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Historical imagination in/and literary consciousness: The afterlife of the Anglo-Saxons in Middle English literature

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Historical Imagination in/and Literary Consciousness:
The Afterlife of the Anglo-Saxons in Middle English Literature

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
Of the requirements for the degree of
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Dedication

For my Mom and Dad—most of what I do would not be possible without your unfailing support. And for my brother Michael, who has endured many years of my strange rants, and has occasionally entered into them, turning my monologue into a dialogue.

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Table of Contents

Abstract	ii
Chapter One: Introduction	1
Chapter Two: Medieval Historiography and Relating to the Past— A Review of Literature	8
Chapter Three: The Mirror and Infinite Regression in <i>St. Erkenwald</i> : The Fourteenth Century meets the Anglo-Saxons meeting the Celts	19
Chapter Four: <i>Athelston</i> , Athelstan, and the Profitable Appropriation of the Past	28
Chapter Five: Chaucer and the Anglo-Saxons: <i>The Man of Law's Tale</i> , Estrangement, and Disconcerting Myths of Continuity	36
Chapter Six: Conclusions	52
Works Cited	56

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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the afterlife and literary presence of the Anglo-Saxons in three literary works from the Middle English period. Middle English writers appropriated classical and French traditions for decidedly English purposes, but relatively few scholars have noted the way in which individuals in the Middle English period (particularly in the fourteenth century) drew upon and (re)constructed an organic English identity or essence emblemized by the Anglo-Saxons. Post-Conquest English men and women did not relate to their Anglo-Saxon forebears in an unproblematic manner; changes in language and culture, precipitated by the Norman Invasion, placed a vast, unwieldy gap between Middle English culture and Anglo-Saxon traditions. The uneasy relationship between the Middle English period and the Anglo-Saxon period marks Middle English literature's relationship with Anglo-Saxon precedents as one of negotiation and contestation. Through an examination of Chaucer's *The Man of Law's Tale*, and the anonymous *Athelston* and *St. Erkenwald*, I consider the ways in which Middle English writers conceived of their notions of "the past," and how such associations affected and generated new modes of thought in a relational and, at times, oppositional manner. This thesis explores the anxiety of relating to a past tradition that was recognizably "English" yet profoundly "other," and I analyze discourses on several distinct (occasionally

conflated) “others,” including Jews, Muslims, and “easterners” in order to suggest the trepidation of relating to a past tradition that was uncanny due to a familiarity that was quite unfamiliar. Middle English literature encounters, and, at times, recoils from this difference, and the works which I consider domesticate and make known/knowable the “primitive” Anglo-Saxon past.

Chapter One Introduction

The long-held belief that the Norman Conquest represented a cultural apocalypse has been challenged by scholars who have emphasized continuity and gradual change as opposed to the agonistic model that formerly placed a crisp border between the Anglo-Saxon period and the arrival of the Normans. James Campbell traces the diminishing presence of the Anglo-Saxons in his book *The Anglo-Saxons*, and he boldly asserts that “few countries have so sharp a break in their history as that which broke Harold in 1066” (240). However, many scholars now contend that 1066 might be more convenient than correct as an absolute border for the Anglo-Saxon period. Recent critical studies that problematize the divide between the Anglo-Saxon and the Middle English periods do not proceed from a merely theoretical basis; critical statements such as Thomas A. Bredehoft’s book chapter “History and Memory in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*” and R. D. Fulk and Christopher M. Cain’s *A History of Old English Literature* seek to bridge the otherwise unwieldy gap between the Anglo-Saxons and the Normans via an examination of historical records and literary texts.¹ One should resist both the lurid accounts of cultural destruction and the convenient myths of continuity that do not adequately take the profound changes of the Norman Conquest into account. Looking through the lens of history allows Frank Stenton, in *Anglo-Saxon England*, to note that “the Anglo-Saxon

¹ The preservation of Anglo-Saxon texts in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, as well as the continuation of the *Peterborough Chronicle*, constitute, according to Fulk and Cain, a political statement imbued with nostalgia and probably the first instance of the “desire for origins” as posited by Allen Frantzen in his book, *Desire for Origins: New Language, Old English, and Teaching the Tradition* (226-7).

tradition was never broken” (684); however, a statement such as this obviously requires a flexible definition of Anglo-Saxon, one which can comfortably accommodate Norman difference.² Eric John, in his book chapter “The End of Anglo-Saxon England,” similarly observes that “the ruling nobility of England became, soon after 1066, almost entirely Norman, [but] Englishmen still mattered” (233). Only by examining the life of a typical English man or woman are we able to note that, according to Stenton, “for all this, it can at least be said that to the ordinary English man who had lived from the accession of King Edward to the death of King William, the Conquest must have seemed an unqualified disaster” (686). Our historical remove from the events of 1066 allows us to observe continuity and the survival of an essential “Englishness” that is only possible due to the silence of the actual Anglo-Saxon men and women who lived through what Stenton characterizes as a truly traumatic period of history. Alexander R. Rumble, editor of *Writing and Texts in Anglo-Saxon England*, collects essays which consider a wide variety of Old English manuscripts and texts, beyond the relatively limited number that are anthologized and taught today, allowing one to glimpse greater opportunities for continuity and cultural transmission. Certainly, the debate that would oppose cultural disaster against peaceful continuity requires a middle position, but this thesis does not seek to resolve the debate over the immediate impact of the Norman Conquest.

² While Stenton argues that the Anglo-Saxon tradition continued, generally, Stanley B. Greenfield and Daniel G. Calder, in their book *A New Critical History of Old English Literature*, note that the Norman Conquest greatly affected the trajectory of English religious thought. They assert that “The Norman Conquest greatly curbed the influence which Ælfric and Wulfstan might have had on the development of English theology and prose style” (95).

The life of the average English person in the twelfth century, and his or her liminality between the two periods (Anglo-Saxon and Middle English), remains a contentious question without a clear answer. One can say, however, with relative certainty, that to a fourteenth-century individual the Anglo-Saxon period must have seemed strange, distant, and yet uncannily familiar. Medieval habits of engaging with and representing historical material usually do not attempt anything approaching historical realism or authentic *vraisemblance*. Ancient Greeks and Romans sport chain-mail, and Moses can pray to Jesus and Mary without any undue complication in any number of medieval texts. While the re-appropriation of classical and continental material for decidedly English purposes has been studied extensively, relatively few scholars have commented upon the way in which the Anglo-Saxons were read and transmitted for a fourteenth-century audience. Contemporary engagements with the past are not necessarily more authentic, and our attempts at historical “realism” often seriously mask unstated intentions and ideologies—but the debates centered upon historical “realism” do not occupy a central place in the current discussion. This thesis centers on the fourteenth-century “historical imagination,” a term elaborated by Robert Hanning in *The Vision of History in Early Britain* that bears significantly on the present analysis. Hanning defines the medieval historical imagination as:

the faculty which perceives the reality of the past; the response, evoked by the record (accurate or inaccurate) of history, which identifies that record with the human condition, seen as a timeless and continuing phenomenon. The historical imagination minimizes the temporal distance between past and present, and emphasizes instead their proximity and continuity. (3)

Medieval historical imagination depends upon an accessible and relatable history which has a sense of closeness to contemporary life. History can inform contemporary actions because of its immanent presence—a fact which also creates discomfort when the purportedly familiar looks quite unfamiliar. However, I disagree with Hanning’s notion that this engagement with the past must necessarily proceed from a theological or philosophical point of view (1). Although the moral and religious elements are always present in *The Man of Law’s Tale*, for instance, Chaucer’s interest in history does share both a nationalistic and authentically historical interest that manifests itself by means of curiosity about the Anglo-Saxon past.³ Chaucer’s treatment, after all, shares little in common with the “fall of Britain texts” of Gildas, Bede, and Geoffrey of Monmouth (the subjects of Hanning’s book) which seem quite concerned with portraying chaotic historical change as the result of God’s divine judgment.

Chapter two outlines the medieval tradition of historiography (and what it can tell us about the range of different kinds of possible encounters with the past), and the chapter specifically analyzes the opinions informed by contemporary critical theory that have revolutionized our thinking about the medieval sense of the past. After chapter two, this thesis turns specifically to three Middle English texts written in the fourteenth century: the anonymous poems *St. Erkenwald* and *Athelston*, and Chaucer’s *The Man of Law’s Tale*. By the fourteenth century, many writers began to investigate the historical records

³ Antonia Gransden notes that the interest of many chronicles contemporary with Edward III regarding the Anglo-Saxons indicates “an age in which patriotism was in the ascendant” (vol. II. 51). The backwards glance of Higden grew out of his displeasure over the celebration of French language at the expense of English, and his distrust of French culture generally remains consonant with the growing nationalist tendencies of the fourteenth century which precipitated the scramble for historically “authentic” English precedents.

of the Anglo-Saxons and to transform such chronicles into literary works. The question, as limned in the preceding paragraph, still lingers: why, exactly, would it be necessary to cast a backwards glance to the Anglo-Saxons? The Anglo-Saxons were a people whose language would have been probably incomprehensible to Chaucer and most of his contemporaries, and their culture would have seemed quite alien indeed. While a myriad of nebulously defined goals likely informed the writers who created literary representations of the Anglo-Saxons in the fourteenth century, this thesis examines the three mentioned texts in order to note the several different purposes for which the Anglo-Saxons were invoked in Middle English literature.

St. Erkenwald, an anonymous poem, occupies the central discussion of chapter three. The poem deals with familiar issues that recur in medieval literature (the reclamation of virtuous pagans, the miracles of saints, etc.) even while it provides a useful point of entry into discourses on the past. Chapter three continues the discussion of medieval historiography begun in chapter two, as the implied reader's encounter with the Anglo-Saxons provides an exterior frame for the inner-encounter of the Anglo-Saxons with the Celts whom they had previously displaced. The multiple levels of regression make *St. Erkenwald* quite relevant for discussions of cultural encounters and historical appropriation, and I argue that the poem serves primarily as a vehicle for exploring ways of relating to the past as outlined by medieval historiographers and historians in chapter two.

While the discussion of *St. Erkenwald* posits the poem's encounter with the Anglo-Saxons as an opportunity for theoretical speculation about such encounters generally, chapter four's treatment of the anonymous *Athelston* explores the decidedly

more pragmatic “uses” of the past as a known/knowable epistemic category. Much of the critical literature that has been written about *Athelston* observes its concrete concerns, such as locating legal precedents important for the fourteenth-century nobility in the Anglo-Saxon era, and this thesis reiterates these readings with important modification. The portrayal of the barbarous king Athelston (modeled on the historical Athelstan), however, introduces the reader to the real differences that existed between the Anglo-Saxons and their fourteenth-century descendants.⁴ The useful myths of continuity, which achieve success in *St. Erkenwald*, begin to falter in *Athelston* and *The Man of Law’s Tale*, as the genuine otherness of the Anglo-Saxons betrays the desires of the fourteenth-century poets who would otherwise elide difference for cultural cohesion and historical continuity. Chapter five, which offers an extended analysis of Chaucer’s *The Man of Law’s Tale*, develops some of the insights elucidated in chapter four in order to provide a new look at this popular tale. This thesis’s primary concern for the portrayal of the Anglo-Saxons in *The Man of Law’s Tale*, as opposed to a discussion of either Muslim Syria, or Custance as a character, will join a relatively small group of critical statements which seek to examine this often ignored aspect of the tale.

Chapter six presents general conclusions informed by the specific analyses of the previous chapters. While the entire thesis investigates the backwards glance of the fourteenth century (and, in some ways, our own twenty-first century backwards glance that views fourteenth-century writers viewing the Anglo-Saxons), chapter six explores the implied tension that constructs historical objectivity “versus” a historical re-

⁴ I here follow scholarly convention as employed by Elaine Treharne and others in distinguishing the historical Athelstan from the literary Athelston by the variant spelling employed by the poem which substitutes an “o” for the “a” in the name of the historical personage.

imagining. The final chapter questions contemporary desires for a truly clinical, scientific variety of history, and it asserts the importance of historical imagination and appropriation in the present era which seeks to consign such “ahistorical” treatments comfortably to the past.

Chapter Two

Medieval Historiography and Relating to the Past—A Review of Literature

A general survey of the variety of historiographical methods by which fourteenth-century writers could engage with the past lays the groundwork for the specific ways in which Middle English writers appropriate and re-imagine historical events. While the treatment of the Anglo-Saxon past varies in each of the three texts under present consideration, all of the texts operate within the well-defined paradigms for historical interaction as elaborated by medieval historians and historiographers. This unity of methodology among the three texts analyzed demands a generic overview of the possible ways of reading the past. However useful the following survey might prove, I do not wish to suggest that the treatment of the past in *St. Erkenwald*, *Athelston*, Chaucer's *Man of Law's Tale*, or any other fourteenth-century literary work must necessarily follow a conveniently systematic formula that can reduce these masterpieces into constituent isolated elements. General ways of interacting with the past as outlined here should be understood to be more of a guideline that demarcates and limits extremes, and one which does not necessarily seek to fix or itemize historical gazes and literary appropriations. This chapter presents a representative review of the critical literature which informs much of this thesis. The contemporary critics and historians cited here provide the theoretical framework which undergirds the remainder of the thesis, and their views of fourteenth-century historiography reveal perhaps more about the unstated intentions which underwrite almost all of the major historical writers of the fourteenth century.

Historical objectivity remains as untenable an idea in the current postmodern era as it did in the Middle Ages, and any claims towards it (either medieval or modern) should be held suspect. If one attempts an analysis of medieval literature with this idea in mind, the outcome will be a reading of fourteenth-century literature that gains in cultural understanding whatever it might otherwise lose in historical accuracy. Derek Brewer's "The Paradox of the Archaic and the Modern in *Lazamon's Brut*" explores the "traditional stories" which inform a society or culture's basic beliefs and possible world-view(s). We may learn quite a bit from medieval senses of history and the past as Brewer contends that "medieval traditional stories dealing with historical events are of special interest in literary history because they make some claim to deal with 'objective' events, and yet are so varied in telling and interpretation" (188). The medieval poet who ostensibly seeks to explore a historical event in a dispassionate manner performs two functions simultaneously, according to Brewer's model. A historical adaptation, in this system, not only represents the past in terms of the present (thus placing a cultural marker on the literary re-production of history), but it does so in a naïve manner which actually conceals the appropriation of history. In the case of the *Brut*, *Lazamon's* treatment of the material, which emphasizes the differences between past and present, re-subsumes cultural and historical difference.⁵ Medieval treatments of the past that claim accurately to represent earlier times quite strategically place contemporary ideas into the mouths of more primitive people in order to assert the universal and timeless nature of contemporary values. The past, in other words, serves the present, and the present

⁵ Brewer notes that *Lazamon* displays a well-developed sense of history as he had "a clear recognition that he was dealing with an earlier stage of history and a more primitive people than his own, to whom a more primitive presentation would be appropriate" (193)

achieves a celebration of contemporary ideas and mores via historical differentiation which marks the past as past only in order to support present concerns.

Those who would elaborate fourteenth-century values through the appropriation and control of the Anglo-Saxon past found the written word a ready source of immediate authority. Engaging with the past and using it for any purpose can lead to an impasse as soon as the writer discovers the otherness (whether linguistic, cultural, legal, etc.) of the Anglo-Saxon era.⁶ A fully-informed appropriation of history would seem to demand a solid knowledge of the differentiating markers that indicate the pastness of the past. This notion of history, however, represents a contemporary attitude that is quite unlike the medieval engagement with it.

In her book, *Ancient and Medieval Memories: Studies in the Reconstruction of the Past*, Janet Coleman emphasizes the literal-minded nature of the medieval reader, who “believed that the text itself was the self-sufficient object of inquiry and understanding” (3). Texts (both literary and historical) have timeless and universal meanings for medieval readers, in Coleman’s model, which can be assessed—presupposing a knowable world to which a reader has immediate and direct access. The *Athelston*-poet, or Chaucer in his *The Man of Law’s Tale*, according to Coleman, can discuss incidents from the Anglo-Saxon past without considering “the issue of first having to know the social and economic context of a past text as the means of gaining access to its meaning” (3). The text itself supplies the most important materials; contexts were usually patterned

⁶ Old English literally has an “othering” effect the moment one looks at it, supposing no previous familiarity with the material. Frantzen contends that readers feel this otherness, and he finds it “ironic that Anglo-Saxon culture should have come to bear this burden of otherness, since in earlier eras Anglo-Saxonists skillfully used their subject to define the characteristics unique to English civilization” (27). The dead/unreadable text both frightens the reader (who demands immediate access) and creates an opportunity for anachronistic projection which resurrects the meaning of an otherwise mysterious script.

anachronistically on contemporary medieval life. The past needed to be interpreted and made topical for contemporary affairs, and Coleman asserts that medieval readers had little interest in historical events for their own objective value. Coleman further argues that “the past was only significant with regards to interpretation, its present intelligibility” (558); thus, the past could be read in the context of the present while only being relevant to the extent that it clarified contemporary issues. In her analysis, Coleman presents a persuasive account of exactly how so many medieval authors were able to (re)write the past without agonizing over historical accuracy or what we would today term as historical research.

The Anglo-Saxons were thus poised to assist a fourteenth-century audience with discovering and constructing an authentically English identity. While Anglo-Saxonism, as defined by Frantzen and Niles is always an appropriation for the purposes of leveraging power, Robert Allen Rouse makes an important distinction by noting that the Anglo-Saxon past has a lingering presence.⁷ Anglo-Saxonism relates to power but it is, according to Rouse, “shaped not merely by the needs of the present, but also by the persistence of the past, in landscape, place-names, and folk memories” (10). The Anglo-Saxon period, in Rouse’s view, continues to haunt the fourteenth century, whether or not Middle English writers explicitly decide to invoke it for their purposes.

That the historical impulse should arrive at precisely the same time (the fourteenth century) that a desire for national or ethnic identity arose may at first appear surprising, and, indeed, these two facets of the period seem unrelated. Matthew Boyd Goldie, in his

⁷ In *Anglo-Saxonism and the Construction of Social Identity*, Allen J. Frantzen and John D. Niles define Anglo-Saxonism as “the process through which a self-conscious national and racial identity first came into being among the peoples of the region we now call England and how... that identity was transformed into an originary myth available to a wide variety of political and social interests” (1).

book *Middle English Literature: A Historical Sourcebook*, asserts that fourteenth century chroniclers, such as Ranulf Higden, who wrote during Edward III's reign displayed an increasing sense of national, "ethnic," and historical awareness (50-1). Burgeoning notions of what is English depended upon both a look backward in history (to the Anglo-Saxons, for instance) as well as a look abroad at others who are defined as "not English." Historical awareness and national identity appear to work in union, according to Goldie, as the desire for historical antecedents may arise from a desire to demarcate not only tracts of times but borders and bodies. Higden, and other chroniclers of Edward II's reign, provided John Trevisa and others with historical documents that made possible an exploration of the Anglo-Saxon past.

While the medieval conventions of historiography demanded an accessible point of cultural origination, into which fourteenth-century writers easily placed the Anglo-Saxons, the connection with the past can proceed only when writers elide the differences between the Anglo-Saxons and the fourteenth-century English. The modern scholar perhaps delights in Anglo-Saxon difference, and he or she might begin studying the Anglo-Saxons in order to appreciate and understand the differences. D. W. Robertson's *Preface to Chaucer: Studies in Medieval Perspective* has, in many ways, outlived its usefulness, and many of its conclusions are, today, deeply problematic. However, Robertson's assertion that "the literature of the past may be interesting not because it is 'modern,' but for exactly the opposite reason: because it is different" remains true and was important in combating the desire to essentialize humanity and artistic expression in such a way as to assert "timelessness" and ahistorical values abstracted from real material experience (viii). Robertson's observation, however problematic the remainder of his

book is, bespeaks an attitude towards that past that remains important today. One should observe that Robertson's introduction illustrates the vast difference between medieval and contemporary methods of reading and relating to the past.

St. Erkenwald, *Athelston*, and Chaucer's *The Man of Law's Tale*, are not primarily interested in the reproduction of a unique and other past for the specular gaze of the contemporary reader: these texts read and employ history for very specific cultural and political purposes that often require minimizing, and not augmenting, the separation between past and present. Any celebration of the pastness of the past threatens to undermine the cultural project of elaborating English identity and tradition; if writers genuinely represent the Anglo-Saxon past as profoundly other the widening gap between past and present will consume the constructed notion of fourteenth-century Englishness at its point of origin.⁸

Fourteenth-century theories of historiography and historical interaction reveal much about the potential uses of the Anglo-Saxons as a theoretical object, but reviewing the stated methods of medieval readers and writers illumines only a portion of this study. Contemporary theorists and critics have reshaped our understanding of the medieval notions of the past, and their penetrating analyses have revealed many of the concealed ideological bases that inform fourteenth-century historical appropriations of the Anglo-Saxons. While the desire to manage the Anglo-Saxons as a symbolic object has political and nationalistic dimensions, Mark Amodio notes that a certain amount of historical nostalgia occurred subtly over a considerable period of time. Middle English poetry, like

⁸ None of the three major works which I consider genuinely portray the Anglo-Saxons as profoundly other. Even Chaucer, whose representation of the Anglo-Saxons has perhaps the greatest potential for cultural alienation, transforms the Anglo-Saxons from absolute other into a domestic/known other.

Middle English identity, is fragmented, and certain strands of the Middle English tradition trace back to Old English oral poetry, but only in a complex way, as other influences (continental, for example) modified the native tradition. The Old English oral tradition decayed and gave way to literate habits organically, before the Norman Invasion, according to Amodio (80-82). We should thus resist the tendency to mark Old English as primarily oral and Middle English as primarily written, as exchanges between the two forms of expression are impossible to separate in an unproblematic manner. The lingering linguistic presence (or trace, more probably) of Old English within Middle English must have made a glance backwards towards the Anglo-Saxons somewhat natural and unconscious. Amodio's discussion of the oral/literate divide quite conveniently emblemizes the divide between Old/Middle English, to a certain extent. While the Middle English language, and identity, contains persistent traces of the Old English language and Anglo-Saxon culture, it appears that the remaining residue of the Anglo-Saxons prompted the desire for a historical gaze back in time.

In an article that predates Amodio's book, James Campbell traverses much of the same terrain mapped by Amodio. Campbell's "Some Twelfth-Century Views of the Anglo-Saxon Past" views twelfth-century historical interests in the Anglo-Saxon past as arising from both an interest, on the part of remaining Anglo-Saxon monks, in their own past traditions (which appeared threatened by Norman clerics), and from a desire for historical writing in a more general sense. Twelfth-century historians invoked Sallust, Horace, and Cicero, and wanted to create an English tradition of historiography modeled on the Roman model; such a project necessarily involved an investigation of the Anglo-Saxons, according to Campbell (133-4). Campbell primarily notes the political and

religious implications of elevating certain Anglo-Saxon models above Norman ones. Various kings and clerics throughout the twelfth century chose particular Anglo-Saxons as paradigmatic figures imbued with symbolic importance. While this article presents many useful historical examples, Campbell's work is often impeded by emphasizing the "combative" and mutually exclusive nature of historiography which necessarily constructs Anglo-Saxons against Normans. Other more recent works have elaborated upon the continuity and cultural syncretism which has replaced Campbell's (and others') competitive model. However, Campbell's article does highlight a facet which Amodio's book seems to (perhaps unwittingly) conceal, namely, that the "natural" desire of the remaining post-Conquest Anglo-Saxons to appropriate the pre-Conquest Anglo-Saxons either began with tacit political motives from the onset or elaborated them in the process of glorifying the lost past. In all instances of historical appropriation, failure to note the practical purposes informing such moves may result in the continued obscurity of the ideology informing the transformation of history into literature.

As Campbell's article demonstrates, twelfth-century literature that takes the Anglo-Saxons as its subject matter can inform, in a general way, the possible motives behind invoking the Anglo-Saxons in the fourteenth century. While the volume edited by Swan and Treharne focuses specifically upon the rewriting of Old English in the twelfth century (and is thus somewhat outside the purview of this study), their volume importantly illustrates the lingering presence of Old English literature in post-Conquest England. The survival of remediated Old English texts copied in the twelfth century leads one to believe that there was an audience interested in Old English writings but Swan and Treharne concede that the question remains regarding "for what purposes Old English

might have been copied in the twelfth century, and for what audience” (4). Further research may determine who commissioned the copying of Old English texts, but, according to Swan and Treharne, the existence of these texts gives some insight into twelfth-century views of cultural transmission and the “manuscript culture where texts are made and remade as they are read or heard and rewritten” (7). The “interactive” nature, as described by Swan and Treharne, of these twelfth century manuscripts illuminates the complex ways in which medieval readers and writers engaged with their own past, even remaking it in the process.

The concept of the interactive nature of historical and literary productions bears significantly on this present analysis. The interactive medieval text, described by Swan and Treharne, owes much to Julia Kristeva’s theory of intertextuality. Kristeva’s intertextuality fits comfortably into any discussion of medieval habits of reading and hermeneutics, as medieval readers, when able, always availed themselves of numerous classical, Biblical, and interdisciplinary intertexts which informed their primary text under analysis. David Macey, in his *Dictionary of Critical Theory*, defines intertextuality as:

[The theory that] any text is essentially a mosaic of references to or quotations from other texts; a text is not a closed system and does not exist in isolation. It is always involved in a dialogue with other texts. Intertextuality is not simply a matter of influences which pass from one author to another, but of the multiple and complex relations that exist between texts in both synchronic and diachronic terms. (203-4)

Kristeva's theory, generally, and as it is specifically applied by Swan and Treharne provides a crucial context for understanding the fourteenth century's relationship to the Anglo-Saxon past. The issue of "influence," within Kristeva's framework, is never straightforward and never easy to trace. Indeed, the question of determining a fixed origin of which interpretations and appropriations are merely an iteration contains a basic flaw, as it fails to grasp the interlacing mosaic of history/literature, reader/writer, and even Anglo-Saxon/Norman.

If the Norman Invasion, and the markedly different culture that accompanied it, othered the Anglo-Saxons, the project remained an incomplete one.⁹ The Anglo-Saxon identity, however strange and other it must have appeared by the fourteenth century, was nevertheless insolubly bound-up with a burgeoning notion of Englishness. England itself was invoked as a unifying symbol, according to Catherine Clarke in *Literary Landscapes and the Idea of England, 700-1400*. Of particular interest are the ways in which an essentialized and idealized England stands to unify disparate historical periods, as Clarke argues for English men and women in Shakespeare's time looking back toward the Middle English period, which itself looked back toward Anglo-Saxon England.¹⁰ While language, political habits, religion, and other important elements of daily life changed greatly over this period, the notion of the stability of England (as an island kingdom) and its unified borders served as a controlling metaphor which supported the myth of

⁹ See M. T. Clanchy's *From Memory to Written Record: England, 1066-1307*. Clanchy contends that William the Conqueror was associated "with the emperors of antiquity and [the] bringing [of] England into the international fraternity of jurisprudence" and thus the Anglo-Saxon elites whom he deposed represented a markedly different tradition (11).

¹⁰ Clarke's inclusion of Shakespeare and Elizabethan England, along with her analysis of the idea of England as a controlling image in the nineteenth century and the colonial era, marks her text as one which traces many of the ideas of this thesis well into historical periods beyond the present investigation.

continuity which rises above (and obscures, ultimately) all differences of time and circumstance. The multiple contemporary analyses of the appropriation and interaction with the past, as a defined category, provide an important context which reveals the more tacit and often concealed ideological reasons for invoking the Anglo-Saxons as an idea in the fourteenth-century. In the following chapters, I specifically explore the portrayal of the Anglo-Saxons, and their cultural leverage, in the three texts (*St. Erkenwald*, *Athleston*, and Chaucer's *The Man of Law's Tale*) which will occupy the remainder of this thesis.

Chapter Three
The Mirror and Infinite Regression in *St. Erkenwald*:
The Fourteenth Century meets the Anglo-Saxons meeting the Celts

The anonymous fourteenth-century poem *St. Erkenwald* has been rather neglected by critics. Scholars who have investigated critical issues germane to the poem have generally entered into debates about the authorship of the poem (most notably, the intriguing possibility that it might have been authored by the *Pearl*-poet), or its relationship to other hagiographical literature and saints' *vitae*.¹¹ Despite the relative neglect of the poem's relationship to the Celtic and Anglo-Saxon past, a few scholars have treated this feature, and this thesis builds upon their initiatory efforts. *St. Erkenwald* offers a unique opportunity for those interested in the ways of relating to the past that were available to fourteenth-century readers and writers. The poem's protagonist literally gains direct, unmediated contact with the past via a discussion with a reanimated corpse, and *St. Erkenwald*, in this sense, provides one with a case study of fourteenth-century interaction with the Celtic and Anglo-Saxon past. However, *St. Erkenwald* further presents itself as a poem about historical interaction and relating to the past in a more general way, as the specific actions of *St. Erkenwald* radiate outwards to encompass a much larger examination about the past, its significance, and its possible uses. The entire project of salvaging the pagan Celtic past occurs via a posthumous baptism, administered

¹¹ Malcolm Andrew, Ronald Waldron, and Clifford Peterson, in their edition entitled *The Complete Works of the Pearl Poet*, group *St. Erkenwald* with the other generally accepted texts attributed to the *Pearl*-poet (*Pearl*, *Cleanliness*, *Patience*, and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*) without much consideration over the controversy of anthologizing *St. Erkenwald* as unquestionably a text written by the *Pearl*-poet.

by St. Erkenwald. After hearing the life-story of the pagan judge, St. Erkenwald compassionately calls out to God:

“Oure Lord lene,” quoth þat lede, “þat þou lyfe hades,
By Goddes leue, as longe as I myzt lacche water
And cast vpon þi faire cors and carpe þes wordes,
‘I folwe þe in þe Fader nome and His fre Childes,
And of þe gracious Holy Goste’ and not one grue lenger;
þen þof þou droppyd doun dede hit daungerde me lasse.” (315-20).¹²

Within the poem itself, St. Erkenwald (an Anglo-Saxon) confronts his nation’s own Celtic past; outside of the poem’s frame, an imagined fourteenth-century reader encounters the Anglo-Saxons as they meet the Celts, while the twenty-first century reader comes to the poem with yet another historical level of remove. The many layers of interpretation which *St. Erkenwald* both contains and invites make it a particularly relevant beginning point from which to investigate the fourteenth century’s relationship with the Anglo-Saxon past. This chapter asserts that the specific interactions between Celtic past and Anglo-Saxon present within *St. Erkenwald* emblemizes the historical gaze of the fourteenth-century writer more generally. One could take this assertion to its logical conclusion, and posit *St. Erkenwald* as an allegorical interaction between past and present (in which, the different historical moments are represented by St. Erkenwald and the talking corpse). Although this thesis does not make such an imaginative leap, the

¹² “May Our Lord himself,” said that man “grant that you have life just long enough (and not one moment longer) for me to reach water and cast it upon your beautiful corpse and speak these words: ‘I baptize you in the name of the Father, his noble child, and the gracious Holy Ghost’; then even if you dropped down dead, it would concern me little.”

individual interactions between the characters within *St. Erkenwald* should always, I contend, suggest the larger questions informing historical imagination and literary appropriation.

The several layers of historical interaction, as posited by Monika Otter, serve as a useful framework for the present discussion. Medieval historical understanding “was not, in the modern sense, an interest in the past for its own sake” and this thesis’s previous analysis of the appropriation of the past should make this point quite clear (Coleman qtd. in Otter 388). The past was to be studied primarily for appropriation, but historical continuity versus discontinuity are not mutually exclusive; rather, they lie on a continuum in which “an awareness of historical continuity always presupposes an awareness of discontinuity, and vice versa” (Otter 390). *St. Erkenwald* acts as an ideal specimen text as it “imagines, quite explicitly, a face-to-face encounter of the ‘present’ and the ‘past,’ a literal dialogue between them” (Otter 391). In the opening lines of the poem, the imagined fourteenth-century reader (or auditor) experiences an immediate estrangement upon hearing that *St. Erkenwald* takes as its subject the Anglo-Saxon bishop who lives “At London in Englonde noȝt fulle longe sythen— / Sythen Crist suffride on crosse and Cristendome stablyde” (1-2).¹³ *Erkenwald*’s proximity to the origins of Christianity and, more specifically, to its arrival to Britain, also recalls a fact that must have surely been an embarrassment to the poet’s fourteenth-century audience: namely, the persecution of the Christian Britons by the initially pagan Anglo-Saxons. The poet anticipates this unpleasant historical incident—which uncomfortably places his Anglo-Saxon ancestors as persecutors of Christians—and he effectively recalls the event early in the poem, so

¹³ “In London, in England, not very long since Christ suffered on the cross and established Christendom.”

that the entire matter might comfortably recede into the poem's background. One might wonder, then, how exactly a fourteenth-century audience would have been expected to relate to their Anglo-Saxon forebears, whom the poet casts as barbarous and perhaps unrecognizable for a fourteenth-century audience. The Anglo-Saxons of "Hengyst[']s dawes" (7) are described as the group that:

Bete oute þe Bretons and broȝt hom into Wales
And peruertyd alle þe pepul þat in þat place dwellide.
Pen wos this reame renaide mony ronke ȝeres
Til Saynt Austyn into Sandewiche was sende fro þe pope;
Pen prechyd he here þe pure faith faythe and plantyd þe trouthe
And conuertyd alle þe communnates to Cristendame newe. (9-14).¹⁴

While the opening lines of the poem remain historically accurate, the pagan Anglo-Saxons, imagined here as marauding murderers of the Christian Britons, provide the poet with a point of cultural origin that must have proved difficult for fourteenth-century Christians to imagine. With the unpleasant details of the pagan Anglo-Saxons still at the forefront of the reader's mind, the poet proceeds to turn rather quickly to the coming of St. Augustine of Canterbury, and the second arrival of Christianity in England. The "ronke ȝeres" (11) only momentarily cast the Anglo-Saxons as the problematic progenitors of the English people, as the poet in the next line recalls the arrival of "Saynt Austyn into Sandewiche" (12).

¹⁴ "beat out the Britons and brought them into Wales, and perverted all the people that dwelled in that place. Then was this realm renounced for many violent years, until St. Augustine was sent, from the pope, to Sandwich; then he preached the pure faith here and planted the truth, and he converted all the people to Christianity again."

The poet partly accomplishes his goal of making the Anglo-Saxons into acceptable ancestors through a violent suppression of the strange and uncanny nature of the pagan Anglo-Saxons.¹⁵ Although suppression and a desire to “pass over” the more uncomfortable chapters of English history help the poet in his goal of reclaiming the Anglo-Saxons, his fully formed sense of history, as John Burrow terms it, helps the poet create a rather important and nuanced distinction. Burrow also notes a highly developed sense of historical verisimilitude that marks this poem as complex. The poet clearly distinguishes between the Anglo-Saxons and the Celtic Britons, two peoples prior to the poet himself, whom he has amazingly managed not to conflate (Burrow 122). The *Erkenwald*-poet genuinely attempts to present the different cultures and moments in time in a complex way, and his distinctions between, for instance, the Anglo-Saxons both before and after their conversion to Christianity assist in making the Anglo-Saxons a people whom a fourteenth-century audience could easily recognize as English. With this important distinction in place, the *Erkenwald*-poet can comfortably cast the Christian Anglo-Saxons as his cultural and spiritual predecessors. The Christian Anglo-Saxons are presented as a people with very little in common with the pagan Anglo-Saxons, and the Christian Anglo-Saxons emerge as an originary point for identity formation without the undue complication that would otherwise arise from a fully detailed discussion of any pagan inheritances that must have assuredly lingered. Vestiges of paganism that might taint the newly Christianized Anglo-Saxons are summarily dismissed by the poet, and he

¹⁵ I employ the term uncanny (*unheimlich* in German) as elaborated by Freud in his famous essay on the uncanny in literature. The reader senses the presence of the uncanny when the familiar and the unfamiliar uncomfortably merge, producing an encounter that is both like and unlike ordinary life, and thus deeply disturbing.

imagines the cultural and religious change as occurring in a simple manner, not unlike his account of the rededication of the pagan temples to Christ:

He turnyd temples þat tyme þat temyd to þe deuelle

And clansyd hom in Cristes nome and kyrkes hom called;

He hurlyd owt hor ydols and hade hym in sayntes

And chaungit cheuely hor nomes and chargit hom better. (15-18).¹⁶

While the modern reader might detect a bit of irony (noting, perhaps, the syncretism and relative ease with which such a profound religious conversion was seemingly accepted by the great majority of Anglo-Saxons), the poet presents a straightforward conversion that completely, if too easily, alters the religious and cultural character of the previously pagan Anglo-Saxons. Monika Otter similarly observes that the scene in which the temple of the pagan gods is rededicated to the Christian God “on the one hand... asserts a radical change from paganism to Christianity; on the other hand, it asserts material continuity from one state to the other” (407). However, the alternative would create an untenable situation for the *Erkenwald*-poet, as he claims that the pagan Anglo-Saxons worshipped, in addition to “þe deuelle” (15), “Mahoun” (Mohammed) (20), and “Jubiter and Jono” (22). Another reference refers, in a rather bafflingly way, to “þe synagoge of þe Sonne,” (21) which seems to confuse Judaism and animist pagan beliefs.¹⁷ Confronted with ancestors who seemingly share the conflated characteristics of Jews, Muslims, animists, Satanists, and pagans, the distinction and ultimate recuperation of the Anglo-Saxons

¹⁶ “He [St. Augustine] changed temples that had belonged to the devil, and cleansed them in Christ’s name, and called them churches; he hurled out idols and brought in saints, and quickly changed their names and instructed them better.”

¹⁷ “The synagogue of the Sun.”

presents itself as an urgent cultural project that the *Erkenwald*-poet must undertake to redeem his Anglo-Saxon ancestors.

The animated talking corpse, for which *St. Erkenwald* is perhaps best remembered, would seem to bear little relevance to the present discussion centered upon historical imagination and a desire for cultural origins and originary myths. Indeed, the uncanny corpse, miraculously preserved and animated, discloses this poem's connection with the genre of the saint's *vita*, generally, and more specifically, with poems that seek to redeem the "virtuous pagans" who, unfortunately through no fault of their own, were unable to accept the salvation of Christ. As this aspect of the poem appears most predominant, it remains unsurprising that most of the critical literature has tended to concentrate on *St. Erkenwald*'s affinities with other hagiographical literature. However, I argue, as a relatively small number of critics have, that the speaking corpse serves as an emblem for historical inquiry and a desire to know one's ancestors in a direct, unmediated way. The interactions with the miraculous corpse symbolize, according to John Longo, the "medieval historiographical tradition" with which the poem concerns itself (36). However, the Anglo-Saxons in *St. Erkenwald* engage problematically with the past of the Celtic Britons (as told by the speaking corpse) even as the fourteenth-century readers of *St. Erkenwald* engaged in a complicated relationship with both Anglo-Saxon and Celtic forebears mentioned in the poem. The Anglo-Saxons in the poem who delve under the old temple are, according to Longo, "unwittingly involved in an archaeological as well as a spiritual and political enterprise. Their effort brings them face to face with a forgotten pre-Saxon past literally embodied in the pagan judge" (41). *St. Erkenwald* playfully manipulates the *inventiones* genre, in which a saint's relics are found; although

something is found here (a body, although not a saint's body) what is actually "unearthed" is the past itself, and the poem's archaeological features (as Monika Otter sees them) deal with how to relate to the past in a complex way.

The miraculous speaking corpse acts as very basic wish fulfillment, as the imagined encounter allows St. Erkenwald (and the fourteenth-century readers of *St. Erkenwald*) to converse with the past, emblemized here by the corpse. Not only does the poet present the fantasy of speaking with the past, he furthermore presents an accessible past that can be understood directly (the differences of speech that would naturally have existed between the Briton's Celtic language and the St. Erkenwald's Old English language are never considered). The failure of the poet to represent the diversity of language seems at odds with his otherwise nuanced presentation of the past, but it might ultimately reflect his move towards expediency (previously noted in his desire to quickly transform pagans into Christians) in the names of myths of cultural continuity, as well as lingering elements from the saint's *vita* genre such as the presence of *xenoglossia*.¹⁸ Whatever the impetus, the *Erkenwald*-poet clearly presents his poem as one that demonstrates cultural identity and a variety of possible ways of relating to the past. The poet achieves a reconstruction of the Anglo-Saxon past that, though usually recognizable and domesticated, occasionally betrays the trace of difference which always threatens to potentially alienate the poet and his fourteenth-century audience from their desired contact with their Anglo-Saxon ancestors. *St. Erkenwald* thus presents a vision of the Anglo-Saxons that both reproduces them for a fourteenth-century audience even as it salvages both that past from the deleterious influence of the pagan origin of the Anglo-

¹⁸ "the practice or faculty of using intelligibly a language one has not learnt" ("xenoglossia").

Saxons, and by extension, the fourteenth-century English men and women who might have read or heard the poem performed.

Chapter Four: *Athelston*, Athelstan, and the Profitable Appropriation of the Past

Nebulous concepts such as historical imagination, and a general desire to reclaim the past from its more unsavory aspects mark *St. Erkenwald*'s relationship with the Anglo-Saxon past as anything but straightforward. In contrast to this complicated relationship, a number of seemingly uncomplicated (and calculated) objectives inform the anonymous *Athelston*-poet's designs for appropriating Anglo-Saxon history. Many scholars have, to date, noted the eminently practical purposes that made *Athelston* an important cultural link between the fourteenth century and the Anglo-Saxons. Recent criticism has generally focused upon the importance of the poem for the burgeoning notion of English law (which sought, not unlike the later English Reformation, organic English traditions originating during the Anglo-Saxon era), and a few critics have also applied feminist readings to the poem, in order to elucidate the situation of both Anglo-Saxon and fourteenth-century women.¹⁹

English exceptionality emerges via comparison with French legal practices, and the kinds of law (English and French) are emblemized by the views espoused by the archbishop and Athelston, respectively (Young 96). The *Athelston*-poet invokes Anglo-Saxon England in order to propagate a myth of continuity, "a sense of unbroken English history, from Anglo-Saxon times to the fourteenth century" that becomes essential in distinguishing England's unique virtues from those of France (Young 96). Although it

¹⁹ James Campbell, in *The Anglo-Saxons*, notes that rule by reason and wise advisors was imagined to exist in the Anglo-Saxon era, and Alfred himself emblemized the variety of good government that was, at times in the fourteenth century, lacking (241).

remains impossible to know exactly what currency the name of Athelstan carried for fourteenth-century audiences, his name “would... have suggested a king who was pious, victorious and English” (Young 98).

While some scholars have remarked on the poem’s more generalized concern for the Anglo-Saxon past, this aspect of the poem has been often overlooked—though, as I will note, a few important initiatory statements have appeared in recent years. *Athelston* was imbued with many important meanings for its original fourteenth-century audience, and thus its setting in distant Anglo-Saxon England allows the author to implicitly comment on Edward III and Richard II who were “determined to increase their monarchical powers at the expense of the nobility” (Treharne 505). The *Athelston*-poet, like many other writers in the Middle Ages, makes no particular attempt at historical accuracy, and instead projects contemporary concerns onto a past that requires the explication of a fourteenth-century writer to glean moral insights. When compared to Monika Otter’s reading of *St. Erkenwald*, which notes at least an emerging interest in the “archaeological” features of that poem, this thesis’s reading of *Athelston* demonstrates that its primary concern remains fourteenth-century England; in this reading, the Anglo-Saxon past merely provides a means through which to discuss contemporary affairs.

If one develops the notion of the Anglo-Saxon settings as a façade which concealed contemporary debates, then a reading which highlights the poem’s strategic setting can illuminate many of these previously hidden concerns. The Anglo-Saxon setting may serve as a subtle method of discussing issues related to women’s “social agency... between 1370 and 1400,” because, if *Athelston* is truly about the past, such discussion would in no way interrogate contemporary fourteenth-century gender norms

(Bradbury 149). The notorious kick, by which Athelston kills his unborn child, represents fourteenth-century abuses of royal power, and again, such issues become safe to analyze if they are comfortably consigned to the “barbarous” past. Both the Anglo-Saxon context and the queen herself matter less, according to Bradbury, as the romance primarily concerns itself with “not only... the interests of particular individuals, but also... judicious action, open consultation, and the rule of law” (155). The Anglo-Saxon past here allows for a safe place in which to debate issues of gender and monarchical power.

If Anglo-Saxon England was imagined as the “Golden Age of law and justice,” then it seems fitting that *Athelston* would be “highly concerned with legal issues” (Rouse 99). The Anglo-Saxon period serves as a theoretical framework in which to discuss rather complex contemporary issues:

The construction of the Anglo-Saxon past as a legal golden age... presents us with a method of approaching the representation of Anglo-Saxon England as a cultural space in which contemporary legal concerns could be articulated during the later Middle Ages. (Rouse 130).

The imagined importance of Parliament and good government also serve to contrast, in the mind of the *Athelston*-poet, with the perceived abuses in his own era. As previously noted, the Anglo-Saxon setting of *Athelston* might always have been a mere façade, as “*Athelston* is clearly set in Anglo-Saxon England, albeit an Anglo-Saxon England that is culturally and geographically continuous with the fourteenth-century England of the text’s audience” (Rouse 132). A modicum of vacillation occurs as the Anglo-Saxon England portrayed in the poem is simultaneously like and unlike fourteenth-century England. The past is imagined and idealized, but this fabulation is based upon historical

precedent and folk-memory (Rouse 132). The “process of ‘remembering’ Anglo-Saxon England” importantly “combines varying degrees of memory and imagination” in order to legitimate post-conquest power within a meta-narrative of continuity between past and present (Rouse 133).

Discussions that relate to *Athelston*’s supposed importance for English law hint at the more generalized and theoretical importance of Anglo-Saxon England for the fourteenth century that this thesis seeks to emphasize. The treatment of historical material provides an opportunity for Middle English writers to adapt and manipulate the historical records (or imaginatively fill in the many historical gaps in the records). Davenport observes of *Athelston* that:

loose reference to the pre-Conquest history of the reign of Athelstan (924-32) and the life of St. Edmund has been fused with allusion to the post-Conquest confrontation between Beckett and Henry II within folklore motifs of sworn brotherhood and trial by ordeal; the recoverable history is a matter of disjointed pieces rather than a coherent sequence. (27)

A good deal of conflation occurred, especially as “Post-Conquest romance tends to lump together British and English history or to fail to make distinctions” (Davenport 39).²⁰ History often provides the impetus for exploring a particular topic, but many romances (*Athelston* included) do not deal seriously enough with English history to support the continued use of the “Matter of England” label.

²⁰ Davenport’s analysis of the tendency to “lump together British and English history” is seemingly at odds with John Burrow’s emphasis upon the *Erkenwald*-poet’s sense of history, but this apparent discrepancy reveals more about the specific differences that exist in the ways that the *Erkenwald*-poet and *Athelston*-poet handle historical material. In this sense, neither Davenport nor Burrow necessarily enunciates a totalizing account of medieval historiography or historical imagination.

Of course, the presence of the historical Athelstan lingers somewhere just beneath the veneer of the poem, though, given the *Athelston*-poet's imaginative transformation of the historical record, an accurate understanding of the historical personage can only reveal so much. The Athelstan of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* is a decidedly heroic figure displaying the familiar warrior ethos of the Anglo-Saxon era, and his portrayal is, in other words, quite divergent from what is presented in the Middle English *Athelston* (O'Brien O'Keeffe 109). Barely recognizable as a warrior in the tradition of *Beowulf*, the image of Athelstan (distinct from both the historical Athelstan and the celebrated portrait of Athelstan, the *Chronicle* "character") in *Athelston* is entirely changed by the fourteenth-century political context. Athelston must navigate the dangerous world of political intrigue and legal statutes, which contrasts greatly with both the Anglo-Saxon historical figure and the romanticized figure of the *Chronicle*. Athelston is alternately more "refined" than the *Chronicle* Athelstan because of his involvement in the complex workings of Parliament and fourteenth-century legal codes and more barbaric (because of his act of infanticide) than the actual Anglo-Saxon king. After Athelston's queen implores him to temper justice with mercy, he violently reprimands her by saying:

"A, dame," he sayde, "verrayment

Hast thou broke my commaundement

Abydd ful dere thou schalle."

With hys foot—he would not wonde—

He slowgh the chyld ryght in her wombe;

She swowynd amonges hem alle. (279-84).

This violent presentation certainly distanced fourteenth-century readers and auditors from their Anglo-Saxon forebears, and such gratuitous displays of violence complicate the entire project of cultural continuity across the rift opened by the Norman Conquest.

The general importance of *Athelston* for the fourteenth century is worthy of analysis, as is revealing (as much as possible) the real Athelstan of history, but it might be more profitable to observe the way in which the “Athelston matter” actually receives a romanticized treatment by the poet. Through an analysis of the historical records and the legendary material that had coalesced around Athelstan by the fourteenth century, Treharne argues that the *Athelston*-poet achieves a degree of verisimilitude by choosing real characters and events (instead of the more fantastical characters who appear in other romances) that serves to lend realism in order to strengthen the didactic impact of the poem. *Athelston* does not overly praise the Anglo-Saxon king, or set him apart as a superlative moral exemplar; rather, “he [the poet] demonstrates through his protagonist the human fallibility of the divinely appointed ruler” (Treharne 2). While Athelston himself may be flawed, the poet finds the Anglo-Saxon era (or, more properly, Anglo-Saxon England as he has constructed it in the poem) as morally superior and guided by good governance in which the Church and the state rule harmoniously over the English people. The early histories of the historical Athelstan noted his piety, his warrior ethics, and his importance in English legal history. The mixture of historically accurate material with more legendary matter makes “[t]he poem... then, a fictional and medievalized portrayal of an Anglo-Saxon king famed for his justice and dedication to the Church” (Treharne 12). I contend that the barbarism of Athelston, particularly in the murder of his unborn child in the womb, serves to distance fourteenth-century readers thereby making

the intended didactic message of the poem more difficult to comprehend. This feature of the poem, along with the Anglo-Saxon names is “archaicizing,” to borrow Treharne’s term (14). While the poet does not attempt complete historical objectivity “the inclusion of Anglo-Saxon judicial and cultural features which are semi-legendary, however, appears to be an attempt to impart authenticity to the text,” and such authenticity seeks to make a connection between past and present more tenable (Treharne 15). *Athelston* might contain many possible references to the tyranny of Richard II, but:

It seems more likely that *Athelston* is a narrative, not about one king in particular, but about kingship in general, its nature and operation. In this context the poet’s choice of the Anglo-Saxon Athelstan, a legendary king of piety, justice, and authority, is important. The poem then, positively encourages the audience to look back to days of a perceptibly more successful monarchy, one which worked closely with the Church to legislate a divinely inspired judicial system, and one which could be regarded as spiritually superior to later medieval successors. (Treharne 20).

Anglo-Saxon England and its system of laws figure as a moral icon, but the more distancing features of the poem (the strangeness of the names, the ordeal by fire, and the barbarity of the king) makes such a connection with the past more problematic.

To date, critics have yet to note the way in which the estranging qualities of *Athelston* (as noted above) seriously undermine the cultural project which connects the fourteenth century with the Anglo-Saxon period for a myriad of purposes, including the observable goal of locating legal precedents in the Anglo-Saxon period, and the more intangible desire of identifying with the past in order to establish a sense of seamless

continuity (the stated objective, in my reading, of the *Erkenwald*-poet). These “othering” aspects of the poem remain dormant, and they lurk just beneath the ostensibly unified front of the poem’s orthodox’s agenda, just as they do in *St. Erkenwald*. The excavation of the uncanny becomes even more pronounced in Chaucer’s *The Man of Law’s Tale*, perhaps the most convincing appropriation of the Anglo-Saxon heritage in Middle English literature, and one which simultaneously unearths and re-subsumes the strange qualities of the Chaucer’s ancestors.

Chapter Five: Chaucer and the Anglo-Saxons: *The Man of Law's Tale*,
Estrangement, and Disconcerting Myths of Continuity

Chaucer's *The Man of Law's Tale* has often been read as an uncomplicated (if imaginative) narrative that presents an alternative account of the Christianization of the Anglo-Saxons. In place of the traditional narrative as presented in Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum*, Chaucer offers a tale in which an exiled woman is responsible for the reintroduction of Christianity to England. Bede recounts that:

Gregory, prompted by divine inspiration, sent a servant of God named Augustine and several more God-fearing monks with him to preach the word of God to the English race. (37).

The official account offered by Bede differs markedly from Chaucer's imaginative narrative, which envisions Custance's rudderless boat being miraculously guided by God, from Syria to England. While the work of God clearly informs both Bede's and Chaucer's conception of the conversion of the English people, Chaucer's consistent interest in human characters and personal trials persuade him to provide a lively and exciting account that differs from Bede's more dispassionate account in which only the will of God matters, and not the particulars which make *The Man of Law's Tale* especially dramatic. I follow Chaucer's lead in focusing heavily upon Custance, because it is through her that Chaucer connects with his often unfamiliar ancestors. Custance comes from Italy, and her Romance language and Catholicism must surely have seemed more familiar than the strange language and pagan beliefs of the pre-Christian Anglo-Saxons. Custance eventually achieves what Chaucer himself desires throughout the tale: a

union of the two different, and, at times, opposed cultures. Custance remains Roman and Catholic, and becomes, through marriage, English. If Chaucer cannot wholly redeem his pagan forebears, he can at least improve their lot by an imaginative encounter which allows the Anglo-Saxons direct access to Christianity and Latin culture.

Custance has garnered much critical attention, as both the vessel of Christian teaching (in more traditional scholarship) and as a woman who escapes from her fiancé and his murderous mother. Syria, the place from which Custance embarks, has also received critical attention, as Custance's initial trip to Syria presents a confrontation between the Christian West and Muslim East. Over the past twenty to thirty years, scholarship has generally centered upon *The Man of Law's Tale* and its relation to discourses of gender, Orientalism, and profitable combinations of the two. Custance, a Christian woman, and the Sowdanesse, a Muslim woman, have provided a critical impetus for investigating the way in which religion, culture, and gender interact with one another. The Sowdanesse, who is harshly described as the "roote of iniquitee! / Virago, thou Semyrane the secounde! / O serpent under femynynytee" (358-60), seemingly embodies the Man of Law's conflated fears of both non-Christian others and "mannish" women who usurp male prerogatives.

The criticism which has elucidated the complicated workings of Orientalism and gender concerns has provided new insights into Chaucer's tale; however, despite all of the informative scholarship that has appeared on *The Man of Law's Tale* in recent years, relatively few critical statements have dealt with the often overlooked, marginalized others who, in many ways, form the mirror-image of the Muslim Syrians: the pagan Anglo-Saxons. If, as Nicholas Burns suggests, pagan Anglo-Saxon England and Muslim

Syria present the reader with “paired marginalities,” then one cannot ignore the function of the second group of others whom Chaucer presents (20). Of course, that these others (whom Burns pairs with the Muslim Syrians) are the Anglo-Saxons, Chaucer’s ancestors, obviously presents an uncomfortable encounter with the otherness of England’s past. Custance’s most quoted histrionic display, uttered in the presence of her father, that laments “Allas, unto the Barbre nacioun / I moste anoon, syn that is youre wille” (281-2) has usually received attention from critics for the way in which it casts Custance’s feminine inferiority in decidedly Christian terms. However, while the “barbre nacioun” imagined here is literally Syria, the image foreshadows Custance’s arrival on the Northumbrian shore, in an England that she finds strange and as unlike her home in Rome as Syria. Chaucer never explicitly connects England with the previously mentioned “barbre nacioun” of Syria, but the pairing of the two locales in this tale signals a, perhaps unconscious, uneasiness about attempting to relate to his pagan forebears. How exactly can the Christian, civilized fourteenth-century England which Chaucer knew have originated from such an unpromising beginning? Chaucer must, as a matter of historical accuracy, cast his ancestors as the persecutors of Britain’s original Celtic Christian population, those

Cristen folk been fled from that contree
 Thurgh payens, that conquereden al aboute
 The plages of the north, by land and see.
 To Walys fledde the Cristyantee
 Of olde Britons dwellynge in this ille” (541-5).

Chaucer's simultaneous interest in and repulsion from the Anglo-Saxons makes any investigation of this occasionally omitted aspect of *The Man of Law's Tale* complex.

While scholars have generally eschewed analysis of the Anglo-Saxons for other salient elements of the tale (as noted previously), some have begun investigating Chaucer's relationship with English traditions, generally, and with the Anglo-Saxon past, specifically. One of Chaucer's most obvious and most noted references to native English traditions, *The Tale of Sir Thopas*, parodies English romances (like *Athelston*) in a rather unflattering manner.²¹ Scholars have long assumed that *Sir Thopas* exemplified Chaucer's aversion towards popular romance, but Nancy Mason Bradbury notes a number of similar phrases and devices in *Troilus and Criseyde*, a work usually cited as one of Chaucer's finest achievements. *Sir Thopas* cannot simply condemn the English romances wholesale because of the *Thopas*-like elements in *Troilus*, according to Bradbury. Chaucer related in a more complex manner to the native English traditions, and Bradbury ultimately concludes that Chaucer parodies the more extreme abuses of tail-rhyme romance, instead of dismissing the genre entirely. This modified embrace of the genre points to Chaucer's inclusion of native English traditions, as Bradbury observes that "English metrical romance had something to offer Chaucer that continental works could not" (123-4).

If one begins to read *The Canterbury Tales* on a symbolic level, then ostensibly historical material transforms from dispassionate accounts into a lively dialogue between past and present. Edward Condren effectively casts *The Canterbury Tales* as not so much

²¹ For a more complete account of *The Tale of Sir Thopas*, and its jaunty tale-rhymes, clichéd images, and "metrical peculiarity," consult the explanatory notes to *Sir Thopas* as presented in Larry Benson's *The Riverside Chaucer* (917-23).

a series of tales as an occasion for disparate discussions regarding nearly everything in the world from a fourteenth-century perspective (3-4).²² By the time of *The Man of Law's Tale*, Condren suggests that Chaucer has allowed his pilgrims to get away from him, as the pilgrims and their characters move closer towards symbolism and allegory (64). Custance's importance for history itself (at least for historiography and a sense of the past) bears importantly on this thesis, as her presence allows for immediate/unmediated access to the Anglo-Saxon past which Chaucer hopes to connect with symbolically via her.

Custance herself becomes Chaucer's means by which to contact the Anglo-Saxons. However, if Chaucer were to have consulted the *Beowulf*-manuscript (in a highly imaginative scenario) he would probably have been unable to read it; this, undoubtedly, would have reasserted the unwieldy gap between the Anglo-Saxons and the fourteenth-century audience that Chaucer desires to traverse. This distance, symbolized in the above example by the unreadable text, presents no particular problem for Custance, as Chaucer endows her with the *xenoglossia* that he cannot achieve.²³ Christine Cooper focuses primarily on Custance's ability to be understood while in Northumbria, and she asserts that Custance is gifted with *xenoglossia*, a hallmark feature of the saint's *vita*, a miracle in which one is able to communicate and be understood in a language with which the

²² Condren's view, which casts *The Canterbury Tales* as an occasion for disparate discussions recalls Derek Pearsall's opinion, as stated in *The Life of Geoffrey Chaucer*, that "[t]he scheme of *The Canterbury Tales*, among many other creative opportunities, evidently had a practical usefulness for Chaucer in providing a secure and easily assigned home for earlier pieces which might otherwise be given little attention" (228).

²³ Chaucer's inability to directly engage with the Anglo-Saxons presents no particular problem, as long as he transfers that desire to Custance. For the importance of *xenoglossia* in *St. Erkenwald* refer to p. 26.

saint has little previous familiarity (28). That Custance is capable of displaying *xenoglossia* at all is in part due to one of Chaucer's changes from Nicholas Trevet's *Cronicles*; while Trevet describes Custance as fluent "in many languages and able to speak Saxon... Custance speaks only her own language, which is nevertheless understood" (Cooper 29). Chaucer's insertion of a very clear incidence of *xenoglossia* is a clear indicator of the generic shift away from Trevet's chronicle history to the saint's life. Historical and literary precedents exist for Custance, but she is the "only medieval example of a *xenoglossic* holy women who possesses a complete access to and master over Latinity" (Cooper 32). That other such holy women are not to be found in hagiographical literature of the period may not be surprising; Custance's special linguistic place allows Custance to participate equally in the worlds of Latinity and the vernacular simultaneously (as stated, the wish of Chaucer himself, perhaps), while "strictly belonging to neither" (Cooper 32). In microcosm, Custance then becomes representative of cultural hegemony and colonialism, affecting and changing a "low" culture to resemble her "higher" culture.

The burgeoning interest in the role of the Anglo-Saxons in *The Man of Law's Tale* has grown organically from the initial analysis of Custance, and the trend has shifted to include discussion of Custance and her interaction with the Anglo-Saxons; recently—and perhaps, controversially—the dialogue has begun to leave Custance out of the picture, and has focused on the Anglo-Saxons as an independent object of inquiry. One might, then, focus upon the importance of time in *The Man of Law's Tale* (perhaps taking a cue

from the Host).²⁴ Asserting that time “in this world is unstable, even insubstantial,” Raybin analyzes the problematic features of applying a masculine world-view of linear history to the feminine principle, (typified by Custance) which remains static and constant (65). The introduction to the tale envisions the passage of time as analogous to the flow of water; thus, Harry Bailly’s references to water are not insignificant in the context of this tale. Kolve’s description of Custance as a woman “in a rudderless boat, afloat on the sea” is of emblematic importance, not merely literal, and Raybin argues that Chaucer employed the image of the sea for the specific associations a medieval reader would have assuredly discerned (qtd. in Raybin 66). While afloat on the sea, Custance is unable to reckon time even as the significance of time disappears into abstraction. One might note Augustine’s theory of God’s relationship to time as a source for Custance’s sea voyage; from God’s perspective, “time is without division” as past, present, and future collapse into an infinite vision of all time (Raybin 67). In her “rudderless boat” Custance achieves independence from a decidedly masculine concept of time, coming into communion with God’s divine sense of its passage. Although much of Custance’s life is spent at sea, she often comes ashore, suggesting the way in which even the devout soul cannot become entirely free from the obligations inherent to temporality. The “land-based universe of ‘The Man of Law’s Tale’ represents the world of human history” and Custance’s movement from sea to land implies the moments and points of contact between the spiritual and the physical (Raybin 68). Perfection, ideality, and spirituality are admired as they manifest in the personage of Custance, but hers cannot be an

²⁴ After the narrator specifies the exact time during which the Man of Law tells his tale (l. 1-15), the Host ponders the interaction between human activity and time’s inexorable movement, and the way in which “los of tyme shendeth us” (l. 28).

existence lived in complete isolation; for her story to be meaningful, she must, of necessity, engage with the world, venturing into historically bound locales even as she “remains timeless” and a figure of “ahistoricity” (Raybin 69). The emblematic nature of Custance, who, while even on land, remains in close proximity to the sea (and always near God’s grace), becomes clear. As an emblematic character, Custance represents “untainted constancy” and “spirituality” in “a world of masculine values she is the consummate outsider” (Raybin 70). Existing as a contrast to the temporal (and decidedly “mannish”) Sowdanesse, and male authority figures, Custance, Raybin argues, exhibits virtue as an “outsider” emphasizing the rarity of such virtue in a postlapsarian world.

If Raybin implicitly connects the feminine experience with a unique insight into the processes of history, then Susan Schibanoff connects feminism and Orientalism; like Raybin, Schibanoff makes no specific references to the Anglo-Saxons, but, given their paired presentation in the tale, her insights reveal a great deal about the Anglo-Saxons. Women and others are paired, in this tale, and even multiple others (Muslims and Anglo-Saxon pagans, for instance) are conflated; because of this, the notion that “the story of Custance presents Chaucer’s sole textual confrontation with medieval Christianity’s strongest religious rival, Islam” bears significantly on any discussion of the Anglo-Saxon others (249). Following several of Lee Patterson’s assertions regarding class conflict in *The Canterbury Tales* (particularly in “The Miller’s Tale”) Schibanoff regards the Man of Law as a character who seeks “to deflect attention [away] from potentially explosive class rivalry” by presenting the ultimate Other—in her definition, Islam and femininity, which become closely linked in the tale (249).²⁵ Failing to see any sympathy for Islam

²⁵ For this analysis, refer to chapter five (p. 244-79) of Lee Patterson’s landmark study, *Chaucer and the Subject of History*.

within the tale (a speculative leap, I think), Schibanoff suggests that Chaucer portrays Islam as “threatening not by depicting it as different from Christianity—as idolatrous—but by revealing its dangerous closeness to his own religion.” (250).²⁶ The threat of Islam (and later, the threat of the feminine) is not a threat of the outlaw, but the dangerous “in-law,” the barbarian not at the gate, but within the city walls. Although Schibanoff fails to do so, this important insight points directly to the pagan Anglo-Saxons, whose similarity and difference alternate in a problematic way for Chaucer and for Custance herself. Offering a paired reading which considers gender and ethnicity, Schibanoff joins many other critics who note Custance “less [as] an emblem of laudable Christian suffering than a model for female submission” (250). Through a tenuous connection, Schibanoff argues that, within the tale, “Muslims and women” become “interchangeable... [as] such reductiveness facilitates his [Chaucer’s] creation of Christian fraternity” (a phrase that she never defines completely) (250). Tracing the history of the “rhetoric of proximity” demonstrates that Augustine may have been the first to note “the figuration of evil as proximate to good” which raises the alarm and heightens our awareness to binary opposites, even as it reduces modes of experience to stereotypes (Schibanoff 251).

There remains an observable difference in the way in which pagans and Muslims are discussed in the fourteenth century; while virtuous classical pagans are acknowledged, medieval writers and theologians allowed for very few virtuous

²⁶ I disagree with Schibanoff, as she finds almost no sympathy for Islam in *The Man of Law’s Tale*. While a negative attitude and judgmental tone are pervasive throughout a substantial portion of Chaucer’s *The Man of Law’s Tale*, his tale does not degenerate into a catalogue listing of the vices of non-Christians, as *The Prioress’s Tale* often does.

Muslims—and references to virtuous “Northern” pagans are fewer still. Whenever a good Saracen appears in medieval literature, he is deemed a pagan (Schibanoff 251).²⁷

Profligate women and Muslim others remain necessary, according to Augustinian doctrine, as heretics who “strengthen the faithful by reminding them of unseen enemies that lurked nearby” (Schibanoff 252). Making a leap from Muslim discourse to antifeminism tracts of the period, Schibanoff asserts that “antifeminism also feared yet traded upon similitude, specifically woman’s proximity to man” as she goes on to the document well-known texts which define and redefine the figure of the *virago* (252). The solution for the threat of woman (and the threat of Eastern others) was “to reestablish woman’s distance from man, to reinscribe her as inferior and subordinate to him” (Schibanoff 253). Highlighting and forcing difference even when similarity appears more abundant become the means by which the Man of Law emphasizes the evil nature of women and Muslims (Schibanoff 253-254). The tendency to highlight difference has already been noted in the present study, and it functions in *The Man of Law’s Tale* much the same way as it does in *St. Erkenwald*.

Analyses of the function of feminine and marginalized experience in *The Man of Law’s Tale* reveal, through analogy, certain insights into Chaucer’s relationship with his ancestors, as the Anglo-Saxons—constructed as the “in-law other,” according to Schibanoff—become more transparent (25). Profitable though these comparisons may be, direct analysis of the marginalized Anglo-Saxons must, of necessity, complete the portrait as limned by the previous discussion of the above mentioned “paired others.”

²⁷ The many “pagan” knights of medieval romance, who often appear with French names, are almost always a cover for Muslim warriors or “Saracens.” This tendency has its genesis in the Middle Ages, but can be found as late as Spenser’s *Faerie Queene* (see the trio of knight: Sans Joy, Sans Loy, and Sans Foy, depicted in book I).

One can connect *The Man of Law's Tale* to the court of Richard II, and doing so reveals, as scholars of *Athelston* have, the important role of the Anglo-Saxons during the Ricardian period. Indeed, if we view the tale (as has traditionally been done) as “a heroine’s tale, then the story seems drawn out and the protagonist’s character incompletely developed” (Dugas 27). Custance has taken “center stage,” obscuring other important questions over the historicity of the tale, often ignored by scholars. The tale seems “particularly concerned with aristocratic power,” and this concern focuses the discussion of aristocratic prerogatives squarely on the personage of Alla, the Northumbrian king (Dugas 27). The tale’s concern with kingship accomplishes several goals, demonstrating the authority and divine right to kingship even as that kingship is legitimated in an implicit connection made between Anglo-Saxon England and Rome. Establishing authority via lineage was absolutely essential during the Middle Ages, with kings ascribing their ancestry to individuals like Aeneas, and the Trojans before him, and Dugas asserts that “ancestral claims became increasingly necessary” as political uncertainties arose (29). Scholars have typically treated the Roman, Greek, and Trojan historical models of authority in great detail, but relatively little attention has been directed towards other historical models of kingship and authority (Dugas 30). During the twelfth century, a curiously large number of individuals displayed an interest “in the Anglo-Saxon and pre-Anglo-Saxon past”, perhaps in an attempt to locate historical authority in a familiar locale, namely England itself (Dugas 30). *The Man of Law's Tale*, then, participates fully in the interest “in the lives of Anglo-Saxon[s]” common to the Ricardian period, which leads to the intriguing assertion that even the “alliterative revival” was attributable to interest in the Anglo-Saxons (Dugas 30).

In Chaucer's version of the tale of Custance, Alla plays "a more active role" as adjudicator of the laws, recalling the (still prevalent) maxims and myths associated with King Alfred and other Anglo-Saxon kings (Dugas 31). What Chaucer accomplishes by positing Alla as a judicial king is the casting of this Northumbrian king as a "virtuous pagan" commonly described by medieval writers and chroniclers; Alla's commitment to law and authority prefigure his miraculous conversion to Christianity, while highlighting an innate "nobility of spirit" within the English king, suggesting the ease with which the English "spirit" adopted Christianity (Dugas 32). As with the pagan court of Syria, and the classical world of *The Knight's Tale*, Chaucer eschews historical "accuracy" in favor of an imagining of the past that is decidedly colored by a present world-view. The past and present, in this case, blur into one seamless vision of time which, according to Dugas, "has the effect of erasing the historical... past" (32). While Chaucer rarely demonstrates a concern for depicting the pagan past in "historically accurate" terms, *The Man of Law's Tale* bridges "the gap between the native English original and the historical-cultural formation of *translatio imperii*" according to Dugas (37). *The Man of Law's Tale* ultimately attempts a restructuring of a history that was "anything but smooth and unbroken" into a cohesive whole whose major theme emerges as the success and ultimate triumph of Christianity (Dugas 38).

The present analysis, which shifts attention from feminine experience studied in isolation, to the role of culture and mythology in creating a national identity, may be understood symbolically by moving the central discussion from Custance to Alla. However, Chaucer does not allow Alla to say anything of much significance, and, as Christine Cooper suggests, Custance (in a religious or emblematic reading of the tale)

needs to speak while Alla listens.²⁸ Alla haunts the tale, a spectral reminder of Chaucer's Anglo-Saxon past which remains, like Alla himself, unknowable and alienated.

The silence might be strategic, though, and I question John Frankis' assertion that "[t]he Constance-story as told by Gower and Chaucer does not on the face of it tell us very much about fourteenth-century views of Anglo-Saxon England" as Chaucer's reluctance to be overly specific (with regards to national/linguistic differences) says quite a bit, in my view, about Anglo-Saxon "appropriations" (76). Custance's relation to both Christian Rome and pagan England erases the otherwise uncomfortable differences which, as Frankis points out, remain especially problematic as Chaucer casts his own ancestors as the pagans who drove away British Christians from England (91). Chaucer "commemorates" the Anglo-Saxon era because of its importance in ecclesiastical history—it was, after all, the period during which Christianity came to England. Custance's story gives this special period of history its own myth as the events "were so important as to merit the devising of a special legend... which may be seen as a religiously motivated transformation of Anglo-Saxon and Roman history" (Frankis 89). I would focus upon Frankis' use of the word "transformation" here, as Chaucer very much appropriated historical material for his own purposes; historical verisimilitude, as noted before, was not valued for its own sake. Custance's ability to employ *xenoglossia* (a subject taken up by Christine Cooper) also erases cultural differences, making the Anglo-Saxons receptive to Christian learning and Roman culture (90). Chaucer narrates, according to Frankis, with the primary purpose of exploring Christian/pagan tensions, and information about opinions of the Anglo-Saxons can only be gleaned tangentially as

²⁸ See Christine Cooper's "'But Algate Therby Was She Understonde': Translating Custance in Chaucer's *Man of Law's Tale*" (32-33).

we read Chaucer's "transformed" fable/history (92). If this tale truly links England to Rome (thereby "saving" the Anglo-Saxon past from its heathen history) then Custance's action is as necessary as Alla's passivity. While it may appear strange that Chaucer reclaims the Anglo-Saxon past through an imagined connection with Rome (via Custance), an entirely English tale, free from Roman influence, would leave Chaucer alone to confront the profound otherness of the pre-Christian Anglo-Saxons to whom he cannot relate directly without the mediating term of Christian Rome, emblemized by Custance.

This reading of *The Man of Law's Tale* places Christian Rome firmly at the center of the Christian world. In fact, Rome's centrality receives no serious interrogation by Chaucer, and while he investigates the history of England, he never attempts to reorient the map in order to celebrate England's central position. Kathy Lavezzo notes that medieval maps (which placed England in the northwest corner of the world) showed that "England's geographic positioning in the medieval world was the furthest thing from central" (2). Lavezzo wonders why exactly English cartographers participated "in the construction of England as a global borderland". (7). England's relatively small size (as clearly demonstrated by modern maps) and England's marginal position (as portrayed by medieval maps) serve to accentuate English difference in order to leverage power (Lavezzo 8). Medieval English writers thus lived in the margins, and were free to fabulize imaginative histories and originary myths. Lavezzo finds *The Man of Law's Tale* to be "the most geographic of *The Canterbury Tales*" (94). The English are an often overlooked group of "others" in the tale, according to Lavezzo, and we should consider them along with "Custance's strangeness and Syrian difference" (96). The tale is not

centered upon Rome, rather, it delights “in distinguishing England from Rome as a sovereign territory” (96). Even as the glory of Rome and the importance of the Catholic Church are celebrated by Chaucer, particularly through Custance, the attention lavished upon Anglo-Saxon England declares its importance in a rather unconventional sense. While Lavezzo notes Chaucer’s desire to separate England from Rome, she neglects to notice the importance of the Anglo-Saxons as emblematic of a desire to trace the history of a newly authorized people. Chaucer’s glorification of fourteenth-century England makes necessary the search for historical precedents that *The Man of Law’s Tale* undertakes. Where Lavezzo wants the reader to note the separation from the cultural hegemony of Rome (but not, of course, from the religious unity of Rome), she fails to note the audacity of detailing the lives of the Anglo-Saxons, that only becomes possible after the initial distinction of “English, not Roman” that Chaucer’s tale elaborates.

Chaucer’s imagined England, as portrayed in *The Man of Law’s Tale*, exists as an idealized locale whose borders, geographies, and even history are not entirely clear. As Frankis and Lavezzo have noted, the unspecified geography of the tale does not affect its overall goals. With these considerations of imagined space and fabulized history in mind, Peggy A. Knapp posits that Chaucer was able to create a theoretical English community/identity through his works. Knapp explores Chaucer’s use of the phrase “resoun ymaginatyf” and the word “engyn” and she argues that Chaucer’s conception of the imaginