's queen and representative of his power. Her refusal may also suggest her inner personal feelings, since Mordred exposed her affair and initiated the events which shattered her life and the realm.

Guenevere further reveals her agency after the end of the civil war when she removes herself from the secular world which has crumbled around her. Upon learning of the deaths of Arthur, Mordred, and many knights in the final battle, Guenevere "wente to Almesburye, and there she let make herself a nonne, and ware whyte clothes and blacke, and grete penaunce she toke as euer dyd synful lady in thys londe. And neuer creature

coude make hyr mery, but *she* lyued in fastyng, prayers, and almes dedes, that al maner

of peple meruaylled how vertuously she was chaunged" (593). Guenevere makes this

decision and controls her life with the authority that the social values of her husband's

court would deny her. She makes the independent determination that her choices with

Launcelot and role in the events which fracture the Round Table, end Arthur's reign in

war, and cause the deaths of many Britons require her to take the veil and perform

penance for the rest of her life, a decision which indicates her sense of personal

accountability rather than an assumption of an objective status. In "*The Ending of the*

Morte Darthur," C. David Benson observes, "The last act is initiated by Guenevere. Once

she learns that Arthur is dead, she goes with five of her ladies to become a nun. As

always, the queen's actions are extreme, but now anything but wilful and selfish" (236).

Guenevere's actions cannot be attributed to anyone other than herself, and her actions

may appear "extreme" to a modern audience but not necessarily to contemporary

audiences. As a widowed queen, Guenevere retreats into a convent to live out her

remaining years. A former queen retiring to a convent would not have been unknown in

fifteenth-century England, for Katherine de Valois, widow of Henry V (r. 1413-1422),

mother of Henry VI (r. 1422-1461 and 1470-1471) and Edmund Tudor (ca. 1430-1456),

through her relationship with Owen Tudor, and grandmother to Henry (Tudor) VII (r.

1483-1509) and Elizabeth Woodville, widow of Edward IV (r. 1461-1483) and mother of

Edward V (who was never crowned in 1483) and Elizabeth York, the wife of Henry VII,

spent the end of their lives in convents as lay residents, not as nuns, although their

decisions may not have been entirely of their own wills.

The convent offers protection, but Guenevere's motivations for joining the order appear to be personal rather than political. Launcelot returns to Britain and finds Guenevere at the convent after the civil war, but Guenevere beseeches him to return to his own realm and live his life: "For as wel as I haue loued the, myn hert wyl not serue me to see the, for thorugh the and me is the flour of kynges and knyghtes destroyed" (Malory 595). She denies their love because it has caused destruction and death and subverted the authority of her king. However, Mordred and Agrauayane drive the exposure of the affair, Gawain drives the war with Launcelot, and Mordred usurps the throne. These actions lead to the destruction of the kingdom, and Guenevere and Lancelot's affair only provides the cause célèbre. Guenevere's assumption of guilt, which drives her to become a nun and deny her love for Launcelot, results from the machinations and manipulations of men; not of her own direct actions so much as their entrapment of her to serve their own ends. While Morgan le Fay subverts the purpose of the religious order by learning necromancy, Guenevere accepts the security and rule of the order to martyr herself by accepting responsibility for the fall of Britain. Although she assumes blame and denies herself a secular life, she also chooses to enter the convent to saves her soul, and rejection of Launcelot leads audiences to believe she may save Launcelot's soul as well. Larry D. Benson, in *Malory's* Morte Darthur, states that "[b]y her good example she brings Lancelot to salvation" (242). However, she tells Launcelot to find a wife and have a family, not to seek forgiveness in religious seclusion as she has done. Her actions act as a catalyst to Launcelot's search for forgiveness, but his salvation is achieved through his own actions. Although Guenevere and Launcelot's affair subverts

the structure of the kingdom which she helps to rule, her actions after the wars with Launcelot and Mordred display a complex combintaion of agency and compliance with social standards and values. Guenevere's acts appear to be unintentional acts of treason while Morgan le Fay and Mordred commit deliberate treasonous acts to threaten the king and put the kingdom at risk.

Guenevere and Morgan le Fay act both of their own volition and through the actions of others to present domestic threats to the kingdom. Guenevere's affair with Launcelot precipitates the events which drive the final battles, resulting in Arthur's death in Malory's epic historical romance. The figure of Arthur plays the central roles in the episodes recounting his ascent to throne and his early years as king until the Roman war. His importance as a central figure declines after the Roman war, never to be fully regained. During the stability of his reign, Arthur's court emphasizes chivalric behavior and courtly love through quests more than imperial conquests. Finke and Shichtman argue that "[i]n the *Morte Darthur*, as that which gives value to his subjects—the Knights of the Round Table—Arthur cannot himself be involved in the pursuit of value, but must be excluded" (174). Malory's hybrid of chronicle and romance traditions requires that Arthur becomes a secondary figure in the adventures in *Le Morte Darthur* and that the focus of events shift to the knights. Arthur's absence from the kingdom enables serious internal threats, because Arthur appears disengaged from the interests of his own kingdom. The political situations in Malory's handling of events suggest a concern in the entangled and contested succession between Henry VI and Edward IV and Richard III and Henry VII. He shapes Arthurian matter in *Le Morte Darthur* to fashion a political

discourse that advocates empire while warning audiences of the destructiveness of

internal dangers. Malory and his printer may have covertly expressed desires for a

politically stable and prosperous England under the governance of a strong monarch who

could extend the kingdom's power internationally, but they refrain from explicit

statements regarding a claimant to the throne to distance themselves from unfavorable

associations with a defeated party, such as Caxton's association with Anthony Woodville,

and against repercussions from the victorious party.

Chapter Four:

Edmund Spenser's Disappearing/Reappearing Knight

Malory's prose work marks the beginning of the decline of English Arthurian

romance, as sixteenth-century writers choose recourse to the matter less frequently. In her

exploration of the changes to the genre of romance in England through the early Stuart

era, Helen Cooper argues, "The early seventeenth century forms the logical stopping-

point [for romance], since the generation into which Spenser and Shakespeare were born

was the last to be brought up on an extended range of medieval romances in more or less

their original forms, and which therefore had access to the full range of their generic

codings and intertextualities" (23). Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* (1590 and 1596) is the

last major English Arthurian romance to be influenced by medieval sources before the

genre falls from favor in the seventeenth century. The production of new treatments of

Arthurian matter fades in sixteenth-century England because the influence of French

romances concerning the matter of Britain upon English literature is less profound

through the influx of classical and Italian texts. English literature during Elizabeth I's

reign (r. 1558-1603) develops with classical and continental, particularly Italian,

influences. English translations of Italian, Latin, and Greek texts make works such as

Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso*, Castiglione's *The Courtier*, Sir Thomas More's *Utopia* and

Horace's *Ars Poetica*, more accessible to English audiences.

Authors of the late Elizabethan period (ca. 1575-1603) shape the matter and

conventions of classical texts to create native works and to assess a native tradition. Sir

Philip Sidney, Edmund Spenser's contemporary, and possible coterie member, analyzes

sixteenth-century literature using the standards expressed in Horace's *Ars Poetica*. In

considering English poetry and the role of the poet in his prose work *The Defence of*

Poesie (1595), Sidney describes the function of virtue in the "Heroicall" (epic) while

asserting the genre's rank in literature as "the best and most accomplished kinde of

Poetry": "as the image of each action styrreth and instructeth the mind, so the loftie

image of such Worthies most inflameth the mind with desire to be worthy, and informes

with counsel how to be worthy" (107).[1] Spenser's intentions in creating his Arthurian

work appear to adhere to the epic ideals of "stirring" and "instructing" the audience to

"worthiness" as expressed by Sidney in *The Defense of Poesie*. Spenser composes an epic

using Arthur, the hero of England's ancient past, to provide a model of an Elizabethan

gentleman for his audience. Although *The Faerie Queene* (1590 and 1596) does not

fulfill the intentions expressed in Spenser's letter to Sir Walter Raleigh (1590), the work

treats elements of Arthurian literature and legend in a manner that distinguishes it from

existing English Arthurian romances such as Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*.[2] The medival

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[1] Sidney's *Defence of Poesie* was written in the 1580s before his death in 1586 but

published posthumously in 1595 by Ponsoby and Olney and in 1598 in the edition

compiled by his sister, Mary Sidney Herbert, Countess of Pembroke.

[2] *The Faerie Queene* was published in two parts. The first printing comprised

Books I-III with the "Letter of the Authors expounding his *whole intention in the course*

of this worke: which for that it giueth great light to the Reader, for the better

vnderstanding is hereunto annexed" in 1590. The next edition in 1596 included Books I-

Arthurian matter as well as Arthur himself remains in the background of the text. In *The Faerie Queene*, Spenser reshapes the matter to diminish the role of Arthur, relating an Arthurian tale that functions as political propaganda to promote the nationalism and the developing English empire during the final decades of Elizabeth's uncontested reign.

While the *Historia Regum Britanniæ* provides a source for many Arthurian works as the origin of certain "facts" that remain constant throughout the literary tradition, during the early modern era the veracity of Geoffrey of Monmouth's chronicle was more heavily questioned than it had been in previous centuries, as practices of writing "history" change to separate the genre of historiography from fictional literature. Spenser would have been aware of contemporary attitudes toward the earlier chronicle accounts of British history when he composes his Arthurian epic five and a half centuries after the *Historia*. Arthur H. Williamson, in "An Empire to End Empire: The Dynamics of Early Modern British Expansion," contends that "[a]ny educated person, and certainly one as learned as Edmund Spenser, would have been intimately familiar with the historical mythologies propagated by Geoffrey of Monmouth in his *History of Britain*. But also like his educated contemporaries, Spenser knew these stories to be no more than myths" (239). Spenser's humanist education provides him with the ability to judge the British history presented in the chronicle traditions and to reconsider in what manner he would employ the national mythology to promote Elizabeth's England.

VI but not Spenser's letter to Raleigh. The Cantos of Mutabilities, the unfinished seventh book, are not published until 1609.

Spenser expresses his views about chronicle traditions of national origins clearly

in his prose tract, *A View of the State of Ireland* (1633).[3] Spenser reveals his opinions on

national origin stories through Irenius's discussion of the Irish in which Irenius recounts

that like the Irish, some English writers promote that which is perhaps inauthentic, "But

the Irish doe heerein no otherwise, then our vaine English-men doe in the Tale of Brutus,

whom they devise to have first conquered and inhabited this land, it being as impossible

to proove, that there was ever any such Brutus of Albion or England" (*A View* 44). The

"impossibility" of testing the authenticity of facts about origins relegates the chronicles

to mythology, and English authors who use Brutus to connect their nation with the

classical world are, according to Irenius, "vaine," reaching beyond that which can be

proven. Spenser expresses in *A View of the State of Ireland* a critique of the use of

traditions but uses chronicle material in *The Faerie Queene*. Spenser carefully structures

his epic to incorporate the Arthurian matter without claiming that it is factual. When he

metafictionally speaks of *The Faerie Queene* within the poem itself, Spenser expresses

no doubts regarding how his romance will be judged. In the opening lines of the Proem to

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[3] Composed in the 1590s and entered into the the Stationer's Register in 1598, *A*

View of the Present State of Ireland was not printed until 1633 in Ware's *Ancient Irish*

Chronicles. For a more detailed discussion of the publication history of *A View of the*

State of Ireland, see Hadfield, Andrew, and Willy Maley. Introduction. *A View of the*

State of Ireland. 1633. Eds. Andrew Hadfield and Willy Maley. Oxford and Malden, MA:

Blackwell, 1997. xi-xxvi.

Book II, in addressing the monarch, the poet's narrative voice anticipates the expected

reaction to the work:

> That all this famous antique history,
>
> Of some th'aboundance of an ydle braine
>
> Will iudged be, and painted forgery,
>
> Rather then matter of iust memory. (II.Proem.1)

Spenser presents his epic as a "history" that he knows will be disbelieved by audiences of

the 1580s and, by doing so, indicates contemporary attitudes toward chronicles such as

the *Historia*. *The Faerie Queene* creates an alternative "history" to the chronicle tradition

to which it has recourse and in which to express his political concerns over governmental

policies in Ireland, to promote dominance of the Protestant religion, and to glorify his

monarch. Unlike previous authors of Arthurian works of national origins, Spenser self-

consciously structures the events to be fictional as opposed to "factual." The decision is

consistent with his skepticism expressed in *A View* regarding chronicle material as

presented in Geoffrey of Monmouth, which Spenser perhaps believes to be more myth

than tried "history."[4]

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[4] For the practices of refashioning, shaping, and employing history in early

modern England, see Alford, Stephen. "Politics and Political History in the Tudor

Century." *The Historical Journal* 42 (1999): 535-48; Helgerson, Richard. "Before

National Literary History." *MLQ: Modern Language Quarterly* 64 (2003): 169-79;

Wheatley, Chloe. "Abridging the *Antiquitee of Faery lond*: New Paths Through Old

Matter in *The Faerie Queene*." *Renaissance Quarterly* 58 (2005): 857-80; Parsons, A. E.

Nonetheless, the "British" Arthur continues to function prominently within social

and political beliefs throughout the sixteenth century.[5] The figure of Arthur holds

significant political importance as propaganda throughout the Tudor era despite the loss

of his accepted historical existence. Although he may not have been an actual British

king, Arthur continues to function as a vehicle and *exemplum* to represent ideals of

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"The Trojan Legend in England: Some Instance of Its Application to the Politics of the

Times." *The Modern Language Review* 24 (1929): 394-408; Logan, Sandra. "Making

History: The Rhetorical and Historical Occasion of Elizabeth Tudor's Coronation Entry."

Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies 31 (2001): 251-82; Archer, Ian W.

"Discourses of History in Elizabethan and Early Stuart London." *The Uses of History in*

Early Modern England. Ed. Paulina Kewes. San Marino, CA: Huntington Library, 2006.

201-22; Millican, Charles Bowie. "Spenser and the Arthurian Legend." *The Review of*

English Studies 6.22 (1930): 167-74; and Woolf, D. R. "A Feminine Past? Gender,

Genre, and Historical Knowledge in England, 1500-1800." *The American Historical*

Review 102 (1997): 645-79.

[5] For information on politics in the early Tudor era, see Gunn, Steven. "The

Structures of Politics in Early Tudor England." *Transactions of the Royal Historical*

Society 5 (1995): 59-90; Gunther, Karl, and Ethan H. Shagan. "Protestant Radicalism and

Political Thought in the Reign of Henry VIII." *Past & Present* 194 (2007): 35-74; and

Whittle, Jane. "Peasant Politics and Class Consciousness: The Norfolk Rebellions of

1381 and 1549 Compared." *Past & Present* Supplement (2007): 233-47.

empire for monarchs as he has in preceding centuries. Clark Hulse, in the section of

"Spenser: Myth, Politics, Poetry" entitled "Spenser and The Myth of Power," argues,

> All ages and all nations have their political myths, shared beliefs about a
> society's origins and purpose, about the behavior that is expected or
> tolerated in its leaders, and about the character of its enemies. A striking
> feature of the political world of the sixteenth century is the attempt of
> European rulers to control such beliefs by manipulating classical myth into
> a political vocabulary. (Hulse, Werner, and Strier 378)

The "political vocabulary" of Greco-Roman mythologogy becomes a trademark of

Elizabeth's reign as Elizabeth herself embraces multiple mythological identities, such as

Astrea and Diana ("Virginia"). Spenser employs his reshaped classical "political

vocabulary" by incorporating the stories, tropes, and figures of Greco-Roman mythology

into his Arthurian epic-romance. Through representations of Elizabeth I that trump those

of Arthur, Spenser fashions a uniquely English mythical political discourse. Spenser's

fusion of reshaped classical and national mythologies develops a discourse whose

relevance for the English political scene becomes profoundly influential.[6]

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[6] For treatments of Spenser's use of mythology, history, and sources, see

Hamilton, A. C. "Spenser's Treatment of Myth." *ELH* 26 (1959): 335-54; Ulreich, John

C. Jr. "Making Dreams Truths, and Fables Histories: Spenser and Milton on the Nature of

Fiction." *Studies in Philology* 87 (1990): 363-77; and Dubrow, Heather. "The

Arraignment of Paridell: Tudor Historiography in *The Faerie Queene* III.ix." *Studies in

Philology* 87 (1990): 312-27.

Spenser employs the mythology and traditions of Arthur and his reign toward

multiple ends: to justify Elizabeth's claim to the throne, to promote her as a monarch on

an international stage, and to memorialize a golden age of the country. Spenser modifies

the traditions to portray, praise, and criticize cultural and historical eventualities of his

own historical moment in the 1580s. In his examination of Spenser's use of myth and

politics, Hulse discusses the purposes of "poetic myth": "[p]oetic language must be

analytical as much as it is celebratory, laying bare the basis of power and the ways—good

or bad, successful or flawed—that it is wielded by the prince or the poet" (381). By

speaking critically of his monarch in *The Faerie Queene*, Spenser employs the analytical

aspects of poetic language that becomes more explicitly political than that of his

predecessors who have recourse to Arthurian matter.[7] The *Gawain*-poet may quietly

question the kingship of a young, inexperienced monarch through the figure of Arthur

while predominantly addressing social ideals of courtesy and colonial concerns regarding

Wales amid perceived rebellious activities of Welsh lords. Geoffrey and Malory both

advocate the need for a strong military leader in Arthur during times of contested

successions in the 1130s and 1460s, although neither criticizes directly Stephen, Matilda,

Henry II, Henry VI, or Edward IV.

In his epic-romance, Spenser fuses classical and native British matter to fashion

representations of specific political figures, including Arthur Grey, Mary Queen of Scots,

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[7] For a detailed analysis of Spenser and medieval romance, see King, Andrew.

The Faerie Queene *and Middle English Romance: The Matter of Just Memory*. Oxford:

Clarendon Press, 2000.

and Elizabeth I. *The Faerie Queene* represents the epitome of Spenser's discussions of

Elizabethan politics concerning empire, colonialism, religious conflicts, and English

national identity. Spenser argues that poets should have a respected political function

within his society, participating in these political discourses of empire, monarchy, and

religion while entertaining audiences with the "Arthurian" adventures within his epic.[8]

Examining Spenser's involvement in and discussion of politics, Edwin A. Greenlaw, in

"Spenser and British Imperialism," argues that "Spenser differed from all other literary

men of his time in that he persistently clung to that conception of a poet's function that

made him a *vates*, a "seer," a man who should warn and advise directly or through cloudy

allegories, those who ruled England" (2). With his belief in the inherently political

function of a poet, Spenser directs his tales to an audience conducting the politics of his

time, commenting upon Irish colonial ventures, the queen's proposed marriage, and the

danger posed by Mary Stuart, Queen of Scotland.[9] Given his belief in the ethical function

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[8] Spenser discusses the roles of poets through his examination of the Irish bards in

A View of the State of Ireland. For Spenser's full discussion of bards, see Spenser,

Edmund. *A View of the State of Ireland*. 1633. Eds. Andrew Hadfield and Willy Maley.

