

“Thou art the lorliest lede that ever I on looked”:  
Arthur and Kingship as Represented by the  
Alliterative *Morte Arthure*, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*,  
and *The Awntyrs off Arthur*

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## ABSTRACT

King Arthur is one of the most well known mythical figures in the English language, and throughout his 1500-year literary tradition, poets have built an intricate and multifaceted mythos around this legendary character. Integral to Arthur's various depictions is how each poet chooses to illustrate his kingship. These characteristics often overlap across poems, poets, and time periods. Yet, upon closer examination, subtle differences between those kingly depictions produce telling insights into the period in which the story was written. For this study, I have examined three separate Arthurian romances: The Alliterative *Morte Arthure*, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, and *The Awntyrs off Arthur*. These texts serve as bookends to a particularly eventful period in English history and speak volumes about public perception regarding kings and chivalry. When we juxtapose these texts against their respective time periods, we gain a better understanding of what Arthur truly means for Britain. As a king, as a man, as a symbol of English identity, Arthur represents whatever Britain needs at that specific time. This both explains why he maintains certain similar characteristics across lengths of time, as well as why certain traits change drastically.

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## **INTRODUCTION**

### **A Look into 14<sup>th</sup> Century Britain**

#### **A Century of Struggle**

In the vast scope of English literature involving King Arthur and his Round Table, we find common themes of bravery, heroism, kingliness, and chivalry. Searching for some way to make sense of those themes, or to somehow connect the dots might sound as simple as it is complex, and vice versa. Certainly, one can pull the most recurring ideas and create a “standard” idea of what makes up Arthur’s typical representation. But at the same time, if we examine those motifs more closely and compare them with the period in which they were written, we begin to see a much more complex relation between society and its perception of “kingliness.”

After various manuscripts and documents dating as early as the 5<sup>th</sup> century mentioning an English warrior, or a “King of Britons,” legends of Arthur arose orally starting in the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> centuries<sup>1</sup> and eventually grew into the wide-ranging mythos we recognize today. While one could debate for days about the most quintessential “Arthurian” piece of literature, it might be more productive to instead look at a specific period in English history that was particularly fruitful in its production of Arthurian stories, and move from there. For the purposes of this

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<sup>1</sup> Lacey, *The New Arthurian Encyclopedia*, (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1996), xxxiii.

paper, I will examine a period of about a century, from the mid 14<sup>th</sup> century (roughly around 1340) to the mid to late 15<sup>th</sup> century (around 1470).

Perhaps unsurprisingly, one of the staples of these 120 years was war. Scholars usually mark 1337 to 1453 as the “traditional dates for the start and end of the Hundred Years war,”<sup>2</sup> putting our 130-year stretch firmly in the middle of that conflict. Britain’s on-again, off-again war with France was a source of constant scholarship and critique, as well as significant hardship for the English people. Further fueling the issue was the fact that certain English lords still maintained notions of crusading during the few periods of down time in between the longer conflicts. On top of that century of war, almost immediately after that conflict officially ended, the English elite began fighting amongst themselves in what came to be known as the Wars of the Roses.

These constant wars would be enough of a drain a nation’s morale (not to mention its resources) without the added factors of famine, disease, and natural disasters. The first case of the Black Death in London occurred in 1348,<sup>3</sup> and from then it quickly spread throughout Britain. With the plague came a series of famines and further economic failures (in addition to the strain on the economy of a war abroad).<sup>4</sup> The effects of these crises lasted well into the beginning of the 15<sup>th</sup> century and beyond, and assuredly affected any and everything that was written during this period.

Indeed, out of these extraordinary circumstances came some of Britain’s finest pieces of poetry. Chief amongst these works were some of the more famous Arthurian romances that

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<sup>2</sup> J.A. Wagner, *Encyclopedia of the Hundred Years War*, (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2006), xxiii.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, xxxvii.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 106.

detailed new and old stories of Arthur and his knights. Perhaps two of the most well-known poems, not just in Arthurian poetry but in all Middle English poetry in general, the Alliterative *Morte Arthure*, and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, came out of the latter half of the 14<sup>th</sup> century. Almost 50 years later, the lesser known but equally insightful *Awntyrs off Arthur* was written. These three poems all give a specific view of Arthur's court and a certain idea of what kingship should and should not entail.

Interestingly, only one of these three works is actually about Arthur. *Morte* details Arthur's quest across Europe to claim Rome, only to be forced to return and fight off a challenger to his throne, culminating with him dying alongside his many knights in a tale befitting an epic tragedy. *Gawain* and *Awntyrs*, on the other hand, both focus primarily on Gawain, though *Awntyrs* also includes Guinevere prominently. The latter two poems spend much of their time detailing Gawain's own battles, or his struggles with chivalric responsibilities. One might ask why am I not then focusing on Gawain instead, or choosing some other works by which to examine Arthur, and the answer is twofold: 1) Though not the main character of either poem, we see enough of Arthur in both to establish a sound judgment on his characterization, and 2) As we will see, a test of Arthur's court, and anyone in it, constitutes a test of Arthur himself, meaning we gain a better understanding of Arthur's character by observing members of his court, namely Gawain. We see Arthur directly by actions and descriptions both from the narrator as well as other characters, and indirectly by how his court behaves as a representative of him.

Additionally, throughout this, Arthur's physical court becomes a symbol about which poets feel compelled to write. Whether that physical location serves to represent Arthur's rule, or juxtapose a conflicting ideal or set of ideals, place is an important aspect of how the poets depict

Arthur. Some poets spend time describing Arthur's hall, suggesting a certain level of significance, while others seem to care little for where Arthur resides. Both contribute to a better understanding of his characterization.

My purpose in examining these separate poems, in viewing Arthur through those direct and indirect descriptions, is to discover what those depictions tell us about the period's particular perceptions and definitions of kingship. Is it a stagnant set of tropes that can be applied across eras? Or is it something with a little more fluidity? What about those specific world events influenced varying depictions of such a common and recognizable figure?

Ultimately, I believe we see an evolving idea of kingship throughout these three poems and throughout Arthur's history. None of these three poets point to a single definition of what makes a king successful, and when combining their three separate ideals, we still do not establish a consensus on what specific aspects of chivalry are the most important for kings to uphold. Instead, we find the ideals and characteristics that *are* present in each poem directly correlate with changing worldviews and perceptions on kingship. When combined with historical context, we find an almost didactic quality in the poems, chastising current events and/or longing for a different time. The three versions of Arthur include a mythological god-like figure, reminiscent of earlier epics, a realistic representation of a king that ironically points towards an unrealistic peace, and a king who becomes the physical manifestation of the kingdom of Britain as a whole.

## CHAPTER ONE

### Militant Leadership in the Alliterative *Morte Arthure*

Written around 1400 during the second major lull of the Hundred Years War (between 1390 and 1415),<sup>5</sup> the Alliterative *Morte Arthure* typifies many beliefs and values English citizens felt towards the idea of kingship, but it also bespeaks their pressing concerns. In this epic of conquest, the poet wastes little space on the actual voices of commoners, but by structuring the events leading to Arthur's eventual downfall in a way so eerily similar to the real events of the 14<sup>th</sup> century, he captures a sense of disillusionment with the trope of an oft-absent lord warring abroad. Steven P. W. Bruso writes about this very topic in his piece examining the role of kingship in *Morte*. Bruso claims the poem sets up a scenario that “may have felt a bit like the English public during Richard II's reign at the end of the fourteenth century, which had become increasingly war-weary and reluctant to fund the war effort,”<sup>6</sup> particularly for a war on another continent, far away from the concerns of that public.

Keep in mind, England had not only been at war with France for around 60 years at this point, but was also still very much reeling from the numerous crises of the Late Middle Ages.

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<sup>5</sup> Simon Armitage, *The Death of King Arthur: A New Verse Translation* (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 2012), 9.

<sup>6</sup> Steven Bruso, “The Sword and the Scepter: Mordred, Arthur, and the Dual Roles of Kingship in the Alliterative *Morte Arthure*,” *Arthuriana* 25, no. 2 (2015) : 51.

Following the Great Famine, subsequent Black Death, and general economic failures of England and Europe as a whole, the English fell back on what little stability was left to them.

Additionally, though the major Crusades took place hundreds of years prior, as Timothy Guard points out in *Chivalry Kingship and Crusade*, minor efforts to crusade and fight the *hethenesse* persisted, particularly during the periods of peace between France and England during (for instance, around the turn of the century, when *Morte* was written).<sup>7</sup> Guard points out, “With the onset of peace, the governments of England and France took steps to protect their interests in what promised to be an impressive revival of eastern crusading.”<sup>8</sup> It was almost as if the aristocratic class had to continue fighting in order to demonstrate their chivalric qualities, which is indeed exactly what Guard goes on to claim.

The connection between the poem and historical events is not too difficult to see, as the events of *Morte* start after a dispute of sovereignty (not unlike Edward III claiming the French throne only to lose it to Philip VI), and become a drawn out war far from the nation’s own borders in an effort to win more territory and wield more power. *Morte*’s conflict is perhaps more pointed, as Lucius Iberius accuses Arthur (via the senator) on “New-Yeres Day”<sup>9</sup> of waging war across Rome’s lands without justification. He states, “There shall thou give reckoning for all the Round Table, / Why thou art rebel to Rome and rentes them with-holdes!”<sup>10</sup>

Further, this summons carries a threat:

Yif thou these summons withsit,      he sendes thee these words:

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<sup>7</sup> Timothy Guard, *Chivalry, Kingship and Crusade: The English Experience in the Fourteenth Century*, (Rochester, NY: Boydell Press, 2013), 18.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> All citations from *Morte Arthur* are from Simon Armitage, *The Death of King Arthur: A New Verse Translation* (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 2012), all translations are my own. Line 90.

<sup>10</sup> Armitage, *Death of King Arthur*, lines 102-103.

He shall thee seek over the se,      with sixteen kinges,  
Brin Britain the brode      and britten thy knightes  
And bring thee buxomly as a beste      with brethe where him likes,  
That thou ne shall route ne rest      under the heven rich  
Though thou for reddour of Rome      run to the erthe!

104-109<sup>11</sup>

He does not just claim that Rome will burn Britain to the ground and eviscerate Arthur's knights ("britten" is a particularly vicious word choice here), which in and of itself carries enough weight to warrant at least *some* response; he also makes sure to take a jab at Arthur's pride by claiming Iberius will "bring thee buxomly as a beste with brethe where him likes." What starts as a threat of war, turns into a direct insult on Arthur's strength and masculinity. By having the senator liken Arthur to a tamed beast after the poet has already spent 100 lines building up Arthur's feats of strength, the reader immediately knows Arthur will not let this offense stand. These are dangerous words to speak in any king's court, much less Arthur's.

Obviously Arthur cannot sit by and do nothing; action is required, either to acquiesce and pay fealty to Rome or to prepare for battle, and the reader would most likely agree that Arthur is justified either way, especially when threatened thus. What has Arthur done to provoke Rome? Initially, it appears he *is* totally justified in his upcoming campaign against Europe. However, if we reexamine the first few dozen lines of the poem, Rome's retaliatory actions might not seem as uncalled for as before, just as Arthur's behavior might not seem as blameless as previously assumed.

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<sup>11</sup> Armitage, *Death of King Arthur*, lines 104-109.

The opening lines detailing Arthur's conquests show the massive amounts of land he "recovered," claiming it was all originally Uther's ("And he had covered the crown of that kith riche / Of all that Uter in erthe ought in his time"<sup>12</sup>), as well as new conquests.

|                             |                          |
|-----------------------------|--------------------------|
| Scathel Scotland by skill   | he skiftes as him likes, |
| And Wales of war            | he won at his will,      |
| Bothe Flaunders and Fraunce | free til himselven,      |
| Holland and Hainault        | they held of him bothen. |

Lines 32-35

Our first impression of Arthur is that of a conquering hero, but when coupled with Rome's accusations, it sheds some doubt as to the legitimacy or innocence of his actions. Again, this points to a successful military leader, but the extent of these territories undoubtedly suggests notions of kings more concerned with conquering lands than ruling them. This again brings up echoes of English monarchs, particularly Richard II. Elliot Kendall discusses Richard's many shortcomings in his book *Lordship and Literature: John Gower and the Politics of the Great Household*, in which he states, "Over the following decade [1390s] he would go much further in exploiting magnificent discourses of kingship, which invariable stressed power over obligation in the role of the monarch."<sup>13</sup> We see this mirrored in Arthur's leadership in *Morte*. Arthur's military prowess is impressive, but his continued leadership is questionable. That obligation of leadership (or lack thereof) is made more evident in the follow up to the preceding passage:

|                                |                        |
|--------------------------------|------------------------|
| When he these deedes had done, | he dubbed his knightes |
| Devised ducheries and delt     | in diverse rewmes,     |

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<sup>12</sup> Armitage, *Death of King Arthur*, lines 28-29.

<sup>13</sup> Elliot Richard Kendall, *Lordship and Literature: John Gower and the Politics of the Great Household*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2008), 49.

|                                  |                           |
|----------------------------------|---------------------------|
| Made of his cosins               | kinges annointed          |
| In kithes there they covet       | crownes to bere.          |
| When he these reqqmes had ridden | and rewled the pople,     |
| Then rested that real            | and held the Round Table: |
| Soujourns that seson             | to solace himselven       |
| In Bretain the brodder,          | as him best likes         |

Lines 48-54

It is important to note that none of this is totally new or revolutionary; these practices of appointing endowments of land to allies were standard practice. Edward III in fact seemed to be particularly adept at his appointments, as he “managed to appoint friends and supporters who were acceptable to political society at large.”<sup>14</sup> However, these appointments were often problematic, as Kendall points out, “The magnificence of both Edward II and Richard II in endowing new nobles out of proportion to their previous positions in landed society proved disastrous.”<sup>15</sup> Kendall later adds, “Almost all of the new peers granted titles by Edward III’s father and grandson (fourteen of sixteen, including de Vere) fell within five years of their creation.”<sup>16</sup> With the apparent exception of Edward II, the English people would have been familiar with these type of careless posts for the past century, and Arthur’s actions are no different. The poet briefly mentions Arthur allocating all of his recent conquered lands to various knights, but says very little else on the matter (until he appoints Mordred as his interim man in charge, which I will discuss later). Though understandable why the poet might choose to not discuss the specifics of all of Arthur’s appointments, it still appears as if Arthur puts little

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<sup>14</sup> Kendal, *Lordship and Literature*, 35.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

thought into any of these titles, and instead cares more about acquiring the land than rightly governing it by appointing competent officials. More so than anything, we see Arthur's role as king concerned almost solely with expansion, which falls short of not just a lord's purpose, but a king's purpose especially.

This idea of an expansive kingship is perhaps best represented by the description of Carlisle. Throughout the detailing of Arthur's conquered lands, there is no clear depiction of a capital of his kingdom, or even really a clear center. This would again fit a standard depiction of the time; Kendall describes this century thus: "Accounts of late medieval government often characterize the period as one in which uncentralized power was re-emergent. Broadly speaking, the Angevin regimes expanded central authority."<sup>17</sup> He further describes the connection between aristocratic landholdings and the broader dominion as follows:

“‘Local’ and ideas of local aristocratic networks have a strong place in current discussions of late medieval society and politics and I often have recourse to them. Associations of ‘local-ness’ with separateness and being definitively outside the centre must be avoided however. Cogent ideas about access to the centre and responsibilities binding centre and locality are very important to medieval interests and discourses resistant to centralized authority. The emphasis is often on the centre’s duty to support established patterns of status and interaction within localities.”

Pg. 19

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<sup>17</sup> Kendall, *Lordship and Literature*, 32.

Arthur does not seem to have one central location here but rather various “local” bases. These separate localities serve as mini-centers of power, but Arthur still lacks a true capital. Arthur spends time in “Britain the brodder,” as well as builds a “cite... with curious walles” at Caerleon, but as was common, the seat of power essentially just followed him. If anything, Caerleon serves as one more distinct locality that behaves like one of those “mini-centers.” However it is at Carlisle that we find Arthur “asserting his majesty over dukes and the like”<sup>18</sup> and enjoying Christmastime festivities. Now this again could very well just be one of the many castles in which Arthur and his court takes holiday, but the season itself is noteworthy. Compare, for instance, with *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, in which Arthur resides at Camelot, the seat of his power in that poem.

Additionally, even as one of the smaller localities (small in comparison to later texts in which Camelot is the established capital), Carlisle holds particular significance largely because it appears to be the location of the physical Round Table. Twice in the first 100 lines the poet describes Arthur convening the Round Table – “Then rested that real and held the Round Table,”<sup>19</sup> and later, “Thus on real array he held his Round Table”<sup>20</sup> – but in both instances it appears to be referencing the broader idea of the table and his community, in other words, “holding” court. Yet the material Round Table does apparently exist, as we soon discover language that is much less ambiguous when describing the place settings of Arthur’s mealtimes.

Soon the senator was set      as him well seemed,  
At the kinges own borde;      two knightes him served,

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<sup>18</sup> Then after at Carlisle a Christenmass he holdes / This I lk kidd conquerour and held him for lord / With Dukes and douspeeres of diverse rewmes. Armitage, *Death of King Arthur*, Lines 64-66.

<sup>19</sup> Armitage, *Death of King Arthur*, line 53.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, line 74.

Singulere, smoothly,                    as Arthur himselven,  
Richly on the right hand            at the Round Table.

Lines 170-173

If the Round Table exists anywhere, one would assume its location would be in a place of certain significance, especially considering the use of the article *the*, as opposed to *a* round table. And here, while the Arthur convenes his court (or Round Table) at Carlisle, we also find *the* Round Table. The fact that the poet chooses to describe the physical table after referencing the men who make it up, gives even more credibility to Carlisle as a royal seat of particular importance (more so than Caerleon, for instance). Rather than just another local base, Carlisle serves as a construct of Arthur's authority.

Now, again, the purpose of this argument is not to prove Carlisle is Arthur's official capital in older Middle English texts, or even that it is the official capital in *Morte*, but rather that it is the most appropriate representation of the *idea* of Arthur's court, particularly in this poem. Thus, despite the fact that there are other mentioned places at which Arthur exercises his power, and also in fact *because* of those other mentioned places, Carlisle can be viewed as the de facto central location in this poem. It typifies that etherealness of the nonexistent center of a kingdom, because like the others, it is initially discussed in terms of temporariness ("Then after at Carlisle a Christenmass he holdes,"<sup>21</sup>). Carlisle fits the idea of the re-emergence of "un-centralized power," just as Arthur himself characterizes the notion of an un-centralized lord. Arthur is lord over many and expanding localities, all of which act as temporary bases, and Carlisle epitomizes that idea of a temporary base.

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<sup>21</sup> Armitage, *Death of King Arthur*, line 64.

Also of note, as Arthur and his knights prepare for the coming campaign against Rome (and Europe), where should they do so if not within the walls of Carlisle. It is at Carlisle that he makes all last-minute preparations before mounting his forces at Sandwich. He does not return to Caerleon, which he seemingly built solely for the purpose of martialing his men (“where his army might assemble should he summon them to arms”<sup>22</sup>).

Returning to Arthur’s style of kingship, he answers our aforementioned choice of how to respond by indeed mustering all the strength he can in order to not only defend his own lands, but, as we might have guessed, to wage an all-out assault on Rome for the brazenness of suggesting he was not the rightful ruler of all of his conquered territories (sound familiar?). Again, not unlike the real-world events leading to the Hundred Years War, we see an accusation, followed by Arthur stating:

|                                |                          |
|--------------------------------|--------------------------|
| I have title to take           | tribute of Rome;         |
| Mine auncestres were emperours | and ought it themselven  |
| Belin and Bremin               | and Bawdewyne the third; |
| They occupied the empire       | eight score winters,     |
| Ilkon eier after other,        | as old men tells;        |

Lines 275-279

Disputes of authority on the basis of ancestral holdings? The poet is not subtle here in his comparisons to real-world events. Arthur calls upon the memories of his ancestors and their ancient holdings as a defense for his own sovereignty, much like Edward III’s claim to the French throne following Charles IV’s death. After being passed over for Philip VI, Edward III

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid, line 63.

eventually paid fealty to Rome (unlike Arthur), only to see Philip VI seize the duchy of Gascony in an active demonstration of force (not unlike Rome's threats to Arthur).<sup>23</sup>

At this point in the poem, one cannot help but notice an even more obvious disinterest or indifference towards the common English people. Arthur primarily concerns himself with Arthur, and the poet presents a noticeable gap between the king and a greater English community. Bruso states that Arthur "distances himself from the responsibilities of governance, fundamentally abandoning England, in order to pursue his war ambitions abroad."<sup>24</sup> It indeed is hard to disagree with Bruso's point, especially if we look further at Arthur's actions before leaving. At the very least, Arthur plans on leaving England woefully underprepared for any type of outside aggression while he is away, and completely susceptible to takeover from foreign powers. Now, as a king, lord, and knight himself, Arthur has a certain obligation to pursue these warring ambitions and perhaps warrants some latitude in our judgment. The principles of chivalry most certainly apply to Arthur, and he subsequently must adhere to certain guidelines in order to fit these preconceived notions of chivalry. This again is consistent with 14<sup>th</sup> century Britain, as Guard elaborates:

... by the late middle ages the office of kingship and the ideals of knighthood had reached a state of near-symbiosis, the warlike needs of the state and the growth of the cult of arms promoting successfully a code of 'chivalric kingship' ... Yet as practicing

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<sup>23</sup> J.A. Wagner, *Encyclopedia of the Hundred Years War*, (Wesport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2006), 119-120.

<sup>24</sup> S.P. Bruso, "The Sword and the Scepter: Mordred, Arthur, and the Dual Roles of Kingship in the Alliterative *Morte Arthure*," *Arthuriana*, 25, no. 2 (2015) : 56.

knights, kings were themselves inseparable from the chivalric milieu...<sup>25</sup>

Using this logic, Arthur's actions are somewhat justified. He must engage these enemies in battle or else fail in his chivalric duty knight, lord, and king.

However, this idea of chivalry/kingship-hybrid only really works if one looks at Arthur's relationship with the nobility. When applied to common subjects, Arthur noticeably falls short of his responsibilities as their king and lord. Despite the blending of the roles, as king, he still has a duty to *all* of his subjects, not just the aristocratic. Kendall's description of the duties of lordship reiterate that notion:

“The subjects to whom the king owes a duty are imagined in two tiers – the nobility and ‘the people’ or commons. The commons need access to the king to receive justice, while the nobility (the social specification of ‘bones counsellors’) require access both to receive justice and to give their ‘good will’ and advice.”<sup>26</sup>

How can the commons have access to their king when he has plans on leaving for an extended period of time? His actions seem solely based on his perceptions of upholding the militaristic aspect of his chivalric duty, without any consideration of his other local, lordly duties.

Compounding that upsetting nature of his leadership is the fact that Arthur himself is purposefully ambiguous about how long he will be abroad. “The people” already will not have access to him while he is away, nor will they apparently know for how long that lack of access will last. Detailing his plan of action, he states, “I shall at Lamas take leve to lunge at my large /

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<sup>25</sup> Guard, *Chivalry, Kingship and Crusade*, 182-183.

<sup>26</sup> Kendall, *Lordship and Literature*, 45.

In Lorraine or Lumbardy, whether me leve thinks;”<sup>27</sup> He then repeats a similar sentiment not a hundred lines later: “I shall at Lamass take leve and lodge at my large / In delite in his landes with lordes ynow.”<sup>28</sup> These do not sound like the plans of a king determined to defend his honor and right to claim authority over his territories, nor do they even really sound like the plans of a king intent on teaching an offending party a lesson. Instead, these “battle-plans” sound more like Arthur planning his next locale in which to hold court, not unlike the descriptions in lines 48-78. Rather than resting in his home, Arthur now seems to be planning on conquering Europe and leisurely enjoying the time. Now, again we can view this as an act of bravado or even a confidence in the ease at which he will achieve this conquest, and consequently attribute that to some sense of chivalry, but we cannot overlook his complete disregard for the actual kingdom itself. It is important that the poet depicts Arthur as this cavalier in his plans to ignore England for an extended and unspecified time. The poet presents Arthur as a king balancing certain chivalric and kingly duties (which *should* go hand in hand), but ultimately unable to conform to any not involved with battle.

In addition to leaving for this unknown amount of time, as stated previously, Arthur also seemingly leaves Britain shorthanded and vulnerable to enemy attack. His knights begin pledging their finest fighting men. Aungers speaks first, pledging “Twenty thousand men within two months / Of my wage to wend where-so thee likes, / To fight with thy fomen that us unfair ledes!”<sup>29</sup> Next is “Thirty thousand by tale, thrifty in armes, / Within a month-day, into what march / That thou will sothly assign, when thyself likes”<sup>30</sup> from the “burlich berne of Bretain.”<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Armitage, *Death of King Arthur*, lines 349-350.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, lines 421-422.

<sup>29</sup> Armitage, *Death of King Arthur*, lines 300-303.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, lines 317-320.

Two thousand are pledged from Wales,<sup>32</sup> and Sir Ewain pledges another fifty thousand “upon fair steeds.”<sup>33</sup> This not only robs the kingdom of men, but also apparently horses. These are all bold declarations of loyalty to their king, but not without consequence. Bruso perhaps say it best in regards to Arthur’s decision-making: “There appears to be no consideration to leave any good fighting men behind to attend to England’s defenses, leaving Mordred with what seems like few soldiers to defend the kingdom, and even fewer lords to help manage the governance of England.”<sup>34</sup> Much like England in the 14<sup>th</sup> Century, the ramifications of Arthur’s planned war are nothing more or less than crippling from a manpower standpoint.

That lack of manpower would not just affect Britain’s defenses, but perhaps more pressing it would affect the economy as well. A 14<sup>th</sup> century poet writing an epic poem about a legendary figure is obviously not going to discuss the economic repercussions of a king’s warring ambitions. Tales of adventure and conquest simply do not work like that. However, as objective readers, we *can* look at those implications, particularly when continuing our comparison to 14<sup>th</sup> century Britain, which, as mentioned before, was currently in economic turmoil. David Green discusses the peasants’ plight in detail in his work, *The Hundred Years War: A People’s History*, noting at this time that peasants made up about 90 percent of the general population.<sup>35</sup> Though a fictionalized account, no doubt the struggles of the peasantry would be on the mind of the poet. Britain’s population likely “fell by about 50 per cent” in the

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid, line 304.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid, line 335.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid, line 365.

<sup>34</sup> Bruso, “Sword and Scepter,” 50.

<sup>35</sup> David Green, *The Hundred Years War: A People’s History*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), 47.

14<sup>th</sup> century due to a “series of natural and man-made disasters,”<sup>36</sup> including the constant flooding of the 1330s-1340s, Great Famine, Black Death, and continued warfare.<sup>37</sup> Green describes post-1337 Britain as one in which “endemic warfare added new burdens in the form of assault and taxation,” which, coupled with “[agricultural] decline and the limited success of Edward III’s first campaign meant that tax collectors in 1340-41 faced a deluge of complaints.”<sup>38</sup>

At this point, we know Arthur is going to be gone an indefinite but unquestionably lengthy amount of time, and that he will be taking a large percentage of his kingdom’s able-bodied men with him to fight. We can estimate the economic toll of a sudden lack of working men, but this does not even include the inevitable cost of this war, which would unquestionably hurt the kingdom’s treasuries (as well as the commoners’ own pockets). The inevitable rise in taxes that would accompany this type of campaign would be astronomical considering the scale of Arthur’s plans. And again, throughout all of this, we see his apparent disinterest in the governance of the kingdom during his absence.

Obviously one would appoint someone in power to govern while away, but as Bruso points out, Arthur seemingly gives complete control of everything in his government to Mordred, without even a mention of maintaining contact. Even Richard I and eventually Edward III “did not simply abandon everything to do with the kingdom’s governance,” but instead, “maintained more or less constant contact with the officials in place at home.”<sup>39</sup> Arthur, on the other hand, tells Mordred “I make thee keeper, Sir Knight, of kingrikes many, / Warden worshipful, to weld

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid, 59.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid, 58.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Bruso, “Sword and Scepter,” 57.

all my landes, / That I have wonnen of war in this world rich.”<sup>40</sup> He adds: “Chaunceller and chamberlain change as thee likes, / Auditours and officers, ordain them thyselven, / Both jurees and judges, and justices of lands;”<sup>41</sup> Bruso provides important insight into the implications of Arthur’s voice here:

Not only does this listing enumerate the powers and responsibilities that Mordred will have... but it also suggests some of Arthur’s distancing from governance even at this state, as his words to ‘chaunge as the likes’ indicates a troubling lack of concern for stability. The remark is delivered off-hand, as though it matters little to Arthur whether or not the men that he had appointed remain in their positions. This brings up the question of competency, for if Arthur seems to care little, we should wonder why they were appointed in the first place; and Arthur’s remark also implies that he does not care who Mordred chooses to appoint, if he does choose to replace an official with another candidate. From his instructions to Mordred, then, it sounds very much like Arthur does not want anything to do with the kingship and governance of England, nor does he wish to be consulted about anything—Mordred is to rule as sovereign and to make all decisions pertaining to England and its governance.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Armitage, *Death of King Arthur*, lines 649-651

<sup>41</sup> Ibid, lines 660-662.

<sup>42</sup> Bruso, “Sword and Scepter,” 56.

Again, appointing an interim head of government is not out of place for a king embarking on a military campaign. Granting one man absolute power (without conferring with any counsel on the matter, I might add) and essentially giving him free reign to do whatever he wants, including supplanting offices you, as rightful king appointed, is cause for concern.

Bruso uses this insight to point out further “problems with [Arthur’s] performance of kingship,”<sup>43</sup> and then goes on to suggest that Mordred represents the more ideal form of kingship, one in which the king balances governing with militaristic competency. I do not necessarily wish to go that far, but I do believe the importance of noting the poet’s depiction of Arthur’s clearly flawed kingship. Thus everything that follows with the fall of Arthur’s court is a direct result of Arthur’s absentee-style leadership, and by extension, his inability to adequately merge his kingly duties with his chivalric ideals.

This failure of kingship once again mirrors a late 14<sup>th</sup> century motif, particularly compared with Richard II’s rule. Gwilym Dodd describes this period as one which proved to be “especially fertile ground [for understanding the dynamics of late medieval English politics], for there was in that period a dramatic upsurge of political and politicised writing as a result of prolonged and, on occasion, profound failures of kingship.”<sup>44</sup>

The poet gives another depiction of Arthur’s rule during the retelling of his dream about the *Rota Fortunae*, which is strikingly similar in its inconsistency to the first few hundred lines of the poem. After Arthur approaches, he is given all that he desires and more for “the lenghe of an hour”<sup>45</sup> atop the Wheel of Fortune, and we are under the impression that he is justified in his

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid, 53.

<sup>44</sup> Gwilym Dodd, “Kingship, Parliament and the Court: The Emergence of ‘High Style’ in Petitions to the English Crown, c. 1350-1405,” 129, no. 538, (2014) : 515.

<sup>45</sup> Armitage, *Death of King Arthur*, line 3380.

position, “But at the mid-day full even all her mood changed, / And made much menace with marvelous words.”<sup>46</sup> Instantly we are given the grim details of Arthur’s sins as he falls from grace. This is decidedly less subtle than our first example, but similarly effective. Much like the previous kings, Arthur becomes aware of his shortcomings. The philosopher states “Thou has shed much blood and shalkes destroyed, / Sakeles, in surquidrie, in sere kinges landes;”<sup>47</sup> directly calling out his arrogance.

The sage then gives her warning about the downfall of Arthur’s kingdom, about which there is little doubt as to where fault lies:

But the wolves in the wood    and the wild bestes  
 Are some wicked men            that werrayes thy rewmes,  
 Is entered in thine absence    to werray thy pople,  
 And alienes and hostes        of uncouthes landes.  
 Thou gettes tidandes, I trow,   within ten dayes,  
 That some torfer is tide        senn thou fro home turned.

Lines 3446-3452

The poet cannot help but mention to Arthur that the problem arose “[I]n thine absence” and “senn thou fro home turned,” which almost seems like salt in the wound. We as readers should not be surprised by the turn of events; after all, we have already noted how Arthur essentially left England without the majority of its fighting men and a bulk of its governors, but whereas before we might have hoped for the best and that everything would be fine, this point in the poem makes it clear that that cannot happen.

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid, lines 3382-3383.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid, lines 3398-3399.

It is at this critical point in the story that Arthur makes one last fatal flaw, and one which might easily get overlooked. After being warned about his fate, and then shown that subsequent warning materialize, one would think he would give up the endeavor that started the whole mess, and retreat from the continent with his men in order to retake his rightful kingdom. Instead, he proclaims:

There shall no freke men fare but all on fresh horses  
That are fraisted in fight      and flowr of my knightes.  
Sir Howell and Sir Hardolf      here shall believe  
To be lordes of the ledes      that here to me longes;  
Lookes into Lumbardy      that there no lede change,  
And tenderly to Tuskane      take tent als I bid;  
Receive the rentes of Rome      when they are reckoned;  
Take sesin the same day      that last was assigned,  
Or ells all the hostage      withouten the walles  
Be hanged high upon height      all holly at ones.

Lines 3581-3590

Has he learned nothing? After leaving his nation defenseless, he now decides to make haste back to defend it, but not at full strength. Would not the better course of action be to regain his original kingdom at all costs, even if that meant abandoning the most recent conquest? Perhaps he has now all of a sudden learned how to properly govern while absent. It is almost comical how now, when attempting to retake his original kingdom, he exercises control by leaving warriors in place to govern, and furthermore leaving those men with specific instructions to exercise his exact orders. If we compare that to his vague “Do whatever you want while I take all

of our soldiers to war” speech with Mordred, we hopefully see how the poet creates this delightfully paradoxical scenario. Does he think that if he cannot retake England, at least the bards will say he conquered Rome? Or has his arrogance expanded to the point that he cannot even imagine defeat? Either way it appears his dream showed him everything and taught him nothing.

We soon find out, Arthur’s England is never reclaimed, as he and the majority of his Round Table perish attempting to take back his kingdom. One can say Mordred’s defeat at least brings perhaps some sense of normalcy back to England, but in reality, the country is now left without the leader that essentially formed it into being. Not only that, but again, who would be there to lead it now? If Arthur left England susceptible to takeover before, imagine the state of the nation now. Most of his original army has been decimated, and what fighting force that *was* left on the island would now be significantly weakened. The door is essentially left completely open for any of the mercenaries Mordred hired to come back and take over.

At this point, the entire kingdom itself has lost its identity, which had heretofore rested solely on Arthur’s absolute control, and thus we can subsequently see that Carlisle no longer holds any importance. As Arthur’s power goes, so goes the idea of a central location of authority represented by Carlisle. Without Arthur in control, the original kingdom, the English people themselves, become the home of the enemy and force Arthur to return as an invading force. It is not as simple as “England was overrun,” but rather, the legitimate ruler whom Arthur himself put in charge of everything. Bruso goes so far as to argue why all of Mordred’s actions were direct

results of Arthur's abandoning of England.<sup>48</sup> Regardless, with Mordred in control, the nation's former identity is lost. It is not as if Arthur is rescuing the English people whom he seemingly abandoned, but rather yet again retaliating against someone who would dare challenge his authority. Looking more deeply into this loss of identity then, it becomes clear that it actually was not Mordred's betrayal (or whatever Bruso might call it) that lost Arthur his country. Instead it was lost the moment Arthur decided it was necessary to leave England in order to capture the world's foremost empire, Rome.

All of these characterizations are efforts by the poet to dramatize this legendary figure. Rather than portraying a king who rules his kingdom like a more subdued, realistic monarch, and one to which the English community might be able to quickly relate, the poet paints a picture of a mythical antihero who takes offense to any and all insults and settles for nothing less than total control. His pride and arrogance (not to mention his temper) lead to his ignoring or dismissal of any and all other aspects of chivalry that would keep him grounded in a realistic setting.

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<sup>48</sup> Bruso argues that though it is described as unjust, Mordred was merely exercising the authority bestowed on him by Arthur in order to restore a traumatically weakened country from the cost of Arthur's European war. 49-50

## CHAPTER TWO

### A Level Head: Peacetime in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*

*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* offers a compelling contrast to the Alliterative *Morte Arthure* with regards to its representation of kingship and the stability of the seat of power. Though written slightly earlier than *Morte* (Casey Finch puts it between 1340 and 1360), we can still apply the same logic with which we examined *Morte*, and infer an underlying social commentary about the current political and social climate, namely, the 100 Years War. Lynn Arner, in her essay on colonialism and Gawain, suggests as much, stating, “As the models of ideology employed in British cultural studies attest, a text does not simply reflect the political climate in which it is composed but intervenes in the political terrain and participates in the production of the social formation.”<sup>49</sup> However, the *Gawain* poet’s intervention in the political terrain is noticeably different than the *Morte*’s. Rather than presenting a king with relatively easily identifiable flaws and an equally flawed kingdom, the *Gawain* poet presents Arthur as an ostensibly more unchanging king in a relatively stable kingdom. If we examine Arthur and his court in *Gawain* more closely, we still see they are not without flaws; but those flaws manifest themselves more subtly. Rather than presenting a negative example of what a king should *not* be,

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<sup>49</sup> Lynn Arner, “The Ends of Enchantment: Colonialism and Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,” *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, 48, no. 2 (2006) : 80.

who would perhaps resemble Richard or Edward, the poet offers a picture of what a king *could* be. This strategy changes Arthur's role from the hero of the story to a spectator. Further, allowing one of his knights to demonstrate certain chivalric duties in his stead reflects more favorably on him as a ruler. Throughout this we also see, but perhaps are unaware of, the unambiguous representation of Arthur's court clearly situated in Camelot.

*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* begins similarly to *Morte*, with abridged descriptions of the famous exploits of a conqueror. However, *Gawain* begins with details of the life and victories of past kings, rather than focusing on Arthur from the beginning. This motif of Arthur remaining somewhat in the background recurs throughout *Gawain*, and is significant for this reading of the poem. Rather than the cities and countries that Arthur has taken over, the poet describes Aeneas and Romulus, Ticius and Langaberd, and lastly Brutus:

Hit watz Ennias þe athel and his highe kynde,  
þat siþen depreced prouinces, and patrounes bicomē  
Welnege of al þe wele in þe west iles.  
For rich Romulus to Rome ricchis hym swyþe  
With gret bobbaunce þat burge he biges vpon fyrst  
And neuenes hit his aune nome, as hit now hat;  
Ticius to Tuskan and teldes bigynnes,  
Langaberde in Lumbardie lyftes vp homes

Lines 5-12<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> All citations from *Gawain* are from Casey Finch, ed., *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* in *The Complete Works of the Pearl Poet* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993).

Instead of Arthur and his knights “by conquest” winning “Casteles and kingdomes and countrees many,”<sup>51</sup> here it is “Ennias þe athel and his highe kynde.” The poet obviously must create historical background to grant this story some gravitas, but it seems clear from these opening lines that this is not Arthur’s story, or, if it is, his is merely one small part of a greater English tale (contrasted with *Morte*’s grand scale). Placing these names first perhaps gives the reader some sense of comparison or an objective mindset for what is next to come. Rather than beginning with the fantastical heroic deeds of one man followed by his downfall, the poet describes the fantastic deeds of generations long ago, as a means of setting the stage to clearer understanding of the narrative present.

The construction of Rome is particularly interesting due to how much it resembles the similar lines of Arthur building Caerleon in *Morte*. The poet describes Romulus’s actions thus: “With gret bobbaunce þat burge he biges vpon fyrst,” much like Arthur deciding to build a great city in which to martial his troops in *Morte*; “And there a cite he set, by assent of his lordes / That Caerlion was called, with curious walles...”<sup>52</sup> The act of constructing a “capital” is undoubtedly symbolic in establishing legitimacy as a ruler. However, the notion in these early descriptions is of rulers establishing themselves and then staying put. As each ruler branched out, he established his realm; “Ticius to Tuskan and teldes bigynnes, / Langaberde in Lumbardie lyftes vp homes,” followed, of course by Brutus founding Britain – “Felix Brutus / On mony bonkkes ful brode Bretayn he settez / Wyth wyne.” Each individual demonstrates this similar trope of building or constructing places in their new kingdoms. The poet also is clear in his word choice, using words like “teldes,” or “homes.” All of this background information suggests that

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<sup>51</sup> Armitage, *Death of King Arthur*, lines 26-27.

<sup>52</sup> Armitage, *Death of King Arthur*, lines 60-61.

these rulers expanded quickly, and then remained put, as *subsequent* rulers expanded further.

Contrast that idea with Arthur's Caerleon in *Morte*, which, as I have already suggested, seems to have been built not to establish itself as a capital or ruling center, but merely a strategic martialing area from which his forces could continue their nomadic conquests.

The establishment of conflict in the opening lines (in *Morte*), or lack thereof (in *Gawain*) differentiates these two works from the beginning. Whereas *Morte* begins with Arthur's war and conquests only to have a brief period of peace interrupted by the narrative's main conflict, *Gawain* begins long after the battles have been won. *Gawain* begins in peacetime – not a hastily drawn-up peace in the midst of ongoing war, not the immediately satisfying peace that comes after a victory, but total peace. The peace in this poem existed before the narrative present and appears to exist after it is finished. The poet offers no mention of outside conflict (the conflict comes from the inside, as Morgan le Fay initiates the challenge, but I will save that for later), but instead focuses on the gaiety of the Christmas-time festivities.

Rekenly of þe Rounde Table alle þo rich breþer –

With ryche reuel orygt and rechles merþes.

þer tournayed tulkes by tymeþ ful mony,

Justed ful jolilē þise gentyle knigtes,

Syþen kayred to þe court, caroles to make;

For þer þe fest watz ilyche ful fiftē dayes,

With alle þe mete and þe mirþe þat men couþe avyse:

Lines 39-45

This description of courtly revelries is perhaps more recognizable now as how chivalric courts were *supposed* to look, but the *Gawain* poet must reiterate this notion, if for nothing else than to

establish a different status-quo than that of other stories. Instead of the more noble pageantry present in *Morte* (“Was never such noblay in no mannes time / Made in mid-winter in tho West marches!”<sup>53</sup>), “these gentle knights made joy... as merry and mirthful as men could devise.”<sup>54</sup> The poet then gives almost 100 more lines describing the merriment before the action begins with “an aghlich mayster.”<sup>55</sup> Again, this type of happiness differs vastly from what we see in *Morte*, in which the celebrations are more geared towards either a) celebrating their victorious past, or b) taking a break from Arthur’s nonstop conquests, or c) both.

The description also makes note of another important piece of information – that of the Round Table. Just as the physical location of the Table in *Morte* was found in Carlisle, here we see it physically located in Camelot. “Rekenly of þe Rounde Table alle þo rich breþer...”<sup>56</sup> The inclusion of the actual Table is not an unimportant detail; much as in *Morte*, its presence automatically gives certain significance to the location, even more so than the presence of the king or his court himself, as the Table remains constant, contrary to the possible departures of court members (including Arthur). The main difference between the two poems, however, is that in *Gawain*, the association of the physical Round Table to a central location is superfluous information. We do not necessarily need extra information assuring that the Round Table’s presence indicates Arthur’s chief base of operations, because we do not see Arthur ever leave Camelot over the course of a yearlong narrative. We have no other locations by which to compare his court, and thus take it at face value that Camelot represents Arthur’s central authority.

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<sup>53</sup> Armitage, *Death of King Arthur*, lines 76-77.

<sup>54</sup> Finch, *Gawain*, lines 42, 45, my translation.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid, line 136.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid, line 39.

Though not explicitly stated, it should be safe to deem Camelot the center, or capital, of Arthur's realm in *Gawain*, if for no other reasons than no other place of importance is mentioned (other than what Gawain discovers in his travels). The poet states that "þis kyng lay at Camylot vpon Krystmasse,"<sup>57</sup> which might suggest a certain temporariness, yet in the quick passage of time after the initial challenge until the following New Year, Arthur does not seem to ever leave Camelot. The poet does not bother mentioning other cities because the crux of the story is not necessarily about Arthur's point of rule specifically, but of Gawain's chivalric trials. However, those trials directly reflect Arthur's rule, as they are representative of his larger court. Bertilak actually admits as much when detailing Morgan le Fay's original intentions later in the poem. He recounts that, "Ho wayned me vpon þis wyse to your wynne halle, / For to assay þe surquidre, gif hit soth were / þat rennes of þe grete renoun of þe Rounde Table;"<sup>58</sup> Here the poet clearly describes the brotherhood of the Round Table, rather than the physical object. Thus Camelot is almost taken for granted, but at the same time, is being tested all along. Perhaps the center of power is so accepted, that the poet does not feel the need to spend more time explaining that fact. Arthur stays at Camelot, and that is the end of it. The poet knows that testing a member of Arthur's court is equivalent to testing him himself. This would again be a shift in ideals from what we see in *Morte*, in which the idea of one stable place is foreign, and instead kings wander from castle to castle, bringing their court with them, all the while needing to prove themselves individually.

In keeping with *Gawain*'s shift in political ideology, Arthur himself differs from the *Morte* version noticeably as well. If we recall *Morte*'s Arthur, the representation of the king

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<sup>57</sup> Finch, *Gawain*, line 37.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid, lines 2456-2458.

focuses primarily on his warring, often arrogant nature. As has been discussed in the previous chapter, *Morte*'s introduction focuses primarily on Arthur's thirst for combat and his early victories. The one moment of peace lasts fewer than 100 lines, and is quickly interrupted by the emissary from Rome. His subsequent reaction to the challenge is to immediately raise an army and conquer the continent of Europe. The Arthur in *Gawain* is noticeably calmer in his disposition.

Importantly, *Gawain*'s Arthur is not indifferent; the poet does not describe an impotent or weak king. In fact, Arthur is quite the opposite. The poet describes him as energetic and even "boyish."<sup>59</sup>

Bot Arthure wolde not ete til al were serued;  
He watz so joly of his joyfnes, and sumquat childgered.  
His lif liked hym lygt; he louied þe lasse  
Auþer to longe lye or to longe sitte,  
So bisied him his gonge blod and his brayn wylde.

Lines 85-89

He was "sumquat childgered" (somewhat boyish), and "louied þe lasse... to longe lye or to longe sitte" (loved less to be seated too long or to lie about). And if the poet truly is trying to portray a more settled or stable king, this makes perfect sense. Just because the English were tired of war, does not mean they would seek refuge in a slothful, uncaring ruler. Instead we see a youthful king, and a youthful court. Not without flaws again, as Gawain's later trials attest, but one that is

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<sup>59</sup> Finch, *Gawain*, line 86 (Finch's translation).

given the benefit of the doubt due to its youthfulness. Thus we see a king “So bisied him his gonge blod and his brayn wylde.”<sup>60</sup>

But instead of satisfying that restlessness via more war (as we might assume the *Alliterative* Arthur might), Arthur maintains a tradition of waiting to eat...

er hym deuised were  
Of sum auenturus þyng, and vncouþe tale  
Of sum mayn meruayle þat he mygt trawe,  
Of alders, of armes, of oþer auenturus;  
Oþer sum segg hym bisogt of sum siker kngt  
To joyne wyth hym in justyng, in jopardé to lay,  
Lede, lif for lyf, leue vchon oþer,  
As fortune wolde fulsun hom, þe fayrer to haue.

Lines 92-99

He is not afraid of combat, and actually seems to want for one of his knights to “joyne wyth hym in justyng,” even to the point of their lives being “in jopardé to lay, / Lede, lif for lyf.” This type of combat would be much more suitable and recognizable for an English audience. This kills two birds with one stone in that it demonstrates to the people the bravery and confidence of their king, while at the same time keeping him home and away from “real” danger. It might suggest a degree of cowardice, but again, le Fay was not testing Arthur specifically, but his court in general. In *Gawain*, the relationship between king and court is much more fluid than in *Alliterative*.

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<sup>60</sup> Finch, *Gawain*, line 89.

As much as Arthur appears to be against sitting around and in need of some physical employment, the poet also suggests that combat is not the only endeavor that will assuage Arthur's restlessness. The first distraction mentioned above is actually "an vncoupe tale / Of sum mayn meruayle þat he mygt trawe." This act of storytelling is important, not the least of which because of the poet's self-awareness (though that is no small point either).

Additionally, by suggesting "an vncoupe tale" first, the poet further associates Arthur with a notion of peace. Yes, he follows this with a more physical, militaristic option, but jousting still was seen as sport, not on a level with conquering more territory. And the fact that the first idea mentioned is simply to listen to a tale of heroic deeds is a telling one. As I have discussed, the narrative present exists in a state of complete peace, and by wishing to hear these tales, we get the impression that these tales are all that is left connecting Arthur's court to the deeds of Aeneas or Brutus. And that is not a bad thing. The poet describes an idyllic time in which there is no need for war; instead they are free to speak of those warring times in the comfort of holiday celebrations. Obviously, the poem goes on to show that is not entirely the case, and we see a new adventure take place, but as far as representations of Arthur goes, these initial glances are dramatically different from *Morte*, and noticeably more favorable.

Now, some have pointed at those "youthful" qualities of Arthur and used them to question the motivations behind the poet's description. Martin Puhvel describes Arthur as "a restless young man," and adds that he gives off the "impression if not of a hyperactive child then at least of an exuberant, impatient youth overflowing with energy, perhaps somewhat of a 'delayed adolescent.'"<sup>61</sup> A restless young man Arthur may be, but this critique paints a much

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<sup>61</sup> Martin Puhvel, "Pride and Fall in Sir 'Gawain and the Green Knight,'" *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen*, 97, no. 1 (1996) : 57.

darker picture of him than the poet suggests. Arthur's actions of yearning for adventure are no different than other kings of literature, from Beowulf to the Arthur of *Morte*. The only difference is that Arthur's restlessness manifests itself in the need to hear tales of adventure, rather than actively engage in them, as mentioned before.

Puhvel furthers his argument in that scene by describing Arthur's need for a story as "a boy demanding to be told a fairy-tale before dinner."<sup>62</sup> Again, Puhvel seems to be overly critical, perhaps the most when he states, "there is no indication that Arthur craves personal participation in adventure and is thus a heroic figure in his own right."<sup>63</sup> As stated previously, this poem takes place in a time of complete peace, before, at present and after. It remains frozen in a moment without conflict (until, of course, the Green Knight enters). That peace is an important aspect of this poem, and keeping it becomes of the utmost importance to a king. Arthur demonstrates the role of a king capable of keeping a peace by satisfying his own sense of adventure by listening to others. Even the Arthur of *Morte*, who we can agree represents one of the more aggressive versions of kingship, enjoys a moment of relative peace once he establishes his new fortress. He of course ultimately brings about the downfall of his kingdom by brashly deciding to pay back his accuser. Instead, the *Gawain* poet decides to show an impatient king, perhaps, but one who also understands his own duties and responsibilities.

If we move on to the actual catalyst of the story, the titular Green Knight, and keep our eye on Arthur, we see an even further distinction from the brash, war-hungry leader of *Morte* to a calmer, perhaps more reasonable king. Much like the Roman senator interrupting the festivities in *Morte*, Arthur's court is interrupted by a menacing figure who proceeds to challenge and insult

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<sup>62</sup> Puhvel, "Pride and Fall," 57.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

the court. Granted, the knight begins by offering due courtesy and praising the Arthur's company:

Bot for þe los of þe, lede, is lyft vp so hyge  
And þy burg and þy burnes best ar holden,  
Stifest vnder stel-gere on stedes to ryde,  
þe wygtest and þe worþyest of þe worldes kynde,

Lines 258-261

However, after offering a challenge that Arthur attempts to accept, the knight boldly boasts, "Here is no mon me to mach, for mygtez so wayke."<sup>64</sup> This is the type of insult to which other iterations of Arthur (as well as plenty of other characters) would react unfavorably. Yet, the poet describes a silence in the court, "When non wolde kepe hym with carpe."<sup>65</sup> None of Arthur's renowned knights stand, nor does the king himself answer the challenge. The poet describes the scene thus: "If he hem stowned vpon first, stiller were þanne / Alle þe heredmen in halle, þe hyg and þe loge."<sup>66</sup> This calls attention to the stillness of everyone, specifically the "hyg and þe loge," further acknowledging Arthur's inaction. Though the knight uses this inaction to subsequently call out the cowardice of the court, we might look at this reaction differently.

The poet could have easily described fear in the court. He could have mentioned them pulling back or averting their eyes. Even some sense of restlessness would suggest anxiety. Instead, they remain even "stiller" than previously seen, again, notably the "hyg and þe loge," i.e. the king and his knights. This does not seem like the actions of fear, but possibly rationality, something noticeably lacking from *Morte* and other tales of Arthur, and something perhaps the

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<sup>64</sup> Finch, *Gawain*, line 284.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid, line 307.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid, lines 301-302.

poet suggests is equally lacking from unfit English kings. After all, these knights were only a few dozen lines prior contemplating different competitions in which they might partake. Add to that the quite reasonable cause for pause when a mysterious, ostensibly magical knight claims he will “stoned... a strok, stif on þis flet” from his own weapon, and the initial indecision does not at all seem unwarranted.

When Arthur does respond, it still is not in arrogance, but in righteous anger in defense of his court, and even perhaps out of slight embarrassment. The poet describes him blushing (“Þe blod schot for scham into his chyre face,”<sup>67</sup>) either in anger or embarrassment, and later “as wroth as wynde,”<sup>68</sup> just like “alle þat þer were.”<sup>69</sup> He then almost dutifully takes the axe as he defends his court’s honor: “I know no gome þat is gast of þy grete wordes.”<sup>70</sup> It is worth restating his earlier willingness to participate in “justying, in jopardé to lay, / Lede, life for lyf,”<sup>71</sup> so this really should come as no surprise to readers. Again though, note how he only reacts after this second insult to his court’s courage, and even then only because no one else stands up (until Gawain).

Now, again, Puhvel has something to say about this interaction as well. Rather than springing to action in defense of his court’s chivalric honor, Puhvel describes Arthur’s response “as a result of fury springing from hurt pride,”<sup>72</sup> and later “from wrath born of pride, two cardinal sins.”<sup>73</sup> This rings particularly critical when compared with Michael Hicks’ description of a king’s duties: “[A king] had to be virtuous rather than vicious, to practise the cardinal virtues

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<sup>67</sup> Finch, *Gawain*, line 317.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid, 319.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid, 320.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid, 325.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid, 98-99.

<sup>72</sup> Puhvel, “Pride and Fall,” 57.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid, 58.

and avoid the deadly sins, and act in line with God's commandments."<sup>74</sup> Puhvel characterizes Arthur in an unfair, "damned if he does, damned if he does not" situation. Arthur's childlike impotence causes him to demand adventure stories rather than crave real adventure, while at the same time his immaturity and quick temper force him to take up arms. However, just as I argued it is not Arthur's impotence that causes him to want to hear stories, I will reiterate the notion that Arthur's reaction is indeed a noble and chivalric response. Guided initially by anger, perhaps, but unjust or irrational? Not in the slightest.

Perhaps the biggest difference between the Arthur of *Gawain* and *Morte* is the more reasonable and calm response of his court, and his ensuing reaction to that council. Looking back at *Morte*, the overwhelming response of the court essentially reaffirms Arthur's belief that he has "title to take tribute of Rome."<sup>75</sup> All seem eager for the chance of Arthur to assert his dominance; Cador states "I thank God of that thro that thus us thretes!"<sup>76</sup> because it means a chance for Arthur to wage more war. The following knights do not differ much, as mentioned before, all begin to quickly offer great forces of men and beasts, only too eager to set out for a new campaign amidst this peace.

In the place of that quick eagerness of his Round Table to fight, we see the polite interruption by Gawain, who is self-described as "wakkest" and "of wyt feblest."<sup>77</sup> Rather than boasting of the men he can offer Arthur, or perhaps more relevant to *Gawain's* action, boasting about how he could easily defeat the knight, Gawain simply reasonably states:

For me þink hit not semly – as hit is soþ knawen –

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<sup>74</sup> Michael Hicks, *The Wars of the Roses*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 24.

<sup>75</sup> Armitage, *Death of King Arthur*, line 275

<sup>76</sup> Ibid, line 249.

<sup>77</sup> Finch, *Gawain*, line 334.

þer such an asking is heuened so hyge in your sale,  
þag ge gourselþ be talenttyf, to take hit to yourseluen,  
Whil mony so bolde yow aboute vpon bench sytten'  
þat vnder heuen I hope non hagerer of wylle  
Ne better bodyes on bent þer baret is rered.

Lines 348-353

Gawain does not further provoke his lord here, nor does he insinuate the need for Arthur's revenge. Instead, he calls attention to Arthur's power and rank. We can view the initial confrontation in *Morte* as Arthur feeling the need to prove his sovereignty, and his knights seconding that notion, whereas in this scene, Gawain essentially tells Arthur that he has no reason to prove himself ("so hyge in your sale"), and indeed, should not need to "Whil mony so bolde yow aboute vpon bench sytten." If anything, Gawain casts further doubt on the rest of the court's courage while maintaining Arthur's credibility, but he more importantly causes Arthur to pause again. This results in the best possible scenario for the king. He has already offered to fight and defend his court's honor, thus proving his bravery and resolve as king, but he now can step away from it safe and unhurt. The court quickly accepts and echoes this notion:

Ryche togeder con roun;  
And syþen þay reddenn alle same  
To ryd þe kyng wyth croun  
And gif Gawain þe game.

Lines 362-365

Soon everyone sees the reason behind Gawain's suggestion and the court is understandably relieved that its king is now out of danger. Hicks states that for kings, "Man management was

essential for effective rule,”<sup>78</sup> and nowhere does Arthur exhibit that more than here. Not only that, but the poet reaffirms the closeness of the court and Arthur. Rather than the disconnect between Arthur and many members of his court in *Morte*, we see Arthur’s court in *Gawain* as a community.

Now, if the poet wanted to write about the noble deeds of Arthur the king and protector of his people, he might have just shown Arthur ignoring Gawain. Indeed, one can easily imagine a similar scenario in *Morte* and Arthur ignoring it entirely in favor of pursuing further battles. However, as a more complex (and evolved) representation of kingship, Arthur does something else – he listens to Gawain and his court, thus completing the ideal scenario for Camelot. Even better, he does so without any dispute:

Ben comaunded þe kyng þe knygt to ryse;  
And he ful radly vpros and ruchched hym fayre  
Kneled doun bifore þe kyng and cachez þat weppen.  
And he luflyly hit hym laft and lyfte vp his honed  
And gef hym Goddez blessing, and gladly hym bides  
þat his hert and his honed schulde hardi be bope.

Lines 366-371

He continues by blessing Gawain and sending him forward, so to speak, as a king should be wont to do.

This entire scene then encapsulates the actions of a new English king. Not a hot-headed, impulsive monarch more concerned with achieving glory for himself and his name, but rather a more subdued, traditional king willing to fight for his own honor and that of his court, while also

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<sup>78</sup> Hicks, *Wars of the Roses*, 23.

willing to allow someone else to take the responsibility as an extension of his own kingship. And amidst all of this development is the unmoving, unobtrusive, barely noticeable Camelot, representing not only Arthur's seat of power, but his court itself, and by extension, his kingdom itself. Just as Arthur's role in *Gawain* is more subdued, so is that of Camelot.

Now, as has been pointed out, like Gawain, this Arthur is not without flaws. This representation of Arthur portrays a specific king, a specific man. He makes mistakes. Perhaps he does anger too quickly at the knight's insult. Perhaps he could have demonstrated more firm control of the situation by telling his own story. However, those critiques miss the point. The *Gawain* poet uses Arthur to represent a single idea of what kingship could be.

Maybe he is not as strong as other kings in literature. I mentioned before how all of the acts of conquest alluded to in the first 100 lines are tales of *other* kings. Arthur wins no land in this poem, nor does he defeat any foe. Rather than the mythological figures of Brutus and Aeneas, or other poets' versions of Arthur, this Arthur exists as a much more real and even plausible ruler. I mentioned that the events of this poem seem set both in a specific time and simultaneously outside of time altogether; this Arthur is no exception. This version of Arthur could be the present king, or he could be a king from 100 years ago. That pseudo-realism works in multiple ways, not the least of which is establishing a reference point for a reader. It also directly associates the reader's perception of what a king might be with Arthur himself. While Gawain's exploits seem mystical and fantastic, what we see of Arthur seems like a pretty established persona.

Does that more realistic depiction hurt our opinions of Arthur though? Albert Friedman acknowledges that, "in the course of romance literature, Arthur becomes progressively a weaker

and less dignified person,”<sup>79</sup> but despite this Arthur’s realism, he does not appear weaker or less dignified. Unlike Puhvel’s claims of Arthur’s “feebleness or ineptitude,”<sup>80</sup> or his insinuation that Arthur is actually little more than a “paper tiger”<sup>81</sup> in this poem, this Arthur still holds agency. Indeed, Friedman concludes quite the contrary, that “there is nothing [*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*] to warrant the belief that the poet is picturing for us a morally degenerate Arthur or that his praises of the Round Table are perfunctory or grudging.”<sup>82</sup> Rather than observing everything Arthur does *not* do and thus assuming he must be a weaker character because we see some missing pieces of some chivalric puzzle, we must examine what we *do* see in the poem.

Arthur does not fight, but he assumes the responsibility of maintaining the code of chivalry nonetheless; that chivalry just happens to be evolving along with ideals of kingship. As we have seen, Arthur’s status presents a complex notion of kingship, but it also suggests a refinement of kingly duties. Martin Stevens argues, “the play element is, in fact, one of [the late Medieval period’s] most prominent marks of sophistication, many of which ultimately redefine Arthurian chivalry as an ethical norm for a society.”<sup>83</sup> Because of this redefinition, chivalry becomes more concerned with Hicks’ aforementioned criteria, such as avoiding the deadly sins and acting in line with God’s commandments. Hicks summarizes these new criteria thusly: “What this really meant was that [a king] should put the interests of his subjects first – in the public interest or for the good of all.”<sup>84</sup> True kings were not merely satisfiers of their own

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<sup>79</sup> Albert B. Friedman, “Morgan le Fay in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*,” *Speculum*, 35, no. 2 (1960) : 269.

<sup>80</sup> Puhvel, “Pride and Fall,” 59.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> Friedman, “Morgan le Fay,” 269.

<sup>83</sup> Martin Stevens, “Laughter and Game in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*,” *Speculum*, 47, no. 1 (1972) : 66.

<sup>84</sup> Hicks, *Wars of the Roses*, 24

desires, they “had a social function – of which they were reminded every time they seemed to forget.”<sup>85</sup> *Gawain* for the most part then treats chivalry as “an ideal *negotiation* between heavenly virtue and political reality.”<sup>86</sup> Most of the poem’s “negotiation” takes place with Gawain, but again, because of the close relationship between Arthur and his court in this poem, that negotiation seems to apply directly to Arthur as well.

As a secondary character in this poem, Arthur’s values are reflected by Gawain’s trials and triumph. A.J. Pollard, in describing Edward III’s “remarkable transformation” of the English monarchy, describes a “cult of chivalry with [Edward] at the head.”<sup>87</sup> Arthur commands a similar cult in *Gawain*. Pollard continues, “Ultimately in late medieval politics... the power and authority of the Crown depended on the character of the king and his personal relationships with his greater subjects.”<sup>88</sup> Despite his lack of so-called aggressive behavior or militaristic leanings, the Arthur of *Gawain* fits more into a chivalric mold than the Arthur of *Morte*. And, unlike the Herculean depiction of that Arthur, this Arthur could actually be a real king. The poet describes him in such a way that he could be a peaceful version of Edward I, or even Edward III. Or he could be a distant, long-forgotten king. Importantly, this representation shows a king that could just as easily be a participant in the world events (namely the Hundred Years War) as he could be completely outside of time completely.

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> Finch, *Gawain* (from the introduction), pg. 40.

<sup>87</sup> A.J. Pollard, *The Wars of the Roses*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 63.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid, 64.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Mother Britain: English Identity in *The Awntyrs off Arthur*

*The Awntyrs off Arthur*, written almost a century after *Morte* and *Gawain*, offers yet another example of kingship, and like *Gawain*, presents Arthur as a lord befitting the current political climate. This Arthur again is not without faults, and can (and will) be criticized for certain behaviors. However, he is primarily portrayed almost diametrically opposite the present king at the time of this poem's creation, Henry VI. Much like the poets of *Morte* and *Gawain*, *Awntyrs'* poet creates an image of kingship that speaks volumes of the current attitudes towards the monarchy. Interestingly, while *Gawain* suggests a more evolved or developed image of a king, *Awntyrs* looks back, and models Arthur after the more successful kings of the past, notably Henry V and Edward III. In doing so, the poet blends past and present notions of kingship into one that again serves as a critique of the current king.

The latter half of the 15<sup>th</sup> century saw Britain once again embroiled in conflict. However, this time the conflict was internal, as the monarchy swapped back and forth between Henry VI and Edward IV during the Wars of the Roses. Theoretically, the English nobles were supposed to adhere to specific "ecclesiastical doctrines and chivalrous conventions about the circumstances

in which war was justifiable, and the rules under which it should be waged.”<sup>89</sup> Those guidelines predominantly revolved around “procuring a rightful peace,” and the paramount examples for the past few centuries were the Crusades, followed by the Hundred Years War.<sup>90</sup> The latter in particular “was an enormous drain on English resources,”<sup>91</sup> and ultimately left a public in upheaval and a nation reeling. One would imagine the English might have had enough of war after the Battle of Castillon all but officially ended the Hundred Years War in 1453, yet a mere two years later, the series of battles between competing factions for the crown seem to fly in the face of those aforementioned “ecclesiastical doctrines” and “chivalrous conventions.” Instead, as Michael Hicks states while speaking of David Hume’s philosophy of the war:

They revealed the fifteenth century as an era of uncontrolled baronial faction and of livery and maintenance, when the great nobility used gangs of uniformed retainers to oppress the localities, to pervert the law, engage in violence and even wage war in pursuit of their private interests, and also to oppose in battle and dethrone legitimate government...

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All of this led to “gloomy” records of the wars, rather than some of the more noble accounts of early crusades or later descriptions of Henry V’s victories against France.<sup>92</sup> The mid 15<sup>th</sup> century was not a time of English pride, but rather a time of beleaguered strife.

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<sup>89</sup> Anthony Goodman, *The Wars of the Roses: The Soldiers Experience*, (Stroud, Gloucestershire: Tempus Publishing, 2005), 27.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

<sup>91</sup> Michael Hicks, *The Wars of the Roses*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 61.

<sup>92</sup> Goodman, *People’s History*, 249.

Several factors led to the major conflicts between the 1450s and 1480s, and I will not attempt to delve too deeply into all of them, but it is important to discuss the major causes briefly. Chief among those factors was the ineptness of Henry VI. Michael Hicks suggests as much, claiming, “King Henry was a factor in what went wrong in the 1440s and in 1450,”<sup>93</sup> and later ““no adult English king, many historians have agreed, was so unsuited for and inadequate in the role,”<sup>94</sup> a point that Anthony Goodman simplifies by simply stating, “Henry’s rule was, indeed, a disaster.”<sup>95</sup> Part of that had to do with “differing perceptions of kingship... derived from the legacy of the fourteenth century, which made the government of his kingdom more challenging.”<sup>96</sup> Assuming the throne as a baby, Henry did not formally gain personal control until the age of 16 in 1437. In those early years, Henry saw his kingdom managed by a regency government trying to deal with the loss of not only the king (Henry’s father, Henry V), but also the Britain’s strongest military mind while still in the midst of a war.

After taking over the reins to the kingdom, the first decade of Henry’s kingship leading to the Wars was noteworthy primarily for his “failure to contain quarrels among the nobility, and for increasing outbreaks of large-scale domestic violence.”<sup>97</sup> Additionally, his monarchy was dealing with the aforementioned “inescapably escalating costs of war, with diminishing revenues, and with inadequate votes of taxation that were spiced with strictures for not living within its means.”<sup>98</sup> Whereas kings like his father were able to “coordinate and channel the energies of lords and their affinities into directions were not self-destructive,” Henry VI frankly

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<sup>93</sup> Hicks, *Wars of the Roses*, 75.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid, 77

<sup>95</sup> Goodman, *People’s History*, 34

<sup>96</sup> A.J. Pollard, *The Wars of the Roses*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 65.

<sup>97</sup> Goodman, *People’s History*, 34.

<sup>98</sup> Hicks, *Wars of the Roses*, 64.

lacked the strength or command to control or even contain the conflict between his lords.<sup>99</sup>

Critics described him at the time as not even *looking* like a king.<sup>100</sup> As such, his “political timidity”<sup>101</sup> led to the appointment of “evil councilors, and the so-called oppressors of the people of the 1440s,”<sup>102</sup> and ultimately to his rule’s fundamental flaws: “the humiliation of foreign defeat and the complicity of the government in it, the financial helplessness of the government... and the inadequacy of the central administration of justice.”<sup>103</sup> A. J. Pollard puts it succinctly; “[Reigns] like those of Richard II or Henry VI revealed what could go wrong if a man unsuited to the task inherited the throne.”<sup>104</sup>

Not all of Britain’s problems during this period can be attributed solely to Henry VI, however. The effects of the Black Death a century prior were still manifesting themselves in the form of a lingering recession across Europe. Additionally, the Great Slump signaled yet another series of agricultural and economic failures. Also not unimportant were the death of Henry V and the series of military defeats that ensued, ultimately negating “the fruits of [Henry’s] victory.”<sup>105</sup> Perhaps had Henry V survived, the Hundred Years War might have had a different result, and Henry VI might have witnessed a more ideal ruler firsthand. We will never know, but we do know that following Henry’s death, Britain immediately suffered catastrophic losses (long before Henry VI was old enough to command an army).

Now, despite the obvious flaws in Henry VI’s leadership, I would be remiss if I left out what was also written about him, that “he was also a good man, whose virtues – piety and

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<sup>99</sup> Pollard, *Wars of the Roses*, 67.

<sup>100</sup> Hicks, *Wars of the Roses*, 77.

<sup>101</sup> Pollard, *Wars of the Roses*, 67.

<sup>102</sup> Hicks, *Wars of the Roses*, 75.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid, 73.

<sup>104</sup> Pollard, *Wars of the Roses*, 64.

<sup>105</sup> Hicks, *Wars of the Roses*, 56.

innocence – were the qualities that political theorists advocated in a king.”<sup>106</sup> His desire for peace should have been a welcome change to a kingdom that had been at war for a century. Yet that same desire for peace, rather than fitting into a mold of chivalric values, ultimately was viewed as a sign of cowardice and impotence, much like Puhvel’s critique of Arthur in *Gawain*.

Now, if we examine the Arthur present in *Awntyrs*, we’ll find certain conspicuous points of difference between his kingship and the leadership of Henry VI (or Edward IV) that make it difficult to chalk it up strictly to coincidence. Much of what we see of Arthur as king in the poem seems not only to counter those kings, but also to suggest something more about kingship in general. Interestingly, despite being the adventures of *Arthur*, much like *Gawain*, the primary action in this poem does not involve Arthur at all. However, like *Gawain*, much can still be said about Arthur from the actions and descriptions we *do* see. Also of interest, this poem actually seemingly presents two different reports of Arthur’s kingship, as the poem is split into two separate episodes. Yet those conflicting notions of kingship ultimately serve more to solidify Arthur’s indefinable mythos.

The poem begins as many others, with Arthur joining his knights in a hunt, but once again the specific location remains noteworthy. Sparing no time to discuss the history of English kings or Arthur’s previous feats of power (as *Morte* or *Gawain*), the poet immediately situates Arthur and his court at Carlisle “To hunte at the herdes that with the dere dwelles.”<sup>107</sup> Though clearly for sport, the poet goes out of his way to make the hunt seem as militaristic and as aggressive as possible. Describing Arthur and his men, the poet states, “Thai werray the wilde

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<sup>106</sup> Ibid, 76.

<sup>107</sup> All citations from *Awntyrs* come from Thomas Hahn, ed., *The Awntyrs off Arthur*, in *Sir Gawain: Eleven Romances and Tales*, (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1995). Line 5.

and worchen hem wo”<sup>108</sup> and later, “They gaf to no gamon grythe that on grounde gruwes.”<sup>109</sup> Making war on the quarry and giving no quarter are both euphemistic terms for hunting, yes, but they are also clearly connecting Arthur to an idea of masculinity and warring nature, something Henry VI notably lacked. In describing the rule of Henry VI, Michael Hicks mentions, “Henry VI also seems early in his reign to have decided on a peace policy, perhaps because he was naturally peaceful,”<sup>110</sup> and later in comparison to his father, Henry V, “The son of a military hero could not fail to appreciate his role as commander-in-chief... Hence Henry never took the military lead... He showed little interest in winning the war...being personally more inclined to peace.”<sup>111</sup> A. J. Pollard echoes this sentiment, stating, “Henry VI was, however, almost the complete opposite of his father. Where Henry V had been the paragon of chivalry, Henry VI eschewed the field of battle”<sup>112</sup>. Now, I am not arguing that Arthur proves his militaristic prowess simply by hunting deer, but the poet’s choice of words definitely suggests a warring nature in the king, which runs counter to virtually all reports of Henry VI’s nature. This warlike king serves almost as a hybrid between the actual warring of the Arthur of *Morte* and the more stagnant, behind the scenes behavior of the Arthur of *Gawain*.

As the action moves away from Arthur and instead towards Gawain and Guinevere, we get another picture of the king. The ghostly figure of Guinevere’s mother, in describing the eventual fall of the kingdom, describes Arthur’s kingship in contradictory terms. As she speaks to Guinevere, she speaks of several things, notably the importance of charity, but also inserts a condemnation for Guinevere, and by association, Arthur himself, when she states, “whan thou art

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<sup>108</sup> Ibid, line 56.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid, line 59.

<sup>110</sup> Hicks, *Wars of the Roses*, 57.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid, 81.

<sup>112</sup> Pollard, *Wars of the Roses*, 23.

set in thi sete, / With al merthes at mete / And dayntés on des,”<sup>113</sup> and again, “With riche dayntés on des thi diotes ar dight, / And I, in danger and doel, in dongone I dwelle.”<sup>114</sup> Though the only extravagance the reader has heretofore seen has been Guinevere’s regalia, this critique nonetheless appears to address not just the queen, but the court itself, and by extension of course, Arthur. This cannot help but bring to mind Morgan le Fay’s test for Arthur’s entire court in *Gawain*. Instead of offering a chance to prove otherwise, however, the ghost in *Gawain* simply calls down judgment on the whole court.

She also cautions against pride, stating ““Pride with the appurtenaunce, as prophetez han tolde, / Bifore the peple, apertly in her preching. / Hit beres bowes bitter: therof be thou bolde.”<sup>115</sup> Again, this seems more directed at Arthur than Guinevere, and the poet confirms the critique by outright claiming a few lines later, “Your King is to covetous, I warne the sir knight.”<sup>116</sup> These vices might all have seemed very familiar to readers who had read or heard previous versions of Arthur and his spot on the Wheel of Fate, but strictly for the purposes of this poem, these criticisms do not have any support behind them. We have hardly seen Arthur up until this point and when we do see him, as stated before, he appears as a pretty standard manifestation of kingship.

The ghost further complicates these criticism by suggesting Arthur’s fall will actually be of no fault of his own, but instead the result of “treson”<sup>117</sup> and another “knight kene.”<sup>118</sup> This is a rather short poem, and understandably does not spend much time discussing Arthur’s past deeds,

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<sup>113</sup> Hahn, *Awntyrs*, lines 180-182.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid, lines 183-184.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid, lines 239-241.

<sup>116</sup> Hahn, *Awntyrs*, line 265.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid, line 291.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid, line 286.

but in this brief episode, we hear from a ghost about the pride and covetousness of a king without any real substantive support, while simultaneously hearing about his eventual downfall that will apparently be a result of circumstances outside of his control. She even goes on to call him “Sir Arthur the honest, avenant and able, / ... the doughty bydene”.<sup>119</sup> She seems to forget her harsh criticisms of Arthur once she describes the actual fall, and instead focus on his chivalric qualities.

When the specter finally does clue the reader in on some of Arthur’s past deeds, we see a striking resemblance to Arthur’s exploits in *Alliterative*, as well as the actual real-world exploits of Henry V, as well as possible allusions to the current events of the Wars of the Roses. She states, “France haf ye frely with your fight wonnen,”<sup>120</sup> and later mentions his successful conquests of “Bretayne and Burgoyne,”<sup>121</sup> as well as Rome itself. This reiterates the might of this Arthur, more so than the aforementioned hunting incident. Again, conspicuously absent is any actual evidence or description of fault on Arthur’s behalf.

Interestingly, the mention of conquering France immediately brings to mind Henry V’s conquests in the 100 Years War. The poet would obviously be aware of the aftermath, and seeing the exploits of a more traditional king (Henry V) lost by the ineptness of a “profoundly unsuccessful king,” who “lost both his thrones, that of England twice,” who “did not look like a king,” and instead “behaved like a fool or simpleton,”<sup>122</sup> undoubtedly influenced the predicted loss of kingdom in this poem. However, Arthur is no Henry VI in this poem. As I have already mentioned and will describe again later, if anything, the poet’s description of Arthur calls to

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<sup>119</sup> Ibid, lines 302, 305.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid, line 274.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid, line 276.

<sup>122</sup> Hicks, *Wars of the Roses*, 75-76.

mind visions of past great kings of Britain, kings like Edward III and Henry V. If the poet is indeed trying to draw parallels between real and fictional worlds, why then does he predict a kingdom's fall with an admirable king present? Regardless of whether or not the ghost's claims about Arthur's pride are justified, the Arthur of *Awntyrs* demonstrates arguably the most all-encompassing notion of chivalric behavior of the three poems we have heretofore examined. In essence, the poet presents the idea of English kingship as an entity in and of itself via Arthur, while simultaneously giving Arthur agency as an individual.

Before going too much further into that claim, it would be pertinent to first address the poem's second episode, between Galaron and Gawain, in order to gain a better understanding of those two versions of Arthur present in the poem. Hicks explains the importance of a king's appearance concisely by stating:

Rulers had to be impressive. Magnificence was expected. A king's houses had to be of the grandest style; furnishings and decorations too; clothes, jewels, diet, horses and everything else had to be of the richest quality; his cavalcade had to be the best born, best attired and best mounted; and everywhere and every day there ought to be ceremonial most elaborate and etiquette beyond compare."

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Arthur certainly fits that description. The poet describes him as the epitome of regality and extravagance. When he is seated, the poet places him "Under a siller of silke dayntly dight / With

al worship and wele, innewith the walle, / Briddes brauden and brad in bankers bright.”<sup>123</sup> Later the poet describes him as “the soveraynest of al sitting in sete / That ever segge had sen with his eye sight.”<sup>124</sup> The descriptions continue throughout the episode; suffice it to say, Arthur certainly looks the part in our first *real* examination of him.

Furthermore, the poet puts Arthur’s aforementioned graciousness on full display, as he welcomes the two into his hall despite the challenge issued forth by Galaron. Galaron enters and immediately challenges the court, stating:

Mi name is Sir Galaron, withouten eny gile,  
The grettest of Galwey of greves and gyllis,  
Of Connok, of Conyngham, and also Kyle,  
Of Lomond, of Losex, of Loyan hilles.  
Thou has wonen hem in were with a wrange wile  
Ang geven hem to Sir Gawayn – that my hert grylles.

Lines 417-422

His monologue resembles what might be said in an introduction for Arthur, yet here this knight claims that he is the “grettest” in all of these lands Arthur has conquered. Not only that, but he then goes so far as to accuse Arthur of some sort of trickery or unfairness. His ostensible attack on Arthur’s chivalric values sounds similar to the Green Knight’s challenge in *Gawain*, to which the Arthur immediately blushes in embarrassment or anger (or both).

This type of accusation perhaps more closely resembles the senator’s denial of Arthur’s right to rule in *Morte*, but it might still be considered more offensive. Firstly, Galaron says this

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<sup>123</sup> Hahn, *Awntyrs*, lines 340-342.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid, lines 358-359.

directly to Arthur, whereas in *Morte* the message is delivered by the senator but really comes from the emperor. Secondly, Galaron's statement is less of a message and more of a straight insult. The senator speaks on behalf of Rome and tells Arthur he has been taking lands that do not belong to him and must pay fealty, whereas Galaron outright attacks Arthur's credibility as a chivalric ruler, essentially claiming he does not possess the power to win lands in a fair and just manner. And thirdly, the senator actually acknowledges Arthur's majesty and strength after delivering his message, albeit out of fear or respect, whereas Galaron hardly finishes his speech denouncing Arthur's rule before Arthur calmly responds:

We ar in the wode went to walke on oure waith,  
To hunte at the hertes with hounde and with horne.  
We ar in oure gamen; we have no gome graithe,  
But yet thou shalt be mached be midday tomorne.  
Forthi I rede the, thence rest al night.

Lines 434-438

His men are not prepared for battle, as they are merely there for sport, yet Arthur still accepts the challenge. Not only that, but he courteously offers a place of rest for the insulting knight. Yes, the Arthur of *Morte* offers the same to the senator, but not before letting his temper rise and needing to be assuaged by the senator's placating compliments. Is the poet here demonstrating Arthur's impotence? Should we just expect a king to lash out in anger at such insults? Perhaps, but more likely, the poet wants to show as calm and level-headed a king as possible, one that does not make rash decisions based solely on emotion, but one that remains constant (a stability in leadership that would have been almost foreign to the English during this time).

Also of note in this episode, Arthur seems to entertain the possibility of giving up lands rather than risk the life of Gawain. After asking his counsel, “Ho shal encounter with the knight?”<sup>125</sup> only to see Gawain immediately stand up and take responsibility, pauses. The poet writes, “‘I leve wel,’ quod the King. ‘Thi lates ar light, / But I nold for no lordeshipp se thi life lorne.’”<sup>126</sup> Now, Arthur’s relationship with Gawain clearly supersedes most if not all of the rest of his knights, so it is understandable that he would immediately have second thoughts, yet would other versions of Arthur even blink twice? The Arthur of *Morte* regrets leaving to conquer *more* land after seeing all his knights fall, particularly Gawain, but still seems to solve his problems by throwing men at them rather than through introspection. Conversely, the Arthur of *Gawain* does give it a second thought when Gawain offers to fulfill the Green Knight’s challenge. Previous poets seem to agree on the nature of Arthur’s rule, in that authority and control outweigh any bonds of fellowship, and result in a very “Arthur-centered” Arthur. However, this Arthur actually admits he would not wish to see Gawain’s life lost “for no lordeshipp.” The poet presents this striking moment as an insight into Arthur’s character, and ultimately reiterates the ghost’s earlier comment of Arthur as “honest, avenant and able.”<sup>127</sup>

We see a final example of Arthur’s wisdom and grace when he calls for peace during the fight. After essentially as stalemate between the two knights for most of the fight, Gawain appears to finally gain the upper hand after Galaron’s killing stroke “on the mayle slikes”.<sup>128</sup> Gawain then “bi the coler keppes the knight,”<sup>129</sup> and would not be faulted for ending the fight then and there. Galaron is the offending party. *He* issued the challenge, *he* insulted Arthur and

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<sup>125</sup> Hahn, *Awntyrs*, line 463.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid, lines 469-470.

<sup>127</sup> Hahn, *Awntyrs*, line 302.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid, line 617.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid, line 618.

the court, and *he* stated that he was “The grettest of Galwey of greves and gyllis,”<sup>130</sup> etc.

Consider the scene in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, in which Gawain beheads the challenger on the spot, not knowing he would survive the blow. Consider Arthur’s retaliation against Rome in *Morte*, and the great lengths he went to reclaim his honor with the blood of an entire continent. And now consider what Arthur does in this instance.

After the cries of Galaron’s lady for mercy, and the subsequent pleas for peace from his own wife Guinevere, Arthur stands and calls for peace. The poet writes, “The king stode upright / And commaunded pes. / The King commaunded pes and cried on hight,”<sup>131</sup> and then shows how the two bruised and bloody knights make peace:

Withouten more lettyng,  
Dight was here saghtlyng;  
Bifore the comly King,  
Thei held up her hondes.

Lines 660-663

Again, one could very easily read this passage as a weakness on Arthur’s part – that he should have enacted revenge or justice on the offender and by holding back, he shows his cowardice, or perhaps his femininity. However, if we look at the time in which this was composed, it becomes hard to not notice the similarities between the two knights and the Houses of Lancaster and York during the Wars of the Roses.

For over 30 years, the English fought amongst themselves, neither side ever seeming to gain any ground. For a public in the midst of economic and social turmoil, the endless political

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<sup>130</sup> Ibid, line 418.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid, lines 649-651.

strife and conflict between two houses would undoubtedly wear thin. The poet describes the two fighting knights as such: “Unneth might tho sturne stoned upright – / What, for buffetes and blode, her blees wex blak; / Her blees were brosed, for beting of brondes.”<sup>132</sup> This description is too appropriate for the fighting Yorkists and Lancastrians at the time to merely be a coincidence on behalf of the poet. Two opposing forces, both laying claim to wide swaths of land, both with seemingly credible claims, and both willing to fight to the death to achieve their goals. But here is where Arthur steps in. Here we see an Arthur that transcends a typical ideal of kingship, and becomes something more. If the poet is attempting to emulate the warring factions, here Arthur is less like a specific king or ruler, but instead more like Britain itself. Arthur takes on this larger than life position as one powerful enough to stop the ceaseless violence and enact a compromise. But unlike his mythical counterpart in *Morte*, this Arthur is not a warrior hero who achieves his legendary status by battle deeds. Instead, this Arthur becomes something even more.

So far, I have discussed various scenes in which we see Arthur in *Awntyrs* and how those scenes color our perception of the type of king he is in this poem. In addition to Hicks’ previous statement about the king’s need for extravagance, he also describes “model” kings, like Henry V and Edward III before him as ones who were “virtuous rather than vicious,” and would “practise the cardinal virtues and avoid the deadly sins, and act in line with God’s commandments.”<sup>133</sup> A king “held his ground, spoke firmly to a man, pressured, alarmed, coerced and even punished their proudest subjects. Man management was essential for effective rule.”<sup>134</sup> From what we see, the Arthur of *Awntyrs* checks all of the boxes for what a king should do and how he should behave. He is gracious to his guests and his court (and even his enemies). He is the embodiment

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<sup>132</sup> Hahn, *Awntyrs*, lines 658-660.

<sup>133</sup> Hicks, *Wars of the Roses*, 24.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid, 23.

of regality. He exhibits all the necessary chivalric traits. He, for all intents and purposes, is the epitome of kingship.

In fact the only negative traits we see are those mentioned by the ghost of Guinevere's mother, none of which ever seem to be substantiated. Additionally, those traits are immediately countered by the ghost's comments about Arthur's kingly qualities. Because of this apparent contradiction, the ghost's comments about Arthur's position on the wheel of fate suggest a larger object, again pointing to the fault not laying on Arthur himself, but rather the kingdom of Britain as a whole. Speaking directly to Gawain and Guinevere, not Arthur, the ghost states "For ye shul lese Bretayn / With a knight kene."<sup>135</sup> Yes, Arthur will fall, but more importantly the Round Table, and by extension, the kingdom itself will fall. In *Morte*, Arthur fell, as did most of the Round Table, but he defeated his foe. His legacy will live on, as will the kingdom itself. *Morte's* closing lines describe a funeral procession:

|                                 |                        |
|---------------------------------|------------------------|
| "The baronage of Breytain then, | bishoppes and other,   |
| Graithes them to Glashenbury    | with glopinand hertes  |
| To bury there the bold king     | and bring to the erthe |
| With all worship and welth      | that any wye sholde.   |

Lines 4328-4331

That memorial though is a product of a kingdom still held together, and one that can now mourn their fallen king. Yet the ghost foretells a far bleaker future in *Awntyrs*. When Arthur falls, "This knight shal keenly croyse the crowne, / And at Carlele shal that comly be crowned as king."<sup>136</sup> She also states:

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<sup>135</sup> Hahn, *Awntyrs*, lines 285-286.

<sup>136</sup> Hahn, *Awntyrs*, lines 287-288.

In riche Arthures hall,  
The barne playes at the balle  
That outray shall you alle,  
Delffully that day.

Lines 309-312

A child (presumably Mordred) will undo not just Arthur, not just the Round Table, but everyone.

That pride and arrogance to which the ghost alludes now takes on a different meaning. If we take the liberty of viewing Arthur, as John Whitman suggests, as one of the “uneasy representatives of a passing social order,”<sup>137</sup> those character vices bespeak greater concerns on a larger population than just the specific character flaws of one idea of kingship. Whitman adds that, “the process of envisioning the end in the Arthurian legend is more than an evocative attempt to anticipate what will be hereafter,” but is also “a moving effort to reveal and reevaluate what is here and now.”<sup>138</sup> The here and now of the mid-15<sup>th</sup> century was a Britain caught in mindless conflict based around pride. By describing the cause of the civilization’s future fall, “the past disrupts a seemingly peaceful present to convey a warning about an ominous future.”<sup>139</sup> Arthur then both is *and* is not the reason for Britain’s future fall. As a representative of the larger English population, the accusations against him are warranted. As the ghost calls him too “covetous,” she is really calling the English people too covetous. But as an individual, Arthur’s behavior bespeaks the ideals of an overarching “Mother Britain” attempting to quell the unnecessary conflict within her borders, as we see in Gawain and Galaron’s fight.

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<sup>137</sup> John Whitman, “Envisioning the End: History and Consciousness in Medieval English Arthurian Romance,” *Arthuriana*, 23, no. 3 (2013) : 93.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid.

<sup>139</sup> Leah Haught, “Ghostly Mothers and Fated Fathers: Gender and Genre in ‘The Awntyrs off Arthure,’” *Arthuriana*, 20, no. 1 (2010) : 3.

Turning back to more specific comparisons between the Arthur of *Awntyrs* and previous iterations, we clearly see recurring themes and a similar cultural value system. One such theme is that all three of these texts associate some idea of kingship with place, whether that be Camelot or Carlisle. Interestingly, though *Awntyrs* gives certain authority to Carlisle, in the end, Arthur essentially offers it up, muddying our perception of the location's significance. Like *Morte*, the poem begins with a retreat at Carlisle, but the poet does not suggest any extra importance than that it is a hunting trip. However, like the poets of *Morte* and *Gawain*, the poet uses spatial phrasing that suggest the presence of the actual physical Round Table at Arthur's court, and in *Awntyrs*, that location appears to be Carlisle. Speaking to Galaron, Gawain states, "Withthi under our lordeship thou lenge here a while, / And to the Round Table make thy repaire,"<sup>140</sup> which the poet clarifies a few lines later with, "To Carlele thei cair."<sup>141</sup> Once there, the poet states, "The King to Carlele is comen with knightes so kene, / And al the Rounde Table on rial aray."<sup>142</sup> The specific description of traveling "to" the Round Table and "to" Carlisle remove the ambiguity associated with describing the Round Table as an indefinite collection of Arthur's court. While a king might indeed spend time traveling across his kingdom, we cannot ignore the physical presence of Arthur's most recognizable representation of his rule.

Carlisle actually takes on even more meaning as the location of the future fall of the kingdom as described by the ghost of Guinevere's mother. The ghost claims, "This Knight shal keenly croyse the crowne, / And at Carlele shal that comly be crowned as king."<sup>143</sup> Drawing on the legends of earlier Arthurian tales, the *Awntyrs*' poet foresees the ultimate defeat at Arthur's

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<sup>140</sup> Hahn, *Awntyrs*, lines 684-685.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid, line 689.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid, line 690-691.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid, lines 287-288.

most significant court. The conquering knight would thus be rubbing salt in the wounds by being crowned at the site of Arthur's greatest loss, and also the symbolic stronghold of his kingdom. All of this again makes it odd that Arthur bestows a place with seemingly such strong connections to his own kingship to another knight to rule, who then in turn bestows it upon *another* knight. Obviously, as Arthur makes Galaron a knight of his Round Table, Galaron's rule of Carlisle still falls under Arthur's overall jurisdiction, but one would imagine that Arthur would establish it as his own specific base. Instead, much like *Morte*, Arthur's physical court becomes more of a wandering troupe, exemplified *by* an impermanent hunting lodge in Northern Britain.

In addition to the parallels with *Morte* and *Gawain* regarding associations of place with kingship, we also see almost direct references to those previous works. Unlike the kingdom seemingly falling into Arthur's lap as described in *Gawain*, Guinvere's mother's ghost details Arthur's many victories, much like the opening of *Morte*. She also specifically references the wheel of fate that Arthur dreams about in *Morte*. Though that wheel is a recurring motif in Medieval poetry, the ghost in *Awntyrs* uses almost identical language to describe Arthur's faults, and lays out the events of the end of *Morte*. As mentioned before, those critiques of Arthur himself though are not substantiated by specific events in *Awntyrs*, unlike the Arthur in *Morte*, whom the poet goes into vivid detail describing his arrogance and pride. And much like *Gawain*'s Arthur, this Arthur enjoys peace and sport only to be interrupted by a challenger. And, like the Arthur of the previous poem, the Arthur in *Awntyrs* is gracious and accepting, perhaps even more so than he is in *Gawain*.

Through these specific examples we clearly see common themes of kingship, and how each representation fulfills some but not all of those ideals. Importantly, Arthur never appears as

inept as someone like Henry VI, instead usually appearing as a paradigm of chivalry with one possible flaw. In the prior poems, we see an Arthur that either shows how a king should behave in a courtly setting (*Gawain*), or how one should behave as a military leader (*Morte*). Again though, the Arthur of *Awntyrs* seems to be an even further evolved representation of kingship. He epitomizes the peaceful wisdom of *Gawain*, while the poet also paints battle-like images of his hunt.

From these two prior versions of Arthur, we get ideas of past kings, as if the poet was fondly remembering an adept leader, like Edward III, and condemning the faults of modern kings, like Richard II. But in *Awntyrs*, that representation becomes something more. Arthur takes on a much larger role. Instead of being viewed as a legendary king of old, the poet presents a new version of Arthur that takes on almost mythological qualities of a kingdom itself. Arthur in *Awntyrs* has ceased to be a king, or a famous figure of legend, and has instead risen to become the manifestation of the kingdom of Britain as a whole. Was *Awntyrs* the first poem to portray this Arthur? Of course not, but as it was written during a time in which the chief office of power of the English people was being disputed, English identity itself was in danger. Thus the poet of *Awntyrs* created an Arthur that brought together these “imagined [communities] of the realm”<sup>144</sup> into one cohesive figure. Arthur hence became not a king, not a leader, not a soldier, but Britain itself.

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<sup>144</sup> Goodman, *Wars of the Roses*, 70.

## CONCLUSION

### What to Make of it All?

In the end, we do not get a pretty bow that ties everything up. Arthur's varying depictions ultimately leave us with more questions about what *really* constitutes kingship than they answer. All three poems present a king with noticeably different characteristics, which is understandable seeing as how three separate poets wrote these over a 100-year time span. But in the end, the fact that these tales keep evolving and highlighting new versions of kingship still tells us something important.

Arthur exists as a necessity in English literature, whether a figure of ancient myth, an homage to a forgotten king or a wish for a new one, or the embodiment of Britain itself. Whether the poet chooses to show Arthur fighting giants and monsters, or sitting back and spectating while his knights carry out the adventures, Arthur holds an important piece in these tales. His longevity and adaptability of character suggest a king so engrained with English culture that he does end up representing the people themselves, more than anything else. Poets may go about it in vastly different ways, but inevitably, Arthur has always and will always have a place in English literature. He is whatever Britain needs him to be, because he is not just a king. Arthur is Britain itself.

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## **VITA**

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