Oxford and Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1997.

[9] Spenser gains associations with Elizabethan politics through his literary works

and his roles in English colonial government in Ireland. For specific explorations of

Spenser and politics, see Gregory, Tobias. "Shadowing Intervention: On the Politics of

The Faerie Queene Book 5 Cantos 10-12." *ELH* 67 (2000): 365-97; Suttie, Paul.

"Edmund Spenser's Political Pragmatism." *Studies in Philology* 95 (1998): 56-76; and

of a poet, his poetic voice must provide counsel for his monarch and her government while addressing his larger audience. Using allegories permits him to create multiple layers of meanings for the varied audiences.

In the creation of a political allegory for his own time, Spenser's choice to use the figure of Arthur draws upon themes inherent to the material, such as imperial propaganda that has been employed in English traditions over centuries.[10] Tudor propaganda,

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Montrose, Louis. "Spenser and the Elizabethan Political Imaginary." *ELH* 69 (2002): 907-946. For information on politics, literature, and authors, see Adams, Robert P. "Despotism, Censorship, and Mirrors of Power Politics in Late Elizabethan Times." *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 10.3 (1979): 5-16 and Winston, Jessica. "*A Mirror for Magistrates* and Public Political Discourse in Elizabethan England." *Studies in Philology* 101 (2004): 381-400.

[10] Spenser's use of allegory fashions multiple dimensions for *The Faerie Queene*, which are not all addressed in this study. For readings on allegory, courtly behavior and love, and heroes, see Cooney, Helen. "Guyon and His Palmer: Spenser's Emblem of Temperance." *The Review of English Studies* 51.202 (2000): 169-92; Lin, Chih-hsin. "Amoret's Sacred Suffering: The Protestant Modification of Courtly Love in Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*." *Studies in Philology* 106 (2009): 354-77; West, Michael. "Spenser and the Renaissance Ideal of Christian Heroism." *PMLA* 88 (1973): 1013-32; and Mears, Natalie. "Court, Courtiers, and Culture in Tudor England." *The Historical Journal* 46 (2003): 703-22.

augmented by the print culture, ensured that Arthur remained vital as part of public

knowledge for many classes of English citizens. Examining how printing disseminated

history among the populace in his article "Remembering the Past in Early Modern

England: Oral and Written Tradition," Adam Fox argues that "[a]nother equally

ubiquitous series of traditions which the Tudor dynasty and the new technology of print

did much to reinvent and nourish were those of King Arthur" (252). The print medium

provides a more accessible method by which to obtain reading materials than the

manuscript culture, and the Tudors benefit from the new medium since the family gains

the throne soon after William Caxton begins to practice in England. Fox also discusses

several examples of Arthurian works in multiple forms of writing to establish the

popularity of the subject in print form and how these works demonstrate an interest in

history by the early modern audience: "As the example of Arthurian legend suggests, the

influence of cheap print in the form of the broadside ballads, chapbooks and plays which

poured from the presses in this period, was clearly of great importance in inventing and

sustaining versions of the past" (254). The past and versions of the past become

important as a means of propaganda by establishing the myth of England as a powerful

empire. Even though Arthur represents a small portion of the national history being retold

and retooled as a means of promotion, his purposes are more well-known than other

figures of domestic history to a contemporary or modern audience.[11] The well-known

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[11] Taking into account Spenser's work and the incorporation of Arthurian material

into *The Faerie Queene*, I have used the term "domestic" to include the British history of

the Arthurian tradition and the contemporary English history that Spenser employs.

figure of Arthur presents problems for Spenser since he wants to glorify his own monarch and her reign. Arthur is inherently laden with political meaning by the early modern era that could counteract Spenser's intentions. Spenser's decision to present the chronicle material in fictional manner alters the traditional employment of chronicle history in literary romances as a means of linking Arthur's Britain with the Greco-Roman past to establish an imperial heritage.

Spenser's epic romance creates a setting for his Arthurian work removed from a recognizable or specific time and location, for Spenser's Arthur exists not in post-Roman pre-Saxon Britain but in the elusive land of Faerie without any indications of the "historical" time in which the action occurs. In his examination of the use of time within the epic, Marvin Glasser, in "Spenser as Mannerist Poet: The "Antique Image" in Book IV of *The Faerie Queene*," observes, "Traditional romantic structures work with historical givens—Arthurian or Carolingian facts and legends, the Crusades, etc.—and as a result establish a locus in time; very deliberately and through all sorts of formal means including a setting of Elf Land, Spenser emphasizes the timelessness of his fiction" (27). Knowledge of history and legends through either oral or written means allows a contemporary audience to make assumptions about the setting of a work centered on a specific figure such as Arthur or Charlemagne, and the removal of the figure from his

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Spenser attempts to unite the British tradition with the contemporary through the familial history of Elizabeth I, and this unification along with Arthur's role as a prince produces questions as to whether the history is "British" or "English." Therefore, domestic functions as a less polarizing term.

associated time changes the established patterns. The figure of Arthur becomes more flexible in the sixteenth century because his historical existence is questioned. The historical circumstances surrounding popular literary versions of Arthur are fashioned for medieval rather than late sixteenth-century audiences. Focusing upon Arthur in *The Faerie Queene* while following traditions of Arthurian romance would compel Spenser to use the British setting associated with the literary tradition or to lead audiences to assume that setting even if Spenser refrains from designating it.

The traditional setting of sixth-century Britain would restrict the political dialogue which Spenser fashions within the poem because the setting establishes both physical and temporal boundaries for Arthur's life, thus restricting his movements. The timelessness within Spenser's epic provides freedom from the constraints that accompany Arthur, allowing Spenser to focus upon the aspects of the figure useful to a portrayal of his monarch while discounting those elements that are not. In his examination of Spenser's use of history and fiction as a means of commenting upon historical accounts of England in *Nationalism and Historical Loss in Renaissance England: Foxe, Dee, Spenser, Milton*, Andrew Escobedo states, "Spenser thus places poetry within the gap between England's past and present" (165).[12] Setting the episodes of *The Faerie Queene* outside the

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[12] Escobedo disagrees with much modern scholarship, claiming, "that Spenser takes early national history seriously *as history*" (*Nationalism* 165). Yet, this argument disputes Spenser's comments upon the history expressed in *A View of the State of Ireland* and does not offer explanations as to why Spenser created the figure of Arthur which he does if he accepts the chronicle accounts as true.

traditional historical timeline in a non-specific time frame prevents the development of nostalgia for the distant past as created in preceding Arthurian works. Nostalgia becomes dangerous for Spenser's purposes because it would idealize the golden age of Britain under Arthur's reign as greater than the age of Elizabeth, thereby, defeating Spenser's promotion of the political and social greatness of Elizabeth and England in the 1580s. The depiction of Arthur as the king who rules the glorious era of domestic history detracts from the portrayal of Elizabeth I as Gloriana and detracts from her reign as a golden age of English history rather than Arthur's.

The removal of the Arthurian tale from sixth-century Britain to prevent nostalgia requires Spenser to disassociate the events of the poem from definite, easily recognizable physical locations, such as Wales or Britain, and events, such as the battle of Mount Badon, which have associations with Arthur through literary traditions from Geoffrey of Monmouth in the 1130s to Malory in the 1460s. Spenser distances *The Faerie Queene* from existing Arthurian literature, while continuing to rely upon audiences' knowledge of Arthurian material, and from traditional settings by locating Arthur in Faerie, an ancient and unknown land. In the Proem to Book II, Spenser addresses the lack of knowledge regarding Faerie:

> Sith none, that breatheth liuing aire, does know,
>
> Where is that happy land of Faery,
>
> Which I so much doe vaunt, yet no where show,
>
> But vouch antiquities, which no body can know. (II.Proem.1)

The "proof" of Faerie, much like the "proof" of Arthur, exists in ancient sources which are no longer known to living men, so the knowledge has been lost. The description of Faerie is reminiscent of the arguments concerning the veracity of Arthurian material. Geoffrey of Monmouth recounts knowledge from an unidentified British source known only to him as Spenser reveals knowledge of Faerie, known only to the narrator of his "chronicle." Reliance upon unknown sources creates ambiguity as to whether what is presented is fact or fiction.

The setting of the romance in a physical location to which Arthur has no previous connection and of which no audience member possesses received knowledge permits Spenser greater freedom to adapt Arthurian traditions than past authors of Arthurian romances had. Faerie provides a blank slate upon which the author can create the world and inhabitants he desires. In her discussion of the races of Britons and Elves in Faerie and the importance of the racial distinctions and the location, Anthea Hume, in *Edmund Spenser: Protestant Poet,* asserts that "[b]y setting the poem in Faeryland, the world and fiction and fable, instead of in Uther Pendragon's historical Britain, the Elizabethan poet could invent any episode he chose for the young Arthur without claiming that it portrayed a real action of the future British king" (149). Faerie provides a fictional space previously unconnected to a young Arthur and thus an opportunity for Spenser to discuss new political issues of exploration and colonization. Spenser provides Faerie's location in the Proem to Book II in terms of new world territories in the Americas: areas of the world · had been unknown to England until recently, and explorers brought knowledge of Peru, the Amazon, and Virginia. Further exploration may bring more discoveries, including one

of the land of Faerie, "Of faery lond yet if he more inquyre / By certein signes here sett in sondrie place / He may it fynd" (II. Proem.4). Spenser claims that Faerie's physical location remains unknown but such lack of knowledge fails to prove that Faerie is purely imagined. Clues which can be deciphered through wisdom suggest that "Faerie" could be a land to add to the developing English empire. The comparison of Faerie to the newly discovered lands presents an underlying political theme regarding the territories of Arthur's adventures. The mention of Faerie as a king of Virginia creates a connection to new practices of colonizing territories that have origins in earlier ventures in Wales and Ireland.[13] The connection of Faerie to Ireland may be implicit, but for the English of the 1580s and 1590s, Ireland is as dangerous as newly discovered Virginia or unknown Faerie.

The connection of Faerie to Ireland speaks to the matter of Arthurian literature. Chronicle traditions include Ireland among Arthur's imperial conquests. Arthur's quest to obtain the Faerie Queen (the monarch of a possibly fictionalized Ireland) would grant him Faerie through her as part of his kingdom, thereby reasserting an English claim to Ireland through the figure of Arthur. Arthur's international victories, recounted originally in English literature in Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia*, include the conquest of Ireland. English monarchs employ partly to justify their claims over Ireland following

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[13] For connections of language and colonialism, see Helgerson, Richard. "Language Lessons: Linguistic Colonialism, Linguistic Postcolonialism, and the Early Modern English Nation." *The Yale Journal of Criticism* 11 (1998): 289-99.

Henry II's domination of the island. [14] Although Spenser's time chooses to question as

fact the claims of the early chronicles, the Arthurian tradition's inclusion of Ireland in

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[14] The matter of land, land use, and laws in early modern England is complicated

and at times vague. For a brief examination of the laws and the history of land use, see

"An Act Against Pulling Down of Towns, 1489 St. 4 Hen. VII, c. 19 (Stat. Realm, II

542)." *English Historical Documents*. v. 5. Ed. C. H. Williams. New York: Oxford UP,

1967. 926; Littleton, Sir Thomas. *Lyttilton tenures truly translated in to englyshe*.

London: T. Berthelet, 1545; *Magna Carta, 1215. English Historical Documents*. v. 3. Ed.

Harry Rothwell. New York: Oxford UP, 1975. 316-24; "Ordering Enclosures Destroyed,

and Tillage Restored, [Westminster, 14 July 1526, 18 Henry VIII]." *Tudor Royal*

Proclamations v. 1. Eds. Paul L. Hughes and James F. Larkin. New Haven and London:

Yale UP, 1964. 154-6; "Prohibiting Enclosure and Engrossing of Farms, [?1514, 6 Henry

VIII]." *Tudor Royal Proclamations* v. 1. Eds. Paul L. Hughes and James F. Larkin. New

Haven and London: Yale UP, 1964. 122-3; Simpson, A. W. B. *A History of the Land*

Law. 2nd ed. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986; Rodgers, H. B. "Land Use in Tudor

Lancashire: The Evidence of the Final Concords, 1450-1558." *Transactions and Papers*

(Institute of British Geographers) 21 (1955): 79-97; Wolffe, B. P. "Henry VII's Land

Revenue and Chamber Finance." *The English Historical* 79 (1964): 225-54; Hazeltine,

Harold D. "The Gage of Land in Medieval England." *Harvard Law Review* 18 (1904):

36-50; Dodgshon, Robert A. "The Landholding Foundations of the Open-Field System."

Past & Present 67 (1975): 3-29; Carpenter, Christine. "Laws, Justice and Landowners in

Late Medieval England." *Law and History Review* 1 (1983): 205-37; Holt, J. C. "Politics

Arthur's empire justifies Spenser's own arguments advocation English rule over Ireland.

In Spenser's prose tract *A View of the State of Ireland*, he discusses the rights of England

to rule over Ireland: "Ireland is by Diodorus Siculus, and by Strabo, called Britannia, and

a part of Great Brittaine. ...it appeareth by good record yet extant, that King Arthur, and

before him Gurgunt, had all that iland under their alleagiance and subjection" (52).

Spenser explores in *A View* the military conquests of English monarchs in Ireland, and

especially the Act of Henry VIII which makes English monarchs "king" rather than

"lord" there. Spenser, however, relies upon the legendary claims to provide a clear

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and Property in Early Medieval England." *Past & Present* 57 (1972): 3-52; Britnell, R. H.

"Minor Landlords in England and Medieval Agrarian Capitalism." *Past & Present* 89

(1980): 3-22; Scott, William O. "Landholding, Leasing, and Inheritance in *Richard II.*"

Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900 42 (2002): 275-92; Kelley, Donald R. "History,

English Law and the Renaissance." *Past & Present* 65 (1974): 24-51; Fisher, Joseph.

"The History of Landholding in England." *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 4

(1876): 97-187; Brooks, Christopher W. *Law, Politics and Society in Early Modern*

England. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2008; Guy, John. "Wolsey and the Parliament of

1523." *Laws and Government under the Tudors: Essays Presented to Sir Geoffrey Elton*

Regius Professor of Modern History in the University of Cambridge on the Occasion of

His Retirement. Eds. Claire Cross, David Loades, and J. J. Scarisbrick. Cambridge:

Cambridge UP, 1988. 1-18; Hudson, John. *Land, Law, and Lordship in Anglo-Norman*

England. 1994. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997; and Turner, Ralph V. "Roman Law in

England Before the Time of Bracton." *The Journal of British Studies* 15.1 (1975): 1-25.

hereditary right rather than a disputed military conquest validated by the Papal Bull

Laudabiliter given to Henry II by Pope Adrain IV. [15] Tudor monarchs encouraged the

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[15] The English claim to Ireland created controversy and questions for centuries.

One legal claim rests upon the issuance of the Papal Bull *Laudabiliter* by Adrian IV;

however, the Bull itself remains controversial regarding the content and existence of the

document. For a translation of the Papal Bull, see "The Bull *Laudabiliter.*" *English

Historical Documents.* v. 2. Eds. David C. Douglas and George W. Greenaway. New

York: Oxford UP, 1953. 776-7. For discussion of the questions surrounding the Bull

Laudabiliter, see Norgate, Kate. "The Bull *Laudabiliter.*" *The English Historical Review*

8 (1893): 18-52 and Fisher, Joseph. The History of Landholding in Ireland." *Transactions

of the Royal Historical Society* 5 (1877): 228-326. Although the Bull grants lordship of

Ireland to the English monarch, the dominance of Ireland appears to have been

established by military conquest which served the interest of Henry II. For a brief

discussion of Henry II and legal rights to Ireland, see Lydon, James. "Ireland: Politics,

Government and Law." *A Companion to Britain in the Later Middle Ages.* Ed. S. H.

Rigby. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2003. 335-56. Reliance upon the Papal Bull for

claims to rule Ireland may have proven problematic after the break from Rome, for

English monarchs would be denying the authority of the Pope in one aspect while

stressing it in another. The Act which made Henry VIII king of Ireland could be seen as

an attempt to legitimize the claim without the involvement of the Roman Catholic

Church. Claims of hereditary right to the country through ancient conquest provides less

problematic, although still controversial, support.

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emphasis on an ancient right established through connections to the British past to support their presence on the throne by reason other than that of a battlefield victory by Henry Tudor over Richard III, the last Yorkist king. Andrew Hadfield, in *Edmund Spenser's Irish Experience: Wilde Fruit and Salvage Soyl*, contends that "like most English writers under the Tudors and before, Spenser looked back to his own British origins and claimed that these validated a right to the possession of the Irish crown by virtue of an ancient conquest and colonization" (108). The age of the conquest, that is it ancient rather than recent, validates national claims without entering into legal disputes as well as creating anger regarding perceived Irish rebellion against English rule.[16] The English argue they have a right to rule, granted through Arthur's conquest, which established Ireland as part of Britain, and later England. The argument bypasses disputes from the Irish themselves and from the Roman Catholic Church concerning the English rule of Ireland since Henry VIII's act makes his claim English law, thereby forcing the recognition of the law by all those he claims as subject. According to the ancient claim, the Irish rebel against rightful, longstanding overlords, not dubious, recent conquerors.

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[16] The Irish saw themselves, not as rebelling against overlords, but as defending themselves against foreign invasion. For reading on Irish views of themselves and influences on Spenser, see Kane, Brendan. "Making the Irish European: Gaelic Honor Politics and Its Continental Contexts." *Renaissance Quarterly* 61 (2008): 1139-66 and Palmer, Patricia. "'An headless Ladie' and 'a horses loade of heades': Writing the Beheading." *Renaissance Quarterly* 60 (2007): 25-57.

Under Elizabeth's reign in the 1580s and 1590s, the subjugation of the Irish became a

greater, more violent priority than under previous English monarchs.[17]

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[17] The relationship of Spenser to Ireland and English colonialism is very complex

as he argues for English domination of island while capturing the country in his literary

works. For detailed examinations of Spenser, Ireland, and colonialism, see Brady, Ciaran.

"Spenser's Irish Crisis: Humanism and Experience in the 1590s." *Past & Present* 111

(1986): 17-49; Canny, Nicholas. "Edmund Spenser and the Development of an Anglo-

Irish Identity." *The Yearbook of English Studies* 13 (1983): 1-19 and "The Ideology of

English Colonization: From Ireland to America." *The William and Mary Quarterly* 30

(1973): 575-98; Shuger, Debora. "Irishmen, Aristocrats, and Other White Barbarians."

Renaissance Quarterly 50 (1997): 494-525; Hadfield, Andrew. "Spenser, Ireland, and

Sixteenth-Century Political Theory." *The Modern Language Review* 89 (1994): 1-18;

Chamberlain, Richard. *Radical Spenser: Pastoral, Politics, and the New Aestheticism.*

Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2005; Maley, Willy. *Salvaging Spenser: Colonialism,*

Culture, and Identity. Houndmill, Hampshire, and London: MacMillan; New York: St.

Martin's Press, 1997; Baker, David J. *Between Nations: Shakespeare, Spenser, Marvell,*

and the Question of Britain. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1997; Fitzpatrick, Joan. *Shakespeare,*

Spenser, and the Contours of Britain: Reshaping the Atlantic Archipelago. Hatfield,

Hertfordshire: U of Hertfordshire P, 2004; Highley, Christopher. *Shakespeare, Spenser,*

and the Crisis in Ireland. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997; Myers, Benjamin P. "The

Green and Golden World: Spenser's Rewriting of the Munster Plantation." *ELH* 76

The fictional representations of Elizabeth I within *The Faerie Queene* also

connect Faerie to Ireland and to the political concern of Irish colonization and

government. The Faerie Queene Gloriana symbolizes, in part, the Queen of England,

recognized as the ruler of Ireland by the English; therefore, the fictional figure of a

monarch rules an allegorized version of the actual monarch's territory. If the location of

Faerie cannot be Britain, in order to distance the figure of Arthur from both his traditional

past upon which Spenser chooses not to draw, the optional locations among English

territories comprise either Ireland or new world claims. Spenser's oblique comparison of

Faerie to Virginia in the Proem to Book II makes Virginia a kind of "Ireland" as well.

Ireland is not unknown territory to the English but is not explicitly mentioned within the

text. However, the definitive answer as to which area is the basis for Faerie remains

necessarily elusive as does the Faerie Queene herself, presenting that which to seek

without hope of finding. In "'Such is the face of falsehood': Spenserian Theodicy in

Ireland," Benjamin Myers states, "Spenser's allegory appears bottomless, moving out in

multiple directions of significance, and while one certainly cannot say that Faerie *is*

Ireland, neither can one say that Faerie is entirely *not* Ireland" (401). Spenser's

familiarity with Ireland, resulting from years of residence, increases the probability of

Ireland as the basis for Faerie since he could use first-hand knowledge of the country to

create his fictional world, whereas he lacked such immediate knowledge of Raliegh's

Virginia colony. The association of Faerie with areas of English colonization under

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(2009): 473-90; and Lockey, Brian. "Conquest and English Legal Identity in Renaissance

Ireland." *Journal of the History of Ideas* 65 (2004): 543-58.

Elizabeth reveals Spenser's interest in contemporary politics as well as the importance of Arthurian matter in addressing them. If Faerie is Ireland and Gloriana, the Faerie Queen, is Elizabeth, Spenser offers a justification for Elizabeth's rule in Ireland, supported by claims through Arthur's conquest.

The multiple allegorical levels in his romance allow Spenser to incorporate discussions of the intertwined issues of English colonialism in Ireland and the English interest in developing Protestant hegemonic dominance in Europe. The reshaping of Arthurian matter to include Redcrosse, Artegall, and Elizabeth in her various fictional representations of Britomart, Gloriana, and Astrea support imperial ambitions through justice and holiness. Examining the ideas of empire in Spenser's work, Richard A. McCabe, in *Spenser's Monstrous Regiment: Elizabeth Ireland and the Poetics of Difference*, states, "As Arthur's descendant and Defender of the Faith, Elizabeth could be said to have inherited his imperial mission—and nowhere more so than in Ireland, the first Arthurian 'colony'" (23). McCabe acknowledges the traditions of hereditary claims to Arthurian conquest and views Spenser's use of Arthur as political decision. For McCabe, the poet's claim to use the figure of Arthur for more noble reasons is "disingenuous" (23). Spenser's deliberate handling of Arthur reveals intentional colonial aspirations. Spenser participates in Tudor propaganda in his recourse to Arthur, who, as he has been since 1136, is strongly associated with the politics of conquest and empire, employing the figure to front an *exemplum* as well as a critique of the chivalric behavior

emulated at Elizabeth's court.[18] However, unlike his predecessor Geoffrey of Monmouth,

Spenser employs the imperial traditions of the figure without fashioning an Arthur who

dominates the story or who represents either "Britain" or England. The central authority

of Faerie resides in the reigning queen, Gloriana, a fictionalized Elizabeth I, to whom

Arthur becomes a subservient knight. In this romance, the author reshapes the figure of

Arthur to directly promote the colonization of Ireland and an internationally powerful

England under a reigning female monarch.

Spenser's incarnation of Arthur represents the ideal to which an Elizabethan

gentleman should aspire, existing as a courtier, a knight, and a subject prince but not as a

monarch.[19] As king, Arthur would challenge Gloriana's reign in Faerie and Elizabeth's

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[18] For a brief discussion on early modern English nation and empire, see Hadfield,

Andrew. "Spenser, Drayton, and the Question of Britain." *The Review of English Studies*

51.204 (2000): 582-99; Armitage, David. "The Elizabethan Idea of Empire."

Transactions of the Royal Historical Society 14 (2004): 269-77; Williams, Penry. "The

Tudor State." *Past & Present* 25 (1963): 39-58; Cohen, Walter. "The Literature of

Empire in the Renaissance." *Modern Philology* 102 (2004): 1-34; and Williamson, Arthur

H. "An Empire to End Empire: The Dynamic of Early Modern British Expansion." *The

Uses of History in Early Modern England*. Ed. Paulina Kewes. San Marino, CA:

Huntington Library, 2006. 223-52.

[19] As do many characters of Spenser's epic-romance, Arthur fulfills more than

one role depending upon the level of allegory approached in the interpretation. For a brief

study on the multiple facets of Arthur in *The Faerie Queene*, see Hughes, Merritt Y. "The

reign in Ireland by presenting a figure of masculine authority which could assert rule

through the hegemonic social structure of sixteenth-century England. Through the

fashioning of Arthur a subject prince, Spenser ensures Elizabeth's status as the monarch

of a golden era of England greater than any past eras, including Arthur's Britain. Arthur's

diminished status within *The Faerie Queene* also permits him to complete quests in

service of his lady as a knight rather than forcing him to remain at court while his knights

quest, a typical pattern in medieval Arthurian romances such as *Sir Gawain and the*

Green Knight and *Le Morte Darthur*. Arthur's primary quest within *The Faerie Queene* is

driven neither by desire for military conquest nor demands of the realm but by personal

desire for a beloved. He recounts the events which drive his actions, describing the dream

in which he encounters the beautiful maiden who after gaining his love, discloses her

identity as the Faerie Queen. Arthur reveals that the dream was, in fact, reality:

> When I awoke, and found her place deuoyd,
>
>> And nought but pressed gras where she had lyen,
>>
>> I sorrowed all so much, as earst I ioyd,
>>
>> And washed all her place with watry eyen.
>>
>> From that day forth I lou'd that face diuyne;
>>
>> From that day forth I cast in carefull mynd,
>>
>> To seeke her out with labor, and long tyne,
>>
>> And neuer vowed to rest, till her I fynd,

Arthurs of *The Faerie Queene*." *King Arthur: A Casebook*. Ed. Edward Donald Kennedy.

New York and London: Garland, 1996. 205-28.

Nyne monethes I seek in vain yet ni'll that vow vnbynd. (I.ix.15)

Spenser employs the quest tradition of medieval romances along with the practices of

courtly love to depict Arthur as a knight seeking an unattainable yet bewitching beloved.

Arthur describes his quest, which he will fulfill only under the specific vow of finding the

Faerie Queene, as a laborious, unending one. McCabe argues that the quest is actually to

fulfill the desires of the poet and the nation for a king, asserting, "His [Arthur's] quest for

the fairy queen is the quest to displace her" (15). As Elizabeth is in her fifties, past her

childbearing years, in the 1580s and early 1590s, the political pressure to marry and to

produce an heir was more a matter of form than actual expectation. However, the

question of her successor looms more heavily on the English with each passing year

while she refuses to legally name her successor. Arthur, of course, will neither succeed

nor displace the Faerie Queene because his quest remains unfulfilled in the unfinished

epic-romance. If Arthur completes his quest by finding Gloriana, Spenser would

fictionally portray his monarch's loss of the throne through Arthur's assumption of rule,

depicting instability in the succession that, although not formalized in law, is not

challenged after the English trial of Mary, Queen of Scots.

In deference to Elizabeth I, Spenser's reshaped Arthur performs the role, not of an

ideal monarch exhibiting strength, mercy, and generosity, but that of an Elizabethan

courtier toward his monarch. Arthur embodies knighthood and chivalry as not only an

ideal, but also a practitioner, for courtiers employed practices of courtly love to

demonstrate their devotion and allegiance to Elizabeth I. Robert J. Mueller examines the

role of Elizabeth's representatives in pageants as well as in the poem and the role of

Arthur in "'Infinite Desire': Spenser's Arthur and the Representation of Courtly Ambition," contending that "Arthur's infinite desire is equated with Elizabeth's endless stream of courtiers. Arthur differs from his fellow knights who have come from Gloriana's court in that very condition of frustrated seeking" (757). Arthur will never receive the satisfaction of finding his beloved but continues his quest out of an unflagging devotion to the beautiful Faerie Queene. He performs the same function as Elizabeth's real-life courtiers who must pursue her continually without hope that their ambitions will be fulfilled or that their emotions will be reciprocated. Arthur's unending, unquestioned loyalty to the Faerie Queene represents the loyalty which Elizabeth demands from her subjects and receives at her court.

The lovesick Arthur of *The Faerie Queene* acts as a chivalric knight without fail or distraction unlike others in Faerie because he represents a peerless ideal for the English audience. In her article "The Enfolding Dragon: Arthur and the Moral Economy of *The Faerie Queene*," Susanne L. Wofford views Arthur's function in *The Faerie Queene* as a symbol of chivalry: "What is most striking about Arthur in his appearance is his resistance to allegorical meaning or intentionality. He remains Prince Arthur, a character described in an unusually consistent chivalric idiom from the moment of his appearance in Book I until his departure from the poem in Book VI" (135).[20] Wofford's statement

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[20] In this article, Wofford claims that Arthur has no meaning beyond that of chivalry, spending the article discussing the importance of the symbolism and meaning of the dragon upon his armor. Yet, she appears to maintain a disconnect between the dragon and Arthur by arguing that Arthur has no meaning politically while discussing the

strips Arthur of political meanings inherent in the figure since Geoffrey of Monmouth's
chronicle, thus removing a political figure from a political allegory. For Spenser's
glorification of Elizabeth's reign in the epic-romance to come to fruition, Arthur must
exist in a subordinate or subservient role to Gloriana, fulfilling his role as knight while
embodying the political discourse concerning the monarch of Spenser's time. Arthur
provides the *exemplum* of the perfect Elizabethan gentleman while Elizabeth's fictional
representations embody the virtues of a great monarch, splitting the past purposes of
Arthur between the fictional figures. Elizabeth could not function as an epitome of
English monarchs if held against the legendary glory of King Arthur. Therefore, Spenser
demotes Arthur from his traditional position as king to establish the primacy and
grandeur of the reigning queen as well as the age.

Although Spenser expresses intentions to compose an Arthurian epic, Spenser's
Prince Arthur, personifying an ideal gentlemen rather than a monarch, appears only
periodically throughout the quests of others as he seeks the Faerie Queene. The
demonstrations of the ideals of justice and temperance are not through the Arthur's
actions as would be the ideals in a work more closely based upon classical or early
European epics. Spenser alters the presentation of a dominant hero in his epic but not the
role of the knight in his romance, for Arthur does quest for a beloved throughout *The*

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political and social significance to the dragon. She views the figure of Arthur as being
used by Spenser for his inherent political connections as a figure who is placed "in the
context not of an allegory of grace but of allusion to the Elizabethan vogue for chivalry
and tournament" (156).

Faerie Queene. In his work *Spenser and the Table Round: A Study in the Contemporaneous Background for Spenser's Use of the Arthurian Legend*, Charles Bowie Millican argues that "[w]ith the resultant romance-epic structure of *The Faerie Queene*, Spenser attempts to combine the single epic action of a single epic hero by interweaving Prince Arthur's search for Gloriana into the many actions of many other knights and ladies" (116). Millican's analysis of the structure of Spenser's epic reveals influences of Tasso and Ariosto on the adaptations of the epic form but fails to examine any specific aspects of Spenser's epic and demonstrate clearly how epic traditions function with the role of Arthur within Spenser's poem. Spenser downplays the traditional role of Arthur as a means of exalting his monarch. Andrew Hadfield asserts that "[i]n a sense, the epic role of Arthur the conqueror is neglected by Elizabeth who herself resembles the ineffectual, courtly Arthur of French romance, relying upon her knights to run her kingdoms. Elizabeth/Gloriana leads Arthur on, but also holds him at bay; the dream of her may, in the end, be no more than a delusion" (*Edmund Spener's* 90). Spenser's Arthur neither conquers territory establishing an empire nor completes his chivalric quest for Gloriana in the unfinished poem. However as this Arthur is only a prince without his full authority as a "British" king, he himself does not fully represent either national or imperial ideals even though an audience familiar with Arthurian traditions may associate those ideals with Arthur the knight. Arthur exists as one figure within a pantheon—including Artegall, Britomart, Gloriana, and Irena—that collectively promote English imperial ambitions.

Spenser's poem promotes the developing early modern English identity and empire by relating a story that establishes the origin of the Tudor dynasty alongside the cultural greatness of Elizabeth I but not a story of "British" or English national origins or of a national hero from the past. Spenser's epic glorifies the nation more through his queen, the living embodiment of England, than through Arthur, the traditional figure of British history. The origin story within *The Faerie Queene* justifies the Tudor claims to English rule by describing the ancient history and descent of the Tudor dynasty from British royal in his discussion of contemporary politics, which includes the fate of Mary Queen of Scots, conflicts with Spain, and policies in Ireland.[21] Arthur participates indirectly in the Tudor succession, which is through his half-brother and Britomart, a representation of Elizabeth I. Therefore, Elizabeth is not Arthur's direct descendant but retains a familial heritage with the figure.[22] As Arthur begins his quest after his dream

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[21] The tensions between England and Spain became heightened during Elizabeth's reign leading to the defeat of the Spanish Armada in 1588. For information on the relationship of England and Spain in the late sixteenth century, see Eldred, Jason. "'The Just will pay for the Sinners': English Merchants, the Trade with Spain, and Elizabethan Foreign Policy, 1563-1585." *Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies* 10.1 (2010): 5-28.

[22] For further reading on Spenser and gender, see Cavanagh, Sheila T. "Nightmares of Desire: Evil Women in *The Faerie Queene*." *Studies in Philology* 91 (1994): 313-38.

encounter with the Faerie Queene, Britomart begins her quest after the mirror's revelation

of her future husband, identified by Merlin, spurred by the immediate love she feels:

> The man whom heauens haue ordaynd to bee
>
> The spouse of *Britomart*, is *Arthegall*:
>
> He wonneth in the land of *Fayeree*,
>
> Yet is no *Fary* borne, ...
>
> ....
>
>
> But sooth he is the sonne of *Gorlois*,
>
> And brother vnto *Cador* Cornish king. (III.iii.26-27)

Gloriana represents the current monarchial face of Elizabeth while Britomart represents

the chaste ideal of Elizabeth as well as the ancestress from which she springs, and the

connection of Elizabeth to Arthur occurs through the British princess Britomart and the

kidnapped Cornish prince Artegall, the Knight of Justice.

Spenser establishes Artegall, Britomart's prophesized husband, as another

displaced noble Briton who finds his fate in Faerie rather than in Cornwall or Britain.

Spenser fashions Artegall as Arthur's half-brother through their mother Igraine's first

husband, Gorlois although the relationship between Arthur and Artegall is generally more

distant. The prophecy reveals that after Artegall was stolen as a baby, he was raised by

inhabitants of Faerie while remaining unaware of his true heritage until his adulthood.

Spenser's account of Artegall adapts the traditions of Arthurian mattter to comment upon

the beginnings of the Tudor dynasty. The relationship between Arthur and Artegall

reflects the relationship between Elizabeth's great-grandfather Edmund Tudor (ca. 1430-1456) and his half-brother Henry VI (r. 1422-61 and 1470 -1471). Artegall and Edmund result from relationships of their respective mothers with partners, Igraine with Gorlois and Katherine de Valois with Owen Tudor, who possess no claim to the thrones of Britain and England. Artegall's and Edmund's paternity removes them from an inherited succession, but both are recognized by their respective half-brothers and generate a ruling house—the Tudors.

The marriage of Britomart and Artegall becomes a central representation of Tudor claims to the throne as well as English justice in Ireland. As she explores the character and role of Artegall, Anthea Hume argues that the relationship between Britomart and Artegall "is the most important of the love affairs in the poem, forming a major strand in the interwoven narrative from Book III to Book V, and destined to culminate in a marriage of profound dynastic significance" (152). The marriage between Britomart, Knight of Chastity, and Artegall, Knight of Justice, results in the Tudor dynasty and in Elizabeth herself. The lineage that Spenser manufactures in his fiction strengthens the Tudor claim of descent from Arthur, directly establishing the connection to Arthur's family through his half-brother. Both Britomart, the daughter of King Ryence, and Artegall, son of King Gorlois, descend from ancient British royal families and will return to their native realm after their adventures in Faerie. The British connections of Britomart and Artegall stress the Tudor claim of descent from ancient Britons and a hereditary claim to the English throne without legal disputes.

The political significance which Spenser needs in the foreground is found in the figure of Artegall, who provides the direct dynastic connection, while Arthur functions in an indirect capacity. As in many medieval Arthurian romances, Arthur's actions become less prominent than those of other knights. In *The Faerie Queene*, Arthur's prominence, or lack thereof, is significant because Arthur and Artegall are two knights on quests in Faerie, not a monarch and a subject. Arthur's refashioned role as a knight equal in status to Artegall indicates that Arthur as a political figure is not irreparably weakened when Artegall occupies a prominent role in the politics of dynasty and national justice. While Spenser's Arthur embodies the ideal of an Elizabethan gentleman, Artegall exists as "The Champion of true Iustice" (V.i.3). Artegall, not Arthur, will be called upon by Gloriana to dispense justice in Faerie. Artegall's position as dispenser of justice results from his training by Astrea, goddess of Justice, who finds Artegall playing as a child:

> Whom seeing fit, and with no crime defilde,
>
> She did allure with gifts and speaches milde,
>
> To wend with her. So thence him farre she brought
>
> Into a caue from companie exilde,
>
> In which she noursled him, till years he raught,
>
> And all the discipline of iustice there him taught. (V.i.6)

Astræa, goddess of justice who is another fictional representation of Elizabeth I, finds the child Artegall as she instructs mortal men in justice. Deeming him worthy and innocent of crime, she convinces him to leave Britain with her, raising him to dispense her justice in Faerie. Artegall represents not only justice, but also Lord Arthur Grey, a governor of

Ireland for whom Spenser serves as a secretary, and, therefore, contemporary policies

regarding the administration of English law in Ireland, which affect Spenser as a colonial

official residing in Ireland and Elizabeth as the ruler of Ireland. The allegorical

representation of Lord Grey also strengthens the connection between Faerie and Ireland

as Artegall's justice in Faerie parallels Grey's in Ireland.

Despite his training by the goddess of justice, Artegall fails to administer justice

in Faerie according to the ideals in which he was instructed by Astraea, for he is not an

exemplum of mercy or righteousness (as Arthur is in chronicle traditions) but a mortal

man. Artegall's failure represents the failure of Astrea, and through her Elizabeth, as well

as the failure of government officials and policies. As Artegall's justice in Faerie

becomes affected by his own personal shortcomings, justice in Ireland becomes affected

by the man who dispenses it. Brian C. Lockey, in his article "'Equitie to Measure': The

Perils of Imperial Imitation in Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*," examines the

equity which Artegall uses when dispensing justice in several episodes of the poem. In

his discussion of Artegall's final battle to free Irena, Lockey claims that though he

defeats his opponent Artegall fails in dispensing justice because his lack of equity makes

reformation attempts of the land a failure (59). Artegall's character, which prevents him

from adjudicating without personal involvement, hampers his efforts to administer justice

in the Astrea's name, reflecting the inability of Lord Grey to adequately oversee Ireland

in Elizabeth's name.[23] Unlike Astrea, the goddess who personifies justice, Artegall, the

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[23] For readings on autonomy and selfhood, see Helgerson, Richard. "Tasso on

Spenser: The Politics of Chivalric Romance." *The Yearbook of English Studies* 21

knight who embodies justice in Faerie, is subject to the flaws of mortal men as is

Elizabeth's representative of justice in 1580s Ireland. Artegall personfies a virtue but not

the ideal of an Elizabethan gentleman as Arthur does because Artegall requires further

development to adequately and consistently administer equitable justice in Astrea's

name.

Artegall's failure as Astrea's adjudicator serves a purpose beyond the

demonstration of his humanity by functioning as a critique of English imperial goals

within *The Faerie Queene*. The failures of Artegall's quest to reform Irena's kingdom

reflect the English inability to institute their reforms on the Irish, resulting from the

policies themselves as much as the administrators who receive blame for the failures. In

his analysis of the actions of Artegall, Talus, and Arthur in Book V as related to events in

Ireland in his work *Shakespeare, Spenser, and the Crisis in Ireland*, Christopher Highley

argues that

> Spenser's frustration at the course of English policy is inscribed in a
>
> narrative structure that replicates a nightmarish inability to act directly,
>
> swiftly, or decisively. Aretegall's quest to rescue Irena from the giant
>
> Grantorto is cluttered with detours, interruptions, and postponements. To
>
> plot Artegall's route to Irena is symbolically to trace the swerving and
>
> uneven course of English policy in late sixteenth-century Ireland. (123)

(1991): 153-67 and Landreth, David. "At Home with Mammon: Matter, Money, and

Memory in Book II of *The Faerie Queene*." *ELH* 73 (2006): 245-74.

Artegall cannot successfully complete his quest to aid Irena, a fictional representation of Ireland and Elizabeth, because he is unable to clearly and without complication dispense justice as he was trained by Astrea. The inability of Artegall and Astræa to administer justice successfully in Faerie parallels that of Lord Grey, Elizabeth I, and numerous English officials to administer English policies and justice in Ireland. Artegall portrays the failure of English policies under Elizabeth in Ireland and England as well as the success of the Tudor dynasty in ruling the developing empire, which springs from his marriage to Britomart, culminating in Elizabeth. These two political elements depicted by the same character illustrate Spenser's praise of his monarch's achievements in the emerging Protestant empire alongside his criticism of her in the English administration of justice in Ireland and in her treatment of Lord Grey.

While the male figures of Arthur and Artegall perform vital roles as embodiments of justice, ideal English courtiers, and the Tudor claim to the throne within the historical, political, and fictional realms of *The Faerie Queene*, these men function under the influential rule of Gloriana and Astrea. The power of these females supports the promotion of Elizabeth I in the Arthurian romance rather than subverting the power structure as occurs in other Arthurian works. The composition of the epic-romance in the 1580s in the height of Elizabeth's reign affects the portrayal of female characters in Spenser's poem by providing an example of strong, demanding feminine authority. Brief exploring the roles of females in *The Faerie Queene* in her article "Spenser and the Problem of Women's Rule," Susanne Woods argues that "[t]he presence of a fully female Queen is the underlying premise and stated inspiration of Spenser's work, and

indeed of England's self-perceived glory, of which Spenser was one of the principal

definers" (146). Because a female monarch rules England during this great age, women

can assert influence, power, and control in the poem but only if they comply with the

authority of men. In Spenser's own historical moment, Elizabeth asserts her own

authority by referring to herself as a prince rather than a queen or princess, assuming both

masculine and feminine *personas* to rule. The Faerie Queene, Gloriana, drives Arthur's

quests as the feminine authority in the land as well as in the structure of the epic-

romance. Without Gloriana's intrusion upon his life, Arthur has no reason to venture into

Faerie on an unending quest for his beloved. Through the fictionally authority of

Elizabeth as Gloriana, Spenser's reshaped Arthur remains distanced from direct rule in

The Faerie Queene and his traditional role of conquest in the chronicle traditions.

Although the Faerie Queene never directly interacts with the young Arthur in the

unfinished epic-romance, she dominates the knight in a manner similar to that of the

beloved of a knight in courtly love traditions, as portrayed in medieval romances and

practiced at Elizabeth's court. While exerting authority as a monarch, the fictional

representation of Elizabeth participates in chivalric and social traditions as the object of

Arthur's quest. Arthur's role as a subservient knight reflects as well as criticizes the

practices of Elizabeth and her courtiers.

   As the reigning monarch of Faerie, Gloriana dictates the actions of knights other

than Arthur, for she sends both Redcrosse, the knight of Holiness, and Artegall, the

knight of Justice, on their respective quests. Artegall's life appears to be almost

completely defined by women, the majority of whom fictionally represent Elizabeth I.

His childhood is spent under the tutelage of Astræa learning to administer her justice, his future is to wed Britomart and father the Tudor dynasty, his adulthood is spent in service to his queen Gloriana, and his downfall results from his quest to aid Irena. These four women pose no threats to the cultural system in which Artegall operates because the female figures function as a queen who requests help through the traditions of knighthood and chivalry or a female who relinquishes power to the knight, thus reasserting masculine hegemonic authority. Because he adheres to the chivalric standards as portrayed in medieval romances and practiced at Elizabeth's court, Artegall suffers defeat at Radigund's hands since she rejects the social system which promotes chivalry. He must be rescued by Britomart, the knight of Chastity, who beheads Radigund, the ruler of the Amazons. Britomart restores masculine authority to the kingdom as she "[t]he liberty of women did repeale, / Which they had long vsurpt; and them restoring / To mens subiection, did true Iustice deale" (V.vii.42). The Amazons welcome Britomart's justice in the restoration of masculine rule, thus reaffirming both Elizabeth's authority over her subjects and the hegemonic social structure which reinforces her self-portrayals as a prince. Britomart appears to subvert the social structure by presenting herself as a knight in full armor but submits to male power when it is present. Radigund accentuates her femininity, appearing to conform to social standards, but rejects the male-dominated power structure. Radigund's defeat and execution eliminates the subversive element of society, reasserting male authority while demonstrating the ability of women to wield power.

Both Artegall and Arthur perform their chivalric duties that result from the

influence of a powerful female rather than from their own choice, thus revealing the

dominance of women in the epic-romance. Britomart, Gloriana, Irena, and Astræa exist

as singular characters within the poem, yet all four represent the monarch of Spenser's

historical moment, Elizabeth I. Elizabeth exudes an enormous amount of influence on

Spenser's work though he attempts to manufacture distance through the implementation

of allegory and fictional names, such as Britomart, even though some of the names

Spenser uses, such as Astrea, are used to portray Elizabeth in English culture in the late

sixteenth century.[24] In *Medusa's Mirrors: Spenser, Shakespeare, Milton, and the*

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[24] The idea of a female monarch, particularly an unmarried one, caused problems

in sixteenth-century England, but during Elizabeth's reign, English culture became more

accepting of the expanding roles of women in politics. For further exploration of women,

politics, queenship, and representations of queens, see Harris, Barbara J. "Property,

Power, and Personal Relations: Elite Mothers and Sons in Yorkist and Early Tudor

England." *Signs* 15 (1990): 606-32 and "Women and Politics in Early Tudor England."

The Historical Journal 33 (1990): 259-81; Carroll, Clare. "Representations of Women in

Some Early Modern English Tracts on the Colonization of Ireland." *Albion: A Quarterly*

Journal Concerned with British Studies 25 (1993): 379-93; Richards, Judith M. "Mary

Tudor as 'Sole Quene'?: Gendering Tudor Monarchy." *The Historical Journal* 40 (1997):

895-924 and "'To Promote a Woman to Beare Rule': Talking of Queens in Mid-Tudor

England." *Sixteenth Century Journal* 28 (1997): 101-21; Eggert. Katherine. *Showing Like*

a Queen: Female Authority and Literary Experiment in Spenser, Shakespeare, and

Metamorphosis of the Female Self, Julia M. Walker observes that though he dedicates

both editions to Elizabeth, "Edmund Spenser inscribes the name of his queen in no line of

his poem. Even in the proem to book III, partly phrased in direct address to the monarch,

he never writes the name Elizabeth, using instead pronouns, titles, and the representations

of other writers" (71). Spenser indireclty refers to his monarch through language intended

to flatter her while he retains the ability to fashion multiple incarnations of Elizabeth,

portraying her as a monarch, justice, and a chaste ideal of an early modern woman. Each

representation of Spenser's queen—Gloriana, Britomart, Astrea, and Irena—wields

authority as monarch, justice, or knight to influence the actions of male knights,

particularly Arthur and Artegall, in Faerie as Elizabeth did over her courtiers in the

1580s. The male figures depict the administration of justice, Tudor claims to the throne

through descent from Arthur, and the service to a powerful queen. However, the impetus

which drives the poem's shaping of the Arthurian matter results from the glorification of

Elizabeth while the power which initiates the adventures within it reside in the hands of

fictional representatives of the queen of whose glorious reign Spenser creates the illusion

within his Arthurian work.

Milton. Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 2000; Montrose, Louis A. "Idols of the

Queen: Policy, Gender, and the Picturing of Elizabeth I." *Representations* 68 (1999):

108-61; Staines, John D. "Elizabeth, Mercilla, and the Rhetoric of Propaganda in

Spenser's *Faerie Queene.*" *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 31 (2001):

283-312; and Walker, Julia M. "Spenser's Elizabeth Portrait and the Fiction of Dynastic

Epic." *Modern Philology* 90 (1992): 172-99.

Spenser's epic-romance *The Faerie Queene* modifies traditions of romance, epic,

and chronicle history to manipulate the figure of Arthur while participating in Tudor

propaganda concerning the origin of the family line as well as advocating English claims

to rule Ireland.[25] Spenser refashions Arthur as a recurring figure with limited power who

serves as a knight to a queen rather than as a king, indicating Spenser's removal of much

of Arthur's traditional authority as depicted in both chronicles and romances. The power

which Arthur lacks exists in the female figures, many of which represent Elizabeth I,

whose influence instigates the actions of the knights, particular Arthur and Artegall, in

The Faerie Queene. The feminine authority reflects a desire to portray as well as to flatter

a reigning queen in Spenser's own time. The male subservience to women in Spenser's

epic-romance also establishes his adherence to the role of knights in medieval romances

since the female figures of earlier Arthurian romances compel the male knights to seek a

beloved, defend a monarch's country, and dispense justice while allowing him to criticize

the chivalry practiced at Elizabeth's court. Spenser employs the power structures within

romances in which women dominate the knights's behaviors and quests but the knights

control the kingdom to fashion powerful female characters who adhere to and support the

right of men to dominate society, including the governmental power structure while

fictionally portraying Elizabeth I to whom he dedicates his work.

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[25] For a discussion on Spenser's use of history and the reinvention of libraries in

the Early Modern era, see Summit, Jennifer. "Monuments and Ruins: Spenser and the

Problem of the English Library." *ELH* 70 (2003): 1-34.

Chapter Five:

Arthur's Return to the "Historical" Realm and John Milton's Republican Ideals

Spenser is one of a few early modern writers who approach Arthurian material in a genre outside chronicle histories, and his epic marks an end to medieval traditions of Arthurian literature and medieval romances.[1] The status of Arthur as a once great king of Britain or ideal of chivalric behavior diminishes among literary works of the last fifty years of the sixteenth century and the first sixty years of the seventeenth century, yet the figure remains tied to ideas of nationhood and national culture. Questions surrounding the historical veracity of Arthur continue to grow throughout the early modern era as empirical practices of inquiry develop. However, Arthur maintains importance in common culture, including folklore, as he fades from focus in epic and dramatic treatments under the Tudors and Stuarts. As the concept of England as a nation changes during the Stuart dynasty, the Civil War, Commonwealth, and Restoration so do the cultural portrayals of legendary figures of British history associated with it. John Milton

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[1]Shakespeare chooses recourse to chronicle material in his plays but not the Arthurian matter from those sources. In *Literature, Nationalism, and Memory in Early Modern England and Wales*, Schwyzer addresses the place of Arthur for Shakespeare: "Shakespeare and his contemporaries thus knew Arthur less as a historical ruler than as a haunting absence at the heart of national life" (134). The doubts surrounding a historically authentic Arthur were, therefore, established as part of English literary culture decades before Milton first mentions composing an Arthurian work, and Arthur's status as a national figure becomes more fictional than historical.

becomes a prominent player in the reconfiguration of national identity through his prose

and verse works composed from the 1630s to 1671. Although his prose tracts more

explicitly express his political beliefs, Milton's poetic works engage his political views as

well. Milton's decision in contemplating the matter of his epic as justified in his prose

tract *The History of Britain* to reduce the status of Arthur from national hero to British

warrior reflects his republican views concerning the English government alongside

growing empirical attitudes toward history. Unlike his predecessors, Milton ultimately

rejects the traditional figure of Arthur as a promotion of nationhood. As Spenser did in

The Faerie Queene, Milton avoids the evocation of nostalgia associated with a golden

age of Arthur by relegating the figure in his *The History of Britain* to a realm of

questionable mytho-history.

Geoffrey of Monmouth and Spenser actively sought patronage through their

works and held positions within the Church, and Irish colonial government, respectively.[2]

Unlike these two predecessors of English Arthurian traditions, Milton appointment as the

Latin Secretary in the Commonwealth government places him in a central rather than

peripheral role. Milton's career in politics portrays an influential voice and mind at the

center of the debate concerning the monarchy, eventually repudiating the monarch in

Eikonoklastes (1649), as well as the functions of government during the decades of the

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[2] The search for patronage can be seen in Geoffrey of Monmouth's dedication to

his chronicle work and in Spenser's numerous dedicatory sonnets accompanying his epic.

Civil War and Commonwealth.[3] When analyzing Milton's role in English government

during the Commonwealth period and discussing the poet's tenure as Latin Secretary in

his work *Milton in Government*, Robert Thomas Fallon asserts, "John Milton was a

dedicated public servant in an office he considered important to his vision of the destiny

of the English people, and he was made of sterner stuff than is often credited to him"

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[3] For more detailed analysis of Milton's treatment of politics and political

imagery, see Bennett, Joan S. "God, Satan, and King Charles: Milton's Royal Portraits."

PMLA 92 (1977): 441-57; Lewalski, Barbara Kiefer. "Milton: Political Beliefs and

Polemical Methods, 1659-60." *PMLA* 74 (1959): 191-202; Kuzner, James. "Habermas

Goes to Hell: Pleasure, Public Reason, and the Republicanism of *Paradise Lost*."

Criticism 51 (2009): 105-45; Achinstein, Sharon. "Milton's Spectre in the Restoration:

Marvell, Dryden, and Literary Enthusiasm." *Huntington Library Quarterly* 59 (1996): 1-

29 and *Milton and the Revolutionary Reader*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1994; Hawkes,

David. "The Politics of Character in John Milton's Divorce Tracts." *Journal of the

History of Ideas* 62 (2001): 141-60; Cohen, Scott. "Counterfeiting and the Economics of

Kingship in Milton's *Eikonoklastes*." *SEL: Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 50

(2010): 147-74; Fallon, Robert Thomas. *Divided Empire: Milton's Political Imagery*.

University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State UP, 1995; Gregerson, Linda. "Colonials

Write the Nation: Spenser, Milton, and England on the Margins." *Milton and the Imperial

Vision*. Eds. Balachandra Rajan and Elizabeth Sauer. Pittsburgh: Duquesne UP, 1999.

169-90; and Knoppers, Laura Lunger. *Historicizing Milton: Spectacle, Power, and Poetry

in Restoration England*. Athens and London: U of Georgia P, 1994.

(68). Fallon views Milton's perseverance and performance in his office despite personal

tragedies as praiseworthy. As a civil servant, the author places the needs of his nation

before his personal needs, illustrating Milton's character along with his dedication to his

country as it strives to assert itself according to Protestant, Parliamentarian values.

Working for the Commonwealth government provides Milton with the

opportunity for a varied, prolific, and prominent career writing political tracts supporting

Parliamentary government as well as tracts on social policies, such as divorce and

education, to accompany his body of fictional verse. In his exploration of Milton's

literary development, Perez Zagorin, in *Milton: Aristocrat & Rebel, The Poet and His*

Politics, argues that the English Revolution profoundly influenced his literary production,

for,

> [i]f it forced him to defer his project of a great epic poem until after the
>
> Restoration, it likewise enabled him to identify himself with a national
>
> cause to which he gave his full allegiance and which he felt it his duty to
>
> support with his pen. It turned his mind to prose as the medium best suited
>
> to the polemical needs of the time in arguing for the issues he had at heart
>
> and attacking the views of his opponents. It was in this way that he
>
> became a political publicist, throwing himself with heroic energy for
>
> twenty years into a succession of controversies in which he declared his
>
> strongest commitments as a religious and political rebel. (150)

The Civil War and Commonwealth provide the circumstances in which Milton develops

an influential national voice through which he serves both his own conscience and the

England of his historical moment. As a "rebel," Milton questions policies of divorce,

education, and the government, perhaps including the policies of the Commonwealth,

through his essays and political pamphlets. Depending upon which faction controls the

English government, Milton could be seen as rebelling against or supporting his nation's

government. Examining what he views as issues of tension and conflict, David

Loewenstein, in his article "Late Milton: Early Modern Nationalist or Patriot?," contends

that "Milton, then, stands as our greatest early modern English example of the burdens,

ambiguities, and enormous creativity of the dissenter and the poet who, in his darkest

years, was also a profoundly uneasy and conflicted patriot" (67). As a result of his

republican political views, Milton struggles with supporting the nation under a monarchy

during the Civil War and Restoration. After the return of Charles II to England in 1660,

Milton's poetry suffers at the hands of censors due to his republican beliefs and important

role as Latin Secretary in the Commonwealth government.

The loss of Arthur's significance as a political figure to support the monarchy can

be seen throughout Milton's literary corpus from his early poems in the 1640s to the

publication of his historical work in 1670. Milton's attitude toward Arthur, among the

elements of ancient British history that he approaches in poetic and prose presentations,

moves from acceptance to distrust regarding the unproven "history." A younger Milton

expresses desires to participate in the Arthurian literary tradition developed and

propagated by Geoffrey of Monmouth, the *Gawain*-poet, Malory, and Spenser. In the

early poetic works of the collection known as *Poems 1645*, he reveals intentions to

compose a national literary work.[4] Before addressing the British matter directly, Milton, as Spenser before him, explores the role of the poet in politics and nation building. In his poem *Mansus* (1645), written to honor John Baptista Manso, a renowned Italian patron of poets, Milton explains that English poets are also devotees of Apollo despite their northern location:[5]

> Nos etiam colimus Phoebum nos munera Phoebe,
>
> Flaventes spicas, et lutea mala canistris,
>
> Halantemque crocum (perhibet nisi vana vetustas)
>
> Misimus, et lectas Druidum de gente choreas.
>
> Gens Druides antiqua, sacris operata deorum,
>
> Heroum laudes imitandaque gesta canebant. (38-43)
>
> [We also worship Phoebus and—unless antiquity asserts vain things—we sent him gifts, golden ears of grain, baskets of yellow apples, the fragrant crocus and chosen bands of the stock of the Druids. The ancient race of the Druids, experienced in the cult of the gods, used to sing the praises of heroes and their emulable acts.] (128)[6]

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[4] The full title of the work known to modern audiences as *Poems 1645* is *Poems of Mr. John Milton, both English and Latin, Compos'd at Several Times. Printed by his true Copies.*

[5] *Mansus* is included in Milton's collection *Poems 1645*.

[6] Translations of *Mansus* are those which appear in the Merritt Y. Hughes edition of *John Milton: Complete Poems and Major Prose.*

Milton describes poets, including himself, in the first person plural pronoun, in classical

terms as servants of Apollo, God of music and poetry, who perform requisite, appropriate

sacrifices. In his description of poets, Milton moves beyond classical allusions to

incorporate elements of domestic antiquity through the terms "Druidum" (41) [Druids]

(128) and "Druides" (42) [Druides] (128). The repeated use of the designation for the

priests of ancient British tribes in his discussion of poets during his own historical

moment contributes to developing English nationalism by equating British and classical

history.

The connection of ancient British Druids to classical worshippers of Apollo

participates in British origin mythology established in the early chronicle traditions, such

as related by Geoffrey of Monmouth in his *Historia Regum Britanniæ*, without the

traditional use of Aeneas or Brutus to connect Britain to a classical heritage. He connects

the Greco-Roman world to Britain through the devotees of the God of music and poetry,

establishing a native tradition of poets shaping English national identity. Although Milton

specifically mentions the Druids within the poem, he combines the role of the "bard" of

ancient British societies with that of the priest.[7] Milton connects these two figures of bard

and druid to fashion a domestic version of the Roman *vates* because he desires poets to

hold a similar position within the English society of his historical moment. Milton's

predecessor, Spenser, also promotes poets as respected political figures through an

examination of Irish bards in *A View of the State of Ireland* (1633). Through his portrayal

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[7] For a detailed definition of "bard" and its timeline in English, see "Bard." Def. 1.

Oxford English Dictionary Online (OED). 1989. 2010. Web. 17 Oct. 2010.

of the role of poets in *Mansus*, Milton reveals his poetic intentions while participating in

the argument regarding the role of poets in early modern English society without the

colonial agenda which dominates Spenser's work. In "Milton's Patriotic Epic," Lawrence

A. Sasek argues that "He [Milton] seeks, in short, to be a poet, prophet, and patriot, a not

uncommon Renaissance triad" (4). For early modern authors, the multi-dimensional

functions of a poet are vital as they include more overt political statements within their

works than their medieval counterparts.

Milton desires to be a contemporary *vates*, addressing the national and political

concerns of mid-seventeenth-century England, particularly the state of the government. A

traditional as well as accessible method through which an author can approach political

concerns is the figure of Arthur. Milton explicitly broaches the idea of speaking to

England by composing a heroic work about Arthur in two of his early poems. In *Mansus*,

Milton relates his interest in composing an Arthurian work tied to the chronicle traditions

of British origins:

> O mihi si mea sors talem concedat amicum
>
> Phoebaeos decorasse viros qui tam bene norit,
>
> Si quando indigenas revocabo in carmina reges,
>
> Arturumque etiam sub terris bella moventem,
>
> Aut dicam invictae sociali foedere mensae
>
> Magnanimos Heroas, et—O modo spiritus adsit—
>
> Frangam Saxonicas Britonum sub Marte phalanges! (78-84)

[O, if my lot might but bestow such a friend upon me, a friend who

understands how to honor the devotees of Phoebus—if ever I shall

summon back our native kings into our songs, and Arthur, waging his

wars beneath the earth, or if ever I shall proclaim the magnanimous heroes

of the table which their mutual fidelity made invincible and (if only the

spirit be with me) shall shatter the Saxon phalanxes under the British

Mars!] (130)

In this early work, Milton explores the possibility of composing a work focused on

Arthurian matter, stressing that such a composition of national legend is possible but by

no means a certainty. While Milton expresses admiration for some of the virtues of

Arthur and his court, the participation in the traditional Arthurian literature as well as the

perpetuation of the "British" king as a national hero appear to be conditional through the

repetition of "si" (78 and 80) [if] (130). He refrains from stating that he "will" write an

Arthurian epic. Rather he conjectures the work that he would create if he had a patron

such as Manso to support his poetic ventures.

The sense of uncertainty regarding a projected traditional Arthurian work as

established with the repetition of "si" (78 and 80) [if] (130) reflects Milton's possible

poetic intentions, indicating that Milton does not yet view the material as more fictional

than factual since he views the "Magnanimos Heroas" (83) [magnanimous heroes] (130)

as appropriate subjects for an epic poem of national history. In *John Milton's Epic*

Invocations, Philip Phillips asserts,

> Having praised Manso for his hospitality towards poets such as Tasso and
>
> himself, Milton mentions his desire to write the British epic. Since,
>
> according to Renaissance interpretations of Aristotle's *Poetics*, an epic
>
> should be grounded in historical fact and should concern the origins of a
>
> people, it is natural that Milton would think of the Arthurian legend for his
>
> theme. (100)

Although the poet refrains from explicitly labeling the proposed Arthurian work

described in lines 78 through 84 of *Mansus* as an epic, an assumption that the literary

treatment of Arthurian matter would be epic in nature results from epic traditions and

precedents in the English literary corpus, such as Geoffrey's chronicle and Malory's

prose romance. An Arthurian theme seems a "natural" choice for a major work of English

literature, as demonstrated by the number of Arthurian literary works created by

prominent authors over the centuries and, more recently, Spenser's epic-romance.

However, Milton's words fail to convince the reader that the poet will undoubtedly

complete an Arthurian epic. The perceived hesitancy, as expressed in his word choice,

about undertaking such a project indicates a political voice in an early stage of

development because he is not yet ready to fashion a work that defines English identity.

Milton relates more determined intentions to create an Arthurian work in another

early Latin poem. *Epitaphium Damonis* (1645), written in memory of Charles Diodati,

portrays the immense grief Milton feels over his best friend's untimely death as well as

Milton's nationalistic literary intentions.[8] In this poem, Milton plans for a future composition of national origins as recounted in British history and specific figures associated with the tradition:

> Ipse ego Dardanias Rutupina per aequora puppes
>
> Dicam, et Pandrasidos regnum vetus Inogeniae,
>
> Brennumque Arviragumque duces, priscumque Belinum,
>
> Et tandem Armoricos Britonum sub lege colonos;
>
> Tum gravidam Arturo fatali fraude Iogernen,
>
> Mendaces vultus, assumptaque Gorloïs arma,
>
> Merlini dolus. O, mihi tum si vita supersit,
>
> Tu procul annosa pendebis, fistula, pinu
>
> Multum oblita mihi, aut patriis mutata camenis
>
> Brittonicum strides! (*Epitaphium Damonis* 162-71)
>
> [I, for my part, am resolved to tell the story of the Trojan ships in the Rutupian sea and of the ancient Kingdom of Inogene, the daughter of Pandrasus, and of the chiefs, Brennus and Arviragus, and of old Belinus, and of the Armorican settlers who came at last under British law. Then I shall tell of Igraine pregnant with Arthur by fatal deception, the counterfeiting of Gorlois' features and arms by Merlin's treachery. And,

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[8] *Epitaphium Damonis*, composed after Charles Diodati's death in 1638, is included in Milton's collection *Poems of Mr. John Milton, both English and Latin, Compos'd at Several Times. Printed by his true Copies*, which is known as *Poems 1645*.

then, O my pipe, if life is granted me, you shall be left dangling on some

old pine tree far away and quite forgotten by me; or else, quite changed,

you shall shrill forth a British theme to your native Muses.] (137)[9]

The literary proposal in lines 162 through 171 of *Epitaphim Damonis* lacks conditional

words or phrasing that create questions or a sense of hesitancy about the future work.

Milton leaves no doubt that he intends to write a work of national origins with a focus on

Arthurian matter. He explicity states his poetic intentions for the British work in the

opening of the passage: "Ipse ego Dardanias Rutupina per aequora puppes / Dicam, et

Pandrasidos regnum vetus Inogeniae" (162-3) [I, for my part, am resolved to tell the story

of the Trojan ships in the Rutupian sea and of the ancient Kingdom of Inogene, the

daughter of Pandrasus] (137). The proposed literary treatment will recount "history"

according to the traditional mythologies of British origins through the Trojan Aeneas and

his grandson Brutus, although he refrains from explicity denoting either figure. The

classical origins that Milton attributes to Britain, and England, reshape the origin story

included at the beginning of Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia* while relying upon the

audience's knowledge of the material. After establishing British connections to the

classical past, Milton will tell the story of "Arturo" (166) [Arthur] (137). These lines of

Epitaphium Damonis present Milton's unambiguous plans for an Arthurian work.

The proposed Arthurian work in lines 78 through 84 of *Mansus* focuses on the

military prowess and virtues of Arthur and his court, but the proposed Arthurian work in

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[9] Translations of *Epitaphium Damonis* are those which appear in the Merritt Y.

Hughes edition of *John Milton: Complete Poems and Major Prose.*

lines 162 through 171 of *Epitaphium Damonis* discusses Arthur's conception, not his

imperial or social greatness as a king. Milton introduces the story of Arthur with the

"fatali fraude" (166) [fatal deception] (137) that leads to Igraine's pregnancy which is

accomplished through "Merlini dolus" (168) [Merlin's treachery] (137) and

"assumptaque Gorloïs arma" (167) [the counterfeiting of Gorlois' features and arms]

(137). Although these elements depict traditional Arthurian matter included in the works

of Geoffrey of Monmouth and Sir Thomas Malory, Milton's description of the Arthurian

material only addresses this early episode focuses on the deceit propagated by Uther and

Merlin rather than the achievements of Arthur. As his intentions to fashion a treatment of

Arthurian matter become more definitely expressed, Milton's views of the material shift

from stories of brave, virtuous, and faithful men that instill national pride, promoting his

function as a *vates*, to stories of deceitful men that reflect negatively on English

nationhood and Christian values.

Milton's word choice in the two literary proposals in *Mansus* and *Epitaphium*

Damonis depict a subtle modification in his perception of traditional Arthurian matter

resulting, perhaps, from established questions of veracity surrounding chronicle material

or Milton's changing political views as the nation approached the Civil War. Colin

Burrow, in his article "*Poems 1645*: The Future Poet," describes the importance of

location and the stress created by marginal areas in England and in Milton's poetry:

"When he [Milton] claims in *Epitaphium Damonis* and in *Mansus* to be about to write a

British epic, therefore, we should be sceptical: *Poems 1645* leaves traces of evidence that

he was becoming increasingly aware that Britain was too multiple an entity, containing

too many regions and too many distinctive habitats, to have one unifying epic poem written about it" (68). The awareness of multiple cultural groups—English, Scottish, Welsh, and Irish—within the kingdom which Burrow addresses fails to account for the stresses of emerging protests against the monarchy in the 1640s. The perceived abuses of the Stuarts, including Charles I's treatment of Parliament and his queen Henrietta Maria's Catholic religion, fracture the larger realm of England politically leading the country toward revolution while the divergent cultural groups react against a hegemonic English national identity to retain their own regional ones.

The developing early modern empire contains many regional identities as territories expand from the established colonial ventures in Wales and Ireland to the more recent developing ones, such as Virginia and the Massachussetts Bay Colony, in the new world. The growing diversity within the population among a great geographical distance prevents a dominant, consistent national identity for the emerging English empire. Addressing the idea of creating nationhood in the later early modern era, Walter S. H. Lim, in *John Milton, Radical Politics, and Biblical Republicanism*, argues, "When Milton thinks about England's status as a republic, he thinks of it with reference not only to Ireland and Scotland but also the felt cultural need to contest Spain for political supremacy. He also conceptualizes England's national identity in relation to the historical past that is the period of Roman Britain" (72). The geographical expansion resulting in the inclusion of multiple cultural groups through colonization and and the union of Scotland with England upon the assecension of James VI, the son of Mary Queen of Scots, to the English throne as James I, the beginning of the English Stuart dynasty,

inhibits the creation of a work or figure that represents all of England. Political writers,

such as Spenser and Milton, define "England" and "Englishness" by discussing the

"Other" in the empire, thus fashioning a national identity through contrast and judgment

that distinctly separate the dominant culture from the subordinate one while stressing the

schisms between them. A figure of British history, such as Arthur, used to portray a

national identity would represent only the portion of the English empire supported by the

author who handled the material. The alterations in Milton's attitude toward Arthurian

matter in *Mansus* and *Epitaphium Domanis* are minor compared to those expressed in his

epic, *Paradise Lost* (1667), and his prose history, *The History of Britain* (1670).

Milton's literary epic ultimately concentrates on the origins and the fall of

mankind rather than the origins of England or "Britain," but he uses elements of national

"history" as he obliquely refers to Arthur matter in his epic.[10] When he composes

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[10] Milton's epic diverges from traditional approaches to the genre in his chosen

material, which presents a religious ideal in the son rather than a cultural ideal in a figure

of "history." For further treatment of Milton and epic, see Di Cesare, M. A. "'Not Less

but More Heroic': The Epic Task and the Renaissance Hero." *The Yearbook of English

Studies* 12 (1982): 58-71; Griffin, Dustin. "Milton and the Decline of Epic in the

Eighteenth Century." *New Literary History* 14 (1982): 143-54; Weller, Barry. "The Epic

as Pastoral: Milton, Marvell, and the Plurality of Genre." *New Literary History* 30

(1999): 143-57; Baumlin, James S. "Epic and Allegory in *Paradise Lost*, Book II."

College Literature 14 (1987): 167-77; and Gregerson, Linda. *The Reformation of the*

Paradise Lost (1667), Milton reveals a drastically different view of Arthurian material

than depicted in his early poems *Mansus* and *Epitaphium Damonis*: his disappointment in

the failure of the Commonwealth government and restoration of the monarchy as well as

his religious beliefs change his views of Arthur.[11] While the figure emerges from the

chronicle tradition, which suffers from severe scrutiny regarding veracity, Arthur is

strongly associated with the romance traditions of the Middle Ages, including the

adulterous practices of courtly love embedded within the chivalric behavior of Arthur and

his knights.[12] In his work *Nationalism and Historical Loss in Renaissance England*,

Andrew Escobedo states, "Despite these signs of enthusiasm, Milton never wrote a

national epic. In fact, he expresses disdain for such national topics in the epic he did end

up writing" (187). As he ages and becomes disenchanted with life in England after the

collapse of the Commonwealth and restoration of the English monarchy in 1660,

Milton's literary concerns focus on Biblical material as three of his four works published

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Subject: Spenser, Milton, and the English Protestant Epic. Cambridge: Cambridge UP,

1995.

[11] The first edition of *Paradise Lost*, divided into ten books, was published in

1667. The second edition of *Paradise Lost*, divided into twelve books, was published in

1674. The quotations from *Paradise Lost* used within this work are from the 1674 edition

as reprinted in the Merritt Y. Hughes' *John Milton: Complete Poems and Major Prose*.

[12] Milton has complex views of the romance genre portrayed throughout his

literary career. For reading on Milton and romance, see Williamson, George. "Milton the

Anti-Romantic." *Modern Philology* 60 (1962): 13-21.

after the Restoration, *Paradise Lost* (1667 and 1674), *Paradise Regained* (1671), and

Samson Agonistes (1671), relate the stories of the creation and fall of man, the temptation

of Jesus, and the death of the hero Samson, respectively. Christian themes, as displayed

in his poem "On the Morning of Christ's Nativity" (1629) that celebrates the dominance

of Christianity, run through Milton's corpus from the *Poems 1645* to the later epic works,

but they come to dominate secular political and social themes of government, education,

and marriage by the end of his literary career.[13] The combination of his religious views,

the shift from monarchy to republic back to monarchy within two decades, and the

changing attitudes toward traditional Arthurian matter influence the change of his epic

subject.

Milton indicates his distrust of Arthurian material through the comparisons he

creates in his epic, *Paradise Lost*, when he includes the matter of Britain in his

description of the legions of Hell gathering for a war council. The demonic army that

Satan gathers is unmatched in history: "For never since created man, / Met such imbodied

force" (*Paradise Lost* I.573-4). Milton illustrates the scope of Satan's massed forces by

recounting the great armies of myth from the classical and European worlds. Milton lists

the military forces of Greece and Troy,

> and what resounds

> In Fable or *Romance* of *Uther's* Son

> Begirt with *British* and *Armoric* Knights;

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[13] For reading on Milton and themes, see Hoxby, Blair. "Milton's Steps in Time."
Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900. 38 (1998): 149-72.

> And all who since, Baptiz'd or Infidel
>
> Jousted in *Aspramont* or *Montalban*,
>
> *Damasco*, or *Marocco*, or *Trebisond*,
>
> Or whom *Biserta* sent from *Afric* shore
>
> When *Charlemain* with all his Peerage fell
>
> By *Fontarabbia*. (*Paradise Lost* 1.579-87)

The domestic material occurs in the middle of the narration of man's military events,

such as the Trojan War and campaigns of Charlemagne, but these epic armies cannot

match the magnitude of the one Satan gathers. Milton brings together subject matter from

established epics—Troy, Arthur, and Charlemagne—and his tone of disbelief affects all

epic material, not simply the Arthurian.[14] By positioning the Arthurian matter among

"historical" and mytho-historical events of other civilizations, ancient British history,

although idealized by previous authors, becomes simply another event in the course of

human history rather than extraordinary events that contribute to the unique glory of

ancient Britain in Arthur's reign.[15] Andrew Escobedo argues, "In fact, of the nine literary

armies that Milton compares to the demonic army at this point in the narrative, the

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[14] For reading on Milton and mythology, see Collett, Jonathan H. "Milton's Use

of Classical Mythology in *Paradise Lost*." *PMLA* 85 (1970): 88-96.

[15] For reading on Milton and history, see Dzelzainis, Martin. "History and

Ideology: Milton, the Levellers, and the Council of State in 1649." *Huntington Library

Quarterly* 68 (2005): 269-87 and Rogers, John. "Milton and the Mysterious Terms of

History." *ELH* 57 (1990): 281-305.

Arthurian army is the only one Milton singles out as fictional....It seems that Milton can now only imagine a national, Arthurian epic as a distasteful fiction" (*Nationalism* 187-8). When he composes *Paradise Lost*, Milton can no longer conceive of an Arthurian epic because the chronicle material, the basis of Arthurian matter, cannot be proven authentic, thus losing its acceptablity in the promotion of English identity. The association of epic and Arthurian material with the demonic armies of Hell demonstrates a dramatic adjustment to the poet's views toward the ancient matter of Britain as conveyed in his earlier poetic works.

Milton removes the sense of pride and respectability associated with the figure of Arthur through the chronicle traditions as well as the sense of glamor with his reign and court through medieval romance. The national figure can no longer stimulate feelings of nostalgia because the people should not desire that which is obviously fictitious. His word choice distances the author and audience from Arthur while relying upon Arthurian traditions, for he refers to Arthur as "Uther's Son" (*Paradise Lost* 1.580) as opposed to Arthur or King Arthur. The use of the name Uther would fail to confuse audiences, who had been exposed to centuries of Arthurian traditions which include Arthur's parentage, about the son's identity, but would carry the negative connotations of a king who risks the welfare of his kingdom to satisfy his own personal desires for the wife of his vassal, accomplished through treachery.[16] The reference to Arthur without explicit mention of

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[16] Refering to Arthur as his father's son parallels Milton's identification of Jesus as the father's son within *Paradise Lost*; although the poet refrains from directly naming either figure within the epic, both are easily identifiable through their fathers.

his name removes entrenched connotations of the figure in English culture as well as the

in the medieval romance tradition in which Arthur flourishes. The ideals of the culture,

court, knighthood, and chivalric behavior are absent from this brief mention of Arthur

because Milton chooses not to promote the traditional *exemplum* of Arthur to which the

poet has recourse as appropriate models for English behavior in the mid-seventeenth

century. Milton diminishes the importance of Arthur in the poet's own historical moment

by stressing that the stories are fictional: Arthurian material "resounds / In Fable or

Romance" (*Paradise Lost* I.579-80). The literary genres of "fabula" and "romance" that

Milton ascribes to Arthurian matter are those whose conventions include elements of

fantasy, otherworldliness, and myth. Milton relegates Arthur to those "fictional" worlds

to reshape the traditional icon to coincide with his beliefs in a republican nation and

English liberty free from the tyranny of a monarch.

Although he emphasizes the fictional existence of Arthur in *Paradise Lost*, Milton

includes Arthurian matter in his prose work, *The History of Britain*. Published in 1670,

The History of Britain presents Milton's version of British history as well as his criticism

of early chronicle works by Geoffry of Monmouth and Nennius. The prose history cannot

be easily analyzed in terms of influence because the work appears to have been composed

in pieces over an extended period before its actual publication at the end of the tenth year

of the Restoration. In his article "Nation, Empire, and the Strange Fire of the Tartars in

Milton's Poetry and Prose," Eric B. Song observes that "*The History of Britain* (which,

although first published in 1671, was probably composed during the 1640s and 1650s)

attempts to narrate a coherent national history even as it announces its own

historiographical flaws" (125).[17] More recent criticism and readings of Milton's prose

work acknowledge that Milton was aware of the limitations and problems, such as the

reliability of sources, varied accounts of events, and veracity of material, in the creation

of his "history."[18]

The material from the English chronicles to which early modern historians,

including Milton, have recourse can present contradictions and questions because the

authors present varied accounts of the same events or do not present events which others

do. Milton must address the issues of credibility as well as authenticity as he composed

his *The History of Britain*. Earlier critics of Milton force Milton into a one-dimensional

interpretation in his role as an historian. J. Milton French, in his article "Milton as a

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[17] The dating of sections of *The History of Britain* revolves around a digression

within the work and the political moment which it addresses. For more detailed

discussions on on the dating of *The History of Britain*, its composition, and its

publication, see Von Maltzahn, Nicholas. "Dating the Digression in Milton's *History of*

Britain." *The Historical Journal* 36 (1993): 945-56 and "The Royal Society and the

Provenance of Milton's *History of Britain* (1670)." *Milton Quarterly* 32 (1998): 90-5 and

Woolrych, Austin. "Dating Milton's *History of Britain*." *The Historical Journal* 36

(1993): 929-43.

[18] Andrew Escobedo discusses Milton's *The History of Britain* which Escobedo

describes as a "conflicted response to the problem of fiction and the conditions of

national historiography in seventeenth-century England" (*Nationalism* 188), and he

addresses the conflicts associated with history and fiction.

Historian," claims that "Milton's temperament in the *History of Britain* is almost exactly

that of the pure scientist. Truth is his aim, and the elimination of untruth is essential"

(470). This interpretation permits no flexibility in Milton's approach to history, claiming

a "scientific" handling of the chronicle material. Although empiricism affects inquiries

into the chronicles, history as approached by Milton is not yet a purely empirical area of

study or composition. In his exploration of the issues of history, rhetoric, and science,

David Loewenstein, in *Milton and the Drama of History: Historical Vision, Iconoclasm,*

and the Literary Imagination, states that "in the case of Milton's *History*, the tension

between historiography as mythopoetic and rhetorical and historiography as truthful and

scientific is by no means neatly resolved" (84). Milton's work displays the influence of

empirical ideas but is not a modern scientific study of history, and *The History of Britain*

blends authorial interpretation and empirical practices unlike the earlier chronicle works.

Milton's treatment of Arthurian material differs drastically from the treatment the

matter receives in earlier works. Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniæ*,

Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*, and Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* depict an illustrious

Arthur more commonly thought of by audiences familiar with Arthurian traditions while

Milton's Arthur represents neither an ideal nor a savior for the English people. The

decision to remove Arthur from this traditional depiction further reduces the English

nostalgia, which Spenser diminishes in his presentation of Prince Arthur in his epic

romance, toward Arthur as well as his reign as a golden age of Britain. Offering an

explanation as to why Milton chooses not to idealize figures of ancient Britain or England

in *The History of Britain* in his work *Writing the English Republic*, David Norbrook

states that *The History of Britain* "presents the island's history as a series of opportunities for enlightened liberty each of which was lost not only because of foreign invasion but because of the lack of civility and moral discipline" (188). Milton's work, like the *Historia*, presents the ancient history to illustrate the fall of Britain as lessons for audiences within his own historical moment. If "historical" kings and kingdoms, including the Arthurian matter, do not embody ideals of republicanism or Christianity which Milton promotes for the nation, he questions the appropriateness of presenting the material as positive *exempla* for the English empire.

Milton's treatment of the historical figure of Arthur breaks from the cultural traditions of idealization, fashioning a distinct tone within his history. In *The History of Britain*, Milton expresses doubts about the authenticity of Arthur and his existence: "In his daies, saith *Nennius*, the *Saxons* prevail'd not much: against whom *Arthur*, as beeing then Cheif General for the *British* Kings, made great War; but more renown'd in Songs and Romances, then in true stories" (123). As he does in *Paradise Lost*, Milton emphasizes Arthur's prominence in fictional works which disclose far more information of Arthur than chronicle accounts. He questions the veracity of sources to which English audience have recourse for Arthurian matter. Milton uses various chronicles along with Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia* to collect the material that he incorporates into his own prose work, and he credits the material to the authors of the works from which he draws information. Attributing credit to specific authors allows Milton to deflect or to abdicate responsibility for the Arthurian material which he presents in *The History of Britain*, thus distancing himself from the chronicle accounts and traditional uses of the matter of

Britain. In "*The History of Britain* and its Restoration Audience," Gary D. Hamilton

argues that

> one of the most fascinating aspects of the *History* is Milton's self-
>
> presentation, particularly as it involves the issue of the truth of his
>
> account. Rather than being able to vouch for the accuracy of what he
>
> writes, Milton presents himself as one whose interest in truth forces him
>
> constantly to interrogate the authorities on whom he must rely, and to
>
> expose, at times, their ideological biases. (247)

Milton does not claim that the material he presents in *The History of Britain* the absolute

truth of British "history." Rather, he reports what English chronicle authors put forth as

truth in the past while offering his critical views and voice to the narrative of British

"history" shaped for his own time. His criticism, which demonstrates Milton's role as a

responsible historiographer, reveals his views of English sources and purported events,

which could compel others, perhaps, to examine the chronicle accounts of Arthurian

matter more critically than previous historians.

Although English citizens and writers may accept Arthur as history without

heavily questioning the authenticity of the figure or traditions, Milton pointedly explores

the problems concerning the promotion of Arthur as an English icon. In *The History of*

Britain, Milton examines the appearance of Arthur in English chronicles:

> For the Monk of *Malmsbury*, and others whose credit hath sway'd most
>
> with the learneder sort, we may well perceave to have known no more of
>
> this *Arthur* 500 years past, nor of his doeings, then we now living; And

what they had to say, transcrib'd out of *Nennius*, a very trivial writer yet

extant, which hath already bin related. Or out of a *British* Book, the same

which he of *Monmouth* set forth, utterly unknown to the World, till more

then 600 years after the dayes of *Arthur*, of whom (as *Sigebert* in his

Chronicle confesses) all other Histories were silent, both Foren and

Domestic, except only that fabulous Book. (128)

The accounts of Arthur and his reign as recounted by authors from the island of Britain

exist only after a certain period of English history in a singular source. Brought to the

attention of England and the European world by a twelfth-century author, the events

associated with traditional Arturian matter cannot be corroborated by "histories" from

within or outside England. Milton argues Arthurian material originates in literature in

Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia*, based upon the mysterious British source that exists

only in the description provided in Geoffrey's work. The historical accounts raise doubts

for Milton about the chronicles works along with the Arthurian material. Putnam Fennell

Jones, in his article "Milton and the Epic Subject from British History," explores

Milton's changing views toward the domestic material: "Milton recognized the

possibility that the whole story of Arthur and his knights is fabulous: his historical

conscience, if so we may term it, was offended by discrepancies in the *material*. A

second source of dissatisfaction, related to the first, lay in the *historians*" (906). The

material creates suspicions because the early sources present varied accounts, to which

Milton calls attention in his prose work, preventing the authetication of Arthurian matter

from the chronicle tradition. The quality of the work produced by these past authors also raises problems for Milton as he acts as an historian.

The inconsistencies within the various chronicle accounts which Milton employs contribute to suspended belief regarding the Arthurian matter, for no two accounts appear to relate the same information about the figure of Arthur, including the figure's name. The variations in the figure's name are closely associated with inconsistencies in Arthur's family in the early chronicle traditions. Milton links Arthur's questionable heritage to his possible existence or non-existence as well as the accuracy of his military prowess, a factor upon which Arthur's greatness was based early in literary traditions. In *The History of Britain*, Milton states, "And as we doubted of his parentage, so may we also of his puissance; for whether that Victory at *Badon* Hill were his or no, is uncertain; *Gildas* not naming him, as he did *Ambrose* in the former" (128-9). Milton highlights the questions that arise from the material through the particular historian's actions—a historian naming one figure but not another when both perform equally important roles in the development of the kingdom or as military figures raises doubts about the unnamed figure. Audiences begin to suspect the existence of the figure, the occurrence of the events, or the purely fictional state of the material. Milton's reluctance to promote Arthur as a pinnacle of Englishness, despite the long-standing native tradition, indicates the ambiguous state in which Arthur remains as a figure of "history" and literature. Philip Phillips observes Milton's "problems with the 'historical' figure of Arthur," noting that "[i]t is interesting that the poet chose to give more attention to the certainly mythological story of Brutus" (96). Elements of Arthurian matter disconcert Milton to the extent that he displays a

preference for the foreign mythological figure who founds Britain over the domestic one who brings the kingom to its political and cultural peak. Milton's critical approach to Arthurian material strips the figure of elements which manufacture nostalgic appeal for audiences of Commonwealth and Restoration England.

Milton's attitude toward the figure of Arthur as a national and political figure may have a basis in reasons other than those of historical veracity or reliability of sources. The promotion of a monarch is an appropriate decision in Milton's career during the 1630s and early 1640s at the time when the monarchy under the reign of Charles I (r. 1625-1649) controlled the government.[19] However, as a republican supporter of Parliament in the 1640s and 1650s, Milton has no desire to advocate for traditions that idealize or immortalize a king and his reign, for promoting a fictional monarch undermines his own political objectives for a republican government in England. The Arthurian matter may be suitable subject matter when he composes *Mansus* and *Epitaphium Damonis* in the last years of the 1630s and first years of the 1640s. However, by the late 1640s and the 1650s, when he was composing part of *The History of Britain*, the political climate in England was not a welcoming environment for a literary work centered on King Arthur, who has been used as a representation for monarchs or ruling families throughout English Arthurian literature. Literary precedents established by Geoffrey of Monmouth and Spenser as well as the cultural traditions surrounding Arthur make the composition of an

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[19] For reading on seventeenth-century monarchy, see Daly, James. "The Idea of Absolute Monarchy in Seventeenth-Century England." *The Historical Journal* 21 (1978): 227-50.

Arthurian work which does not support the Royalist Cause or Charles I complicated because the audience has the recourse to recognize the traditions associated with the British figure.

Milton's political views, however, prevent the author from fashioning a work of traditional Arthurian matter because his republican ideals contradict the support of a monarch who fails to serve the people well. While the figure of Arthur carries associations of ideal kingship throughout the literary traditions, Arthur's reign also initiates the fall of Britain when he places personal achievements, such as the defeat of the Roman empire in Geoffrey of Monmouth's chronicle, or the interests of close kin, such as Gawayne's desire for revenge against Launcelot in Malory's prose work, before those of the British people. Perez Zagorin examines the differences between men in a republic and under a king:

> The cause of vast expense and luxury, debauched the prime gentry of both sexes and produced a servile nobility intent on court office instead of public service. Milton was sure that the government of a free, elected council ruled by reason provided the best guarantee of the nation's happiness. He could not understand why a people able to manage their own affairs should want to devolve power upon one person who would be their lord, not their servant. (115).

Social, moral, and political concerns appear inherent under a monarchial government because one individual controls all, and Milton cannot create a work of literature that glorifies a monarch if he cannot support a monarch or the cultural practices associated

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with the monarchy. Milton reshapes the Arthurian matter in *The History of Britain* to remove Arthur from the role of monarch to separate the figure from the English kings of Milton's historical moment.

The glorification of a king, whether real-life or literary, could also affront Milton's religious values as well as his political views. Barbara K. Lewalski, in her article "Milton and Idolatry," explores Milton's literary actions in combating idolatry associated with religions other than Protestantism: "Milton, however, insisted that anything could be made into an idol, and he believed that the disposition to attach divinity or special sanctity to any person—pope, king, or prelate—or to any human institution, or to any material good, was idolatrous" (214). If Milton believes that idols are not restricted to religion but could be fashioned out of anything in the culture, perhaps these beliefs influence his decision to abandon an epic Arthurian project while critically examining Arthur's authenticity in the English chronicle sources.[20] Arthur, after all, occupies a prominent cultural position and could easily be turned from icon to idol. The insistence on Arthur's questionable place in history along with the removal of literary and cultural associations from the figure illustrates Milton's desire to diminish the sense of nostalgia which earlier Arthurian writers attempt to manufacture within their own works of romance or chronicle history.

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[20] For reading on Milton and religion, see Baker, David Well. "'Dealt with at his owne weapon': Anti-Antiquarianism in Milton's Prelacy Tracts." *Studies in Philology* 106 (2009): 207-34 and Knott, John R. Jr. "Milton's Heaven." *PMLA* 85 (1970): 487-95.

Not all English authors of the 1650s and 1660s share Milton's opinions of chronicle accounts and Arthurian material. One of Milton's contemporaries engages the same traditions which he refutes. Katherine Philips celebrates elements of ancient British history, including the figure of Arthur, in her poem, "On the Welch Language."[21] In the poem, Philips extols the virtues of Britain's past and the greatness of select British figures. However, she neither recounts renowned battles nor fashions a chronicle-based account of the material to which she has recourse. Philips establishes traditional connections between classical and British "history" as she compares Britain to ancient civilizations through the veneration of the native British or "Welch" language, for the great figures of ancient British history all spoke this language. In "On the Welch Language," Philips begins her catalogue of British heroes with figures associated with Arthurian matter:

> This *Merlin* [s]poke, who in his gloomy Cave,
>
> Ev'n De[s]tiny her [s]elf [s]eem'd to en[s]lave.

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[21] Philips' poem, "On the Welch Language," does not appear in the first printed edition of her works published in 1664. The first appearance of the poem appears to be the 1667 edition of her works entitled *POEMS By the most deservedly Admired Mrs. KATHERINE PHILIPS The matchless ORINDA. To which is added MONSIEUR CORNEILLE'S* POMPEY & HORACE, *TRAGEDIES. With several other Translations out of FRENCH* and printed for H. Herringman. Philips' works were popular enough to merit at least three surviving editions in the five years after her death—one in 1664, one in 1667, and one in 1669—two of which were completed by the same printing house.

> For to his fight the future time was known,
>
> Much better than to others is their own:
>
> And with [s]uch [s]tate, Predictions from him fell,
>
> As if he did Decree, and not Foretell.
>
> This [s]poke King *Arthur*, who, if Fame be true,
>
> Could have compell'd Mankind to [s]peak it too. (27-34)

She stresses the power of Merlin and Arthur without recounting details of their actions in the native history. Unlike Milton, who questions Arthurian material, Philips employs the traditions to convey Arthur's strength and power as a British ruler by referring to the "Fame" (33) of the figure in English culture. She relies upon the prominence of Arthur within English culture and literature as well as the audience's knowledge of the Arthurian matter to provide the substance which establishes Arthur's fame. Philips treatment of the Arthurian matter acknowledges the persistence of the figure's role in the English culture of her own time.

Philips skirts issues of historical veracity because she refers to events implicitly through an assumed, shared cultural awareness rather than explicitly through detailed accounts. Milton's *The History of Britain* demonstrate changing attitudes toward the Arthurian matter as presented in chronicles because he directly addresses the material while Philips focuses on the cultural significance of the native language and its prominence in British history as opposed to the imperial achievements of Arthur. The emphasis remains on the prominence of the culture and its language, using Arthur as one example among several to illustrate important events in ancient Britain. Although the

poem is not dated, appearing in print after her death, Philips writes during the

Commonwealth and Restoration at the same time as Milton, and "On the Welch

Language" is possibly known on a more intimate level among her coterie before her

death in 1664 and the subsequent publications of collected works in that same decade.

She creates a literary *persona* which directly contrasts the Protestant, republican, English

persona Milton presents, portraying herself as Catholic, royalist, Welsh woman.[22] While

Philips' political position as a royalist does not create the same conflicts with the

Arthurian material as Milton's as a republican, she experiences similar problems when

writing under an opposition government. Philips' poem demonstrates a manner in which

to approach ancient British or Arthurian material in politically adverse situations in her

historical moment.[23] In Milton's navigation of the changing political situations of

England from 1640 to 1670, he bases his decisions on his religious beliefs, historical

practices, and the Arthurian matter in the chronicle tradition as well as his republican

politics.

Milton chooses not to compose a literary work, epic or otherwise centered on the

established national icon of Arthur to promote English identity in the mid-seventeenth

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[22] For discussions of the philosophical influences on Phillips' works, see Shifflet,

Andrew. *Stoicism, Politics, and Literature in the Age of Milton: War and Peace

Reconciled.* Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998.

[23] For reading on seventeenth-century art, see Hoxby, Blair. "The Government of

Trade: Commerce, Politics, and the Courtly Art of the Restoration." *ELH* 66 (1999): 591-

627.

century. Instead, he honors new national heroes while following his republican ideals by portraying chosen figures through shorter poetic works. Milton prevents the fashioning of an idol out of a contemporary man, endangering the political movment he supports and affronting his own religious beliefs, by composing multiple dedicatory sonnets extolling the virtues of various figures of contemporary England within the Commonwealth rather than multiple works centered on a single figure. R. F. Hall, in "Milton's Sonnets and His Contemporaries," explains, "About half of Milton's English sonnets explicitly address individual men or women whom he knew personally, and with several of whom he had worked in spheres of poetry or politics or education" (99).[24] The sonnets which Milton writes in English rather than in Latin, thereby presenting them in an accessible manner to more of his countrymen than the Latin works could reach, reflect personal connections between the author and addressee. In "Sonnet XV" (1648), "Sonnet XVI" (1652), and "Sonnet XVII" (1652), Milton extols what he views as the virtues of the real-life men who played prominent roles in political actions of the Civil War and Commonwealth to fashion new ideas of national heroes, and each sonnet directly addresses the man he honors with its composition.

However, Milton intends for the poems to have a larger audience than the poet and the three acquaintances whom he honors within the poems. In "Milton's Heroical

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[24] Milton's practice of addressing sonnets to people whom he knows is also discussed in Kurt Schlueter's article, "Milton's Heroical Sonnets," in which he acknowledges that "[a]ll three of Milton's heroical sonnets address a public figure with whom the author was personally acquainted" (134-5).

Sonnets," Kurt Schlueter argues that the actual audience of the sonnets reveals their function, not the constructed audience of the direct addressee:

> The real addressee of all three of Milton's heroical sonnets is the reader, since the poems are not made accessible to the general public as documents in some history museum but as texts in various collections of poetry. The immediate contest is not historical but literary. This change of context parallels the turning of the historical persons into fictionalized mythological figures and the changing of the speaker into the persona of the enraptured poet-priest. (135)

In the creation of these sonnets, Milton assumes the role of the poet-priest, or *vates*, that he extols in *Mansus*, and the rejection of Arthurian material in favor of contemporary material provides Milton with the opportunity to function as a *vates* by creating a specific political discourse in the English sonnets that speaks to the English people of his historical moment who Milton believes should be involved in their own governance. The publication of the sonnets as literary rather than historical texts parallels the literary treatment of Arthur, who represents cultural values and ideals within fictional rather than "historical" treatments. These brief literary works are meant to fasion new heroes with national ideals of faith and reason to replace traditional ones, such as Arthur, associated with imperial or chivalric practices. Through these three sonnets, Milton works to manufacture new historical along with national mythologies associated with the republican and Christian ideals that he advocates for the English nation in which he lives

distanced from traditional connections to monarchs and a questionable or inauthentic past as found in the Arthurian matter.

Composed after the publication of *Mansus* (1645) and *Epitaphium Damonis* (1645) and before the publication of *Paradise Lost* (1667) and *The History of Britain* (1670), the sonnets provide several figures as national heroes to replace the historical or quasi-historical figures, such as Arthur, which Milton feels should no longer represent England or the English people. Milton's set of heroic sonnets begins with "Sonnet XV" in tribute of Lord General Fairfax and his successful military actions supporting the Parliamentary cause. In *Representing Revolution in Milton and His Contemporaries: Religion, Politics, and Polemics in Radical Puritanism*, David Loewenstein states that "His [Milton's] 1648 sonnet commemorating Fairfax's military victories characterized the monstrousness of royalist revolts which had broken out in the provinces" (177). Milton equates Fairfax's victories over outbreaks of royalist support in the country to mythological monsters in order to emphasize the enormity of the general's triumph. Milton addresses the political situations of the English Civil War and the establishment of the Commonwealth in the second quatrain of "Sonnet XV":

> Thy firm unshak'n virtue ever brings
>
> Victory home, though new rebellion raise
>
> Thir Hydra heads, and the false North displays
>
> Her brok'n league, to imp their serpent wings. (5-8)

The allusions to his military success and the Hydra manufacture the impression of a contemporary English Hercules, a man who represents the strength of the people without

being a fictional figure. As a national figure, Fairfax is free from the suspicions of authenticity which surround the Arthurian matter. Fairfax, unlike Arthur, gains proven victories in known battles which support the English people and the republican government, but Fairfax, like Hercules, continues to fight the rebellious uprisings until the threat is ultimately defeated.

Milton incorporates no specific details about Fairfax within these lines but stresses the General's military prowess which causes envy and fear among those who hear of him. Milton opens "Sonnet XV" with the declaration of Fairfax's reputation: "Fairfax, whose name in arms through Europe rings, / Filling each mouth with envy or praise" (1-2). Fairfax's name becomes synonymous with military feats, impressing both the English, for whom he toils, and rulers throughout the continent. As important as Fairfax's strength is to Milton's depiction of the general as a national hero, Fairfax's personal qualities represent ideals for Milton who attributes "firm unshak'n virtue" to the English general (5). The poetic depiction of Fairfax manufactures a national figure to be admired for his virtuousness as well as his military performance, as Arthur is in earlier literary incarnations, while advocating that English citizens need to be virtuous and strong to maintain their liberty. Discussing the fall of the British and their failure to appropriately maintain their liberty, Walter Lim explains, "The inability to transform this liberty into the good and able governance of a nation, upheld by wisdom, virtue, and hard work, can subject a people to slavery even more devastating than that imposed by a foreign yoke" (94). With men such as Fairfax, the English of the 1640s can maintain a stable, lasting government which provides liberty to its citizens as the ancient Britons

could not. Chronicle authors recount that the British, including Arthur, fall as a result of their failure to preserve good governance despite the glories they achieve. The virtue and hard work required to maintain English liberty, which Milton attributes to Fairfax in the turbulence of the English Revolution, represent characteristics of republican England that Milton desires to preserve.

Along with republican ideals that he promotes, Milton captures ideals of Englishness through two figures aside from General Fairfax who contribute significantly to the Commonwealth government, for Milton commemorates Oliver Cromwell and Sir Henry Vane in the second and third sonnets of the set, "Sonnet XVI" and "Sonnet XVII" respectively. These two sonnets illustrate personal characteristics which will aid England as the nation restructures into the republican Commonwealth. In "Sonnet XVI," Milton addresses Oliver Cromwell, the future Lord Protector, and although he honors Cromwell's military success, he refrains from the mythological comparisons of strength present in the sonnet to Fairfax. In "Sonnet XVI", Milton focuses upon Cromwell's intellectual and moral capabilities:

> Cromwell, our chief of men, who through a cloud
>
> Not of war only, but detractions rude,
>
> Guided by faith and matchless Fortitude,
>
> To peace and truth thy glorious way hast plough'd. (1-4)

Again, Milton combines military prowess with personal faith and fortitude. Cromwell uses these latter strengths to lead England out of turmoil into a peace in which citizens can enjoy their liberty. Each strength represents a virtue that contributes to Cromwell's

success and should be emulated by the English. This literary depiction of Cromwell

shares characteristics with traditional depictions of Arthur as a strong military figure who

establishes peace through his military actions while maintaining a strong religious faith.

However, in literary traditions, Arthur fails the British people because he cannot retain

his martial prowess indefinitely, and in the chronicle traditions that Milton addresses in

The History of Britain, Arthur's success exists under suspicision. In "Sonnet XVI,"

Milton provides a factual figure in Cromwell to embody virtues of faith and strength for

republican England in the 1650s without relying upon a connection to a distant,

questionable past.[25]

The third figure of the heroic sonnets, Sir Henry Vane, is not a portrayed as

military success against royalist forces as are Fairfax and Cromwell. In "Sonnet XVII,"

Milton immortalizes Vane in verse for his intellectual qualities: "Vane, young in years,

but in sage counsel old, / Than whom a better Senator ne'er held / The helm of *Rome*" (1-

3). By directly comparing Vane to a Roman Senator, Milton establishes Vane's

republican beliefs while fashioning a connection between classical history and

contemporary England without relying on chronicle traditions of British origins. Vane's

importance resides in his wisdom and his counsel, for reason is necessary for the

maintenance of English liberty. Significantly, the three sonnets illustrate virtues that

Milton promotes embodied in three separate individuals to illustrate the importance of all

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[25] Although not discussed in this study, Arthur is depicted as a Christian king in

Geoffrey of Monmouth and the later romance tradition, and the Christianity of Arthur and

his court becomes an integral element in the Grail quests of Arthurian tradition.

English citizens to the maintaince of republican government. Arthur embodies virtues in a single figure as a monarch represents a kingdom, and to avoid this tradition in his promotion of republican ideals, Milton divides the virtues of faith, strength, and reason among three individuals to demonstrate that the nation must represent many not one. Encoded within the few lines of the heroic sonnets, Milton incorporates the virtues of strength, Christian faith, and wisdom as his cultural ideals for England and developing early modern English national identity.

Milton's three heroic sonnets provide *exempla* of national heroes in the persons of Fairfax, Cromwell, and Vane, who strive for the republican government that Milton supports, while offering his praise of the Commonwealth leaders in the Horation traditions. Milton's republican politics influence the alteration in his handling of Arthurian matter from the early expressions of literary intent in *Mansus* and *Epitaphium Damonis* to later treatments of the material in his epic *Paradise Lost* and his prose work *The History of Britain*. As his politics develop throughout the decades of the mid-seventeenth century, his trust turns to distrust of Arthurian traditions and the sources in which the material appears. Milton uses Arthurian material associated with romance as a contrast to Biblical material within his epic. The questions of veracity, connected to Arthur since Geoffrey of Monmouth's work, become heightened in the seventeenth century as empiricism becomes a more prominent mode of inquiry. Because he cannot accept the figure of Arthur as a literary subject, Milton returns the matter of Britain to national "history" as he questions the chronicle sources of Arthurian material. He removes elements of Arthurian tradition that manufacture nostalgia among audiences to

prevent the English from longing for the political and social greatness of a British king. Milton's reshaping of Arthurian matter to distance England from the ancient past as related by chronicle authors and the chivalric behavior associated with Arthur through medieval romances in order to reestablish English national identity by stressing the virtues of strength, reason, and faith as ideal qualities for seventeenth-century Englishmen.

Conclusion

The figure of Arthur plays various roles in English literature and culture over the centuries since Geoffrey of Monmouth's chronicle. The roles change throughout the works and their interpretations by scholars.[1] This study focuses on several of Arthur's roles as seen in a selection of English works and authors. The number of works as well as roles for Arthur are too great to argue for one overreaching interpretation. Limitations are, therefore, necessary to narrow the scope of a study through genre, texts, translations, and editions.[2] The English authors examined here who contribute to the manufacture of

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[1] For brief examinations of Arthurian traditions over their long history, see Lupack, Alan. *The Oxford Guide to Arthurian Literature and Legend.* Oxford: Oxford UP, 2005.

[2] As with compiling a study of Arthurian matter, teaching it requires limitations. For reading on teaching, materials, including texts, editions, and translations, and matter, see Fries, Maureen. "The Labyrinthe Ways: Teaching the Arthurian Tradition." *Approaches to Teaching the Arthurian Tradition.* Eds. Maureen Fries and Jennie Watson. New York: Modern Language Association of America, 1992. 33-50 and "Part One: Materials." *Approaches to Teaching the Arthurian Tradition.* Eds. Maureen Fries and Jennie Watson. New York: Modern Language Association of America, 1992. 3-30; Gaylord, Alan T. "Arthur and the Green World." *Approaches to Teaching the Arthurian Tradition.* Eds. Maureen Fries and Jennie Watson. New York: Modern Language Association of America, 1992. 56-60; Lacy, Norris J. "Teaching the King Arthur of History and Chronicle." *Approaches to Teaching the Arthurian Tradition.* Eds. Maureen

Arthurian material represent only a small number of authors and works. Each represents a significant contribution within the English Arthurian tradition from ca. 1130 to 1670. Over this five-hundred-year period, the portrayals of Arthur transform from warrior-king to courtly knight to virtuous gentlemen to "auncient" warrior, inflected by historically specific cultural ideals and traditions. The composite of contemporary values with the ancient British figure creates nostalgia for an imagined glorious past to promote the promise of a future that "should" be. A strong Arthur represents a strong monarchy playing a forceful role on an international stage. The dangers which weaken the strength of king and kingdom result from domestic threats in which females play significant roles.

Fries and Jennie Watson. New York: Modern Language Association of America, 1992. 51-5; McClatchey, Joseph. "Teaching the Individual Characters and Motifs." *Approaches to Teaching the Arthurian Tradition.* Eds. Maureen Fries and Jennie Watson. New York: Modern Language Association of America, 1992. 70-2; Raffel, Burton. "Translating *Yvain* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* for Classroom Use." *Approaches to Teaching the Arthurian Tradition.* Eds. Maureen Fries and Jennie Watson. New York: Modern Language Association of America, 1992. 88-93; Ruud, Jay. "Teaching the 'Hoole' Tradition through Parallel Passages." *Approaches to Teaching the Arthurian Tradition.* Eds. Maureen Fries and Jennie Watson. New York: Modern Language Association of America, 1992. 73-6; and Thompson, Raymond H. "Modern Visions and Revisions of the Matter of Britain." *Approaches to Teaching the Arthurian Tradition.* Eds. Maureen Fries and Jennie Watson. New York: Modern Language Association of America, 1992. 61-4.

Medieval and early modern cultures influence the evolution of Arthur, Arthurian literature, and scholarly views of Arthurian material. The English literary traditions begin with history, and early English Arthurian works can profitably combine fiction with history for contemporary as for current audiences. Whether the figures and stories are to be believed as historical as much as fictional, the stories are instructive. The line between history and fiction within medieval and early modern eras does not adhere to strict empirical delineations that exist within modern times. In "Historians and Poets," Blair Worden explores the relationship between history and writing, arguing, "Poets engaged not only with the literature and languages of the past but also, on broader fronts, with history. Poets and historians were what... they ought not to be: the same individuals" (71-2). The Arthurian literary corpus contains many works which follow the practice of blending history with poetry, and the figure of Arthur becomes an embodiment of this blending.

The blend of fiction and history within Arthurian literature contributes to the nostalgia employed by authors who present Arthur's Britain as a golden realm of ideal kingship and behaviors. The *Historia Regum Britanniæ*, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, *Le Morte Darthur*, and *The Faerie Queene* all evoke nostalgia to differing degrees to stimulate discussion of contemporary political topics. Further analysis of English Arthurian works would reveal how they incorporate political issues of their times: texts such as *The Wife of Bath's Tale*, *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle* or the Alliterative *Morte Arthure* would provide further insight into the extent to which political elements are germane to Arthurian matter. The degree to which Arthur is

viewed as a figure who retains inherently political significance throughout medieval and early modern periods by authors influenced by Arthurian literature and practices is yet to be determined.

The appropriation of Arthur by Anglo-Norman and later English culture establishes political uses for Arthurian material early in the literary tradition. Geoffrey of Monmouth employs Arthur to advocate for a strong monarch who advances the kingdom on an imperial stage before it may fall as a victim of domestic conflict. Critics continue to question the authenticity of the Arthurian material as well as Geoffrey's larger purpose. In his discussion of the fictitious nature of the legend of Britain's conquest of Rome, C. S. Lewis, in *Studies in Medieval and Renaissance Literature*, states, "Whether Geoffrey intended all this stuff as political propaganda for our continental empire or merely as a sop to national vanity, we neither know nor care. It is either way deplorable" (19). To Lewis, the imaginary nature of the material creates objections that override Geoffrey of Monmouth's enduring record. Yet, if the work is viewed as a blend of history and fiction more than purely factual history, Geoffrey of Monmouth fashions episodes that advance arguments concerning the manner of kingship and kingdom. The Arthurian material presented in the *Historia Regum Britanniæ* influences generations of works which employ their traditions to further purposes. The *Gawain*-poet draws upon the traditions, including imperial heritage, while subtly incorporating topics concerning English colonial projects in Wales. His primary emphasis resides in the portrayal of chivalry to prove the worth of Arthur and his court, notably stressing social values over political issues in a time of stable and peaceful succession.

Writing during a time free from civil strife concerning monarchial succession, the

Gawain-poet reflects this domestic security within the Arthurian kingdom of his poem.

Fractured successions in the fifteenth century influence writers of later Arthurian works.

Malory's *Le Morte Darthur* begins with a questioned succession of the crown and ends

with the shattering of domestic tranquility along with British glory in a battle for the

throne. The prose romance advocates a strong monarch who can promote England on a

world stage, but the work refrains from arguing for a specific claimant to the throne

during conflicts whose political ramifications redound to author and printer. In discussing

the importance of the work's publication to development of English prose, Spisak

contends, "That Caxton saw this project to completion in spite of imminent political risks

attests to Malory's importance and typifies the printer's own literary derring-do" (606).

Although *Le Morte Darthur* avoids speaking directly to the specific political situation in

England, the use of the work to support a particular claimant (either Henry VI or Edward

IV until 1471 and Richard III or Henry VII in 1485) creates dangers for author and

printer since a contested succession exists at both the time of composition and printing.

The imperial conquests and civil wars of Arthur's realm are stressed at the beginning and

end of the work and balanced by the chivalric practices of knighthood and courtly love of

the knights' quests within the center. The English traditions of medieval romance

combine both political and social aspects to create a full cultural picture within works.

The cultural picture of an Arthurian work becomes multi-layered in the early

modern romance-epic *The Faerie Queene*. Through multiple allegorical levels which

exist in the characters and episodes, Spenser addresses social as well as political issues

simultaneously. Arthur embodies the traits which Spenser designates for a gentleman—justice, temperance, chastity, friendship, holiness, and courtesy—while retaining those attributed to him in Arthurian traditions, such as mercy, generosity, and strength—even though the poet chooses not to emphasize the latter. In shaping Arthurian material to suit his purposes, Spenser lessens Arthur's role within the poem. Examining the creation of Spenser's epic in terms of literary tradition, C. S. Lewis, in *The Allegory of Love*, argues that "[t]he scene of the poem could have been laid in Britain and a real topography...could have been used at every turn. But Spenser keeps his Arthurian lore for occasional digressions and detaches his Prince Arthur from Saxons, from Guinevere, Gawain, and Launcelot, even from Sir Ector. There is no *situation* in *The Faerie Queene*, no when or where" (309-10). The separation from traditional elements of chronicles and romances serves to prevent the creation of nostalgia for an era of the British past, thus promoting the greatness of the monarch in the 1580s. The Arthurian material reproduces a political connection stressed in the early years of the Tudor dynasty to help justify and legitimize the family's claim to the throne.

During the sixteenth century, the Tudors lessened their emphasis on their family's Welsh connections to Arthur, retaining the throne despite extended family struggles vexing Henry VIII and his three children who succeeded him on the throne. The status of Arthur in English literature is also weakened by the time Spenser composes his poem in the last decades of the sixteenth century. However, the figure of Arthur continues to be viewed as a national and political figure. Spenser draws upon the imperial role of the figure when he creates *The Faerie Queene*. In *Studies in Medieval and Renaissance*

Literature, Lewis examines Spenser's use of Arthur: "By making Arthur, the hero, or at least the nominal hero, of his poem he nevertheless attempted to gratify the humanists' wish, and his own, that the great poem should be, in some sort, a national epic" (131). The use of Arthur establishes the poem as nationalistic without requiring the poet to have recourse to British mythology. Spenser transforms the traditional figure to suit his Protestant, imperial political agendas concerning his monarch and the colonization of Ireland. Like Spenser, Milton adjusts his views along with his presentation of Arthur in accordance with his particular political beliefs. He removes Arthur from many traditions associated with the figure through creating a historical presentation of Arthur. Milton forgoes composing his national epic because the matter of Arthurian traditions contradicts his religious and political beliefs concerning the adulterous practices in the tenets of courtly love and the monarchy; instead, he seeks to establish new national heroes representative of a new Protestant republic rather than a medieval kingdom. Milton refashions the virtues of an English hero to eliminate nostalgia for an era ended by domestic strife centered on the throne.

The domestic strife along with the fall of Arthur and his court are often attributed to female characters within Arthurian works, and consequently, audiences view the women, their actions, and their influence critically. Some women in Arthurian works, such as Morgan le Fay in Malory's romance, actively seek the downfall of Arthur, while others, such as Guenevere in the *Historia*, contribute to the downfall of the kingdom without overtly seeking to destroy Arthur. In "Leaving Morgan Aside: Women, History, and Revisionism in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," Sheila Fisher argues that the

women of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* are marginalized to save the Round Table

and Arthur from its traditional fall in which "women are centrally implicated" (130-1).

However, not all of the major female characters are marginalized within the text, for the

deference shown to the disguised Morgan le Fay reflects her power while the actions of

Lady Bercilak within Gawain's chamber demonstrate her agency. The lack of specific

character development fails to denote marginalization. The women of Bercilak's

household actively attempt to corrupt and subvert the power structure which Guenevere

at Arthur's court passively supports. The distinctions between subversion and support of

political or social concerns are not always depicted as a deliberate separation between

female characters. In *The Faerie Queene*, Radigund, who subverts the status quo,

physically confronts Britomart, who supports the status quo. In Spenser's romance, the

female knight's defeat of this subversive element, which enslaves the male knight (in this

case Artegall), neatly demonstrates appropriate roles for women while stressing the

authority of the poet's female monarch. While women of Arthurian works often threaten

power structures, they cannot be wholly blamed for the collapse of the kingdoms.

Placing blame on female characters absolves male figures within the works from

their own failures. The marginalization of females within Arthurian works occurs more

through interpretations by successive audiences' values than through the actual content

fashioned by the author. Modern audiences should distance themselves from their own

cultural values to view the early texts in terms of their contemporary times and cultures.[3]

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[3] Instructors who teach Arthurian matter should address the author's own

historical moments to clarify cultural differences for students. For approaches to teaching

Within the context of their contemporary societies, the women may adhere to or react

against traditional roles, but in either instance, the women can gain power and display

agency. In the *Historia Regum Britanniæ* and *Le Morte Darthur*, Guenevere is given

control of the kingdom when Arthur leaves Britain. Although Mordred shares the

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Arthurian literature at secondary and collegiate levels, see Beaudry, Mary L. "Lignum

Vitae in the Two-Year College." *Approaches to Teaching the Arthurian Tradition*. Eds.

Maureen Fries and Jennie Watson. New York: Modern Language Association of

America, 1992. 122-6; Hamilton, Ruth E. "Teaching Arthur at a Summer Institute for

Secondary School Teachers." *Approaches to Teaching the Arthurian Tradition*. Eds.

Maureen Fries and Jennie Watson. New York: Modern Language Association of

America, 1992. 118-21; Kelly, Thomas, and Thomas Ohlgren. "The World of King

Arthur: An Interdisciplinary Course." *Approaches to Teaching the Arthurian Tradition*.

Eds. Maureen Fries and Jennie Watson. New York: Modern Language Association of

America, 1992. 77-80; Keiser, George R. "Malory and the Middle English Romance: A

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Lynch, Kathryn L. "Implementing the Interdisciplinary Course." *Approaches to Teaching

the Arthurian Tradition*. Eds. Maureen Fries and Jennie Watson. New York: Modern

Language Association of America, 1992. 65-9; and Slocum, Sally K. "Arthur the Great

Equalizer: Teaching a Course for Graduate and Undergraduate Students." *Approaches to

Teaching the Arthurian Tradition*. Eds. Maureen Fries and Jennie Watson. New York:

Modern Language Association of America, 1992. 127-30.

regency, that Guenevere is specifically designated to rule in Arthur's absence illustrates

her significance as well as her power. Like Lady Bercilak and Britomart, Guenevere

demonstrates agency in the *Historia* and *Le Morte Darthur* when she seeks shelter at the

convent. The ability to choose and to act of their own accord establishes that female

characters within Arthurian works are not automatically marginalized; their social roles

contribute to the political meanings and interpretations of the texts. Arthurian women

who attempt to subvert power or social structures do so from within those structures and

typically face defeat by the representative of the kingdom's power structure when they

pose a direct challenge, thereby, illustrating the need for domestic peace as the kingdom

develops into an empire.

The power and agency of female characters as well as the political elements may

be less apparent to a modern audience than they were to a contemporary one familiar

with the cultural subtexts and values along with the intricacies of the English political

situations of the various eras of the authors. The audiences for Malory's work and its

1485 edition by Caxton could have recognized the political implications of advocating a

unifying monarch and subsequent dangers in supporting a particular claimant without

explicit references to Henry VI (r. 1422-1461 and 1470-1471), Edward IV (r. 1461-

1483), Richard III (r. 1483-1485), or Henry VII (r. 1485-1509) during the conflicts of

succession that constitute the Wars of the Roses. The figure of Arthur gains political

meaning connected to empire and national identity as the tradition develops over

centuries, influencing the manner in which successive literary generations treat the

material and in which audiences interpret the position of Arthur as monarch in relation to

their own political climates. The Arthurian traditions known to a seventeenth-century audience would have brought implicit meanings regarding the political successes of monarchs to any fictional text that Milton creates about the British king, preventing Milton from creating a national epic completely separated from those traditions. The contemporary political climate influences the received texts as well as the decisions behind the reworking of Arthurian texts.

Arthurian material remains part of culture after Milton's decision to return the figure to a historical context. Arthurian works created during and after the nineteenth century restore literary importance to the corpus that was lost with the decline of romance during the early modern era. The various modern treatments of Arthur, such as Alfred, Lord Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* (1865-1885) and Marion Zimmer Bradley's *Mists of Avalon* (1982), add to a diverse corpus containing literary works composed over eight hundred years alongside cultural traditions which span a longer time period.[4] The

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[4] Arthur functions not only as a figure within history, legend, and literature, but also as a figure within popular culture over the centuries. Therefore, modern presentations of Arthurian matter have a place in the classroom alongside canonical works. For reading on Arthur, modern works, and modern popular culture in the classroom, see Boardman, Phillip C. "Teaching the Moderns in an Arthurian Course." *Approaches to Teaching the Arthurian Tradition*. Eds. Maureen Fries and Jennie Watson. New York: Modern Language Association of America, 1992. 81-7; Grellner, Mary Alice. "Arthuriana and Popular Culture." *Approaches to Teaching the Arthurian Tradition*. Eds. Maureen Fries and Jennie Watson. New York: Modern Language Association of

selected texts and authors within this study provide an opportunity to observe connections

between works and a developing tradition of political literature. The extended time period

over which these authors composed their treatments of Arthur provides the opportunity to

distinguish alterations fashioned and employed by these authors within larger traditions

of English Arthurian literature. In her article "Prophecy and Nostalgia: Arthurian

Symbolism at the Close of the English Middle Ages," Caroline D. Eckhardt examines the

uses of Arthur, arguing, "The varied treatments of Arthur indicate that *context* is the great

determiner of the connotations of the legend. Where the situation calls for the backward

glance of nostalgia, Arthur's name will serve; where the situation calls for optimism and

action, Arthur's name will serve there, too" (125-6). My study acknowledges the

importance of the nostalgia associated with Arthurian matter but examines how authors in

the early modern era remove that nostalgic veil to create a new English national identity.

Spenser promotes an optimistic portrayal of England but places Arthur in the background

of *The Faerie Queene* to stress the achievements of Elizabeth I (r. 1558-1603). Arthur

becomes a malleable symbol capable of serving multiple purposes without losing any

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America, 1992. 159-62; Harty, Kevin J. "Teaching Arthurian Film." *Approaches to*

Teaching the Arthurian Tradition. Eds. Maureen Fries and Jennie Watson. New York:

Modern Language Association of America, 1992. 147-50; and Herman, Harold J.

"Teaching White, Stewart, and Berger." *Approaches to Teaching the Arthurian Tradition*.

Eds. Maureen Fries and Jennie Watson. New York: Modern Language Association of

America, 1992. 113-7.

integral interpretative meanings. He grows as a multi-faceted figure representing social and political issues. Works which relate Arthurian material take advantage of the multiple meanings as the figure develops. The arc which Arthur follows into the early modern era through history into romance and back to history presents the flexibility as well as the endurance of the figure as a national hero until the cultural transformation during the English Revolution affects views of Arthur. In *The History of Britain*, Milton questions chronicle sources, presenting a critical view of history more than an idealized view of history as presented in Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia*.

The various compositions over the lengthy period between Geoffrey of Monmouth's chronicle in 1136 and Milton's historical work in 1670 include eras in which contested successions create civil strife which threatens the kingdom and eras of domestic peace; the inclusion of multiple political eras illustrates the shift of Arthur from centralized to background figure, who embodies preceding traditions as well as additions through the early modern era, while retaining a relationship with English national identity. The established time frame of works and authors also encompasses times in which chronicle history could be viewed as factual and in which developing empirical studies increased existing doubts regarding the chronicle material, particularly the Arthurian material as presented in the *Historia Regum Britanniæ*, as reflected in literary depictions of Arthurian matter by Spenser and Milton. Questions accompanied Geoffrey of Monmouth's work, which influences traditions and literary treatments of Arthur by depicting him as a British king who establishes an empire, from its twelfth-century composition because the source material could not be corroborated. The questions of

veracity grew throughout the early modern era, and by the mid-seventeenth century, authors of histories, such as Polydore Vergil and Milton, and of poetry, such as Spenser, seem to regard the *Historia* as a fictional work in a manner similar to that of the Arthurian romances.

English Arthurian traditions continue to develop because the stories portray an artificial society in such detail that the Britain associated with Arthur has elements of verisimilitude, such as the relationship between Guenevere and Launcelot, the practices of knighthood and chivalry, and the military successes of Arthur, for audiences, overshadowing factual historical events. Scholars and readers view the material as fictional, but the tales present societies whose inner workings appear realistic in their functions.[5] Arthur and his court represent a golden age to audiences although that age is not free from war, jealousy, or envy that threaten their society. Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*, as a result of its epic scope, illustrates multiple layers of human behavior and traits in the characters, quests, and wars of Arthur's reign. In his "Prologue," Caxton encourages the reading of Malory's work, "[f]or herein may be seen noble chyualrye, curtosye, humanyte, frendlynesse, hardynesse, loue, frendshyp, cowardyse, murdre, hate, vertue, and synne" (3). The work presents the virtuous traits that strengthen Arthur's society alongside the corrupt behaviors that threaten the kingdom from beginning to end

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[5] As stated earlier in this study, this work does not engage in the debate concerning Arthur's historical existence. Scholars who attempt to prove his existence may not view works as purely fictitious, but literary scholars examine Arthur as a fictional creation.

as does the story of Arthur, born of the adulterous actions of a king and killed by his own knight, who is a nephew as well as a son. The Arthurian world of these literary texts presents an element of ancient British history that the authors, with the notable exception of Milton, use to create an ideal for their own societies, but the literary traditions preserve the weaknesses and betrayals within Arthur's society, ensuring the ideal cannot endure.

Despite the negative aspects of his human nature along with his inability ultimately to maintain the kingdom against the domestic threat which precipitates its fall, Arthur evokes an ideal of chivalric behavior and knighthood. Geoffrey of Monmouth, the *Gawain*-poet, Malory, and Spenser employ Arthur to represent the ideals of kingship and chivalry which they wish to promote. Milton returns Arthur to a historical work, *The History of Britain*, in which Arthur is one of many ancient British figures alongside Lear and Ambrosius. Arthur represents ideals that contradict Milton's political as well as religious agendas. Arthur's portrayal as a strong central figure appears in times of domestic strife in the eleventh and fifteenth centuries when English writers wish to promote strength for the nation and monarch; his relegation to a background figure, a prominent practice in romance traditions, becomes pronounced in the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries when England enjoys security under stable monarchs and successions. Women also contribute to the stability and instability of Arthur's Britain within various prose and verse works. Female figures who threaten the society, such as Morgan le Fay or Radigund, must be defeated to restore order, re-establishing the authority of the political structure. Through the mid-seventeenth century, Arthur remains wedded to English politics even as the belief in the historical sources' veracity diminishes. The need

to retire Arthur as a symbol for the kingdom as well as English identity develops in the

face of a definitive national and imperial identity for the country in the sixteenth and

seventeenth centuries.

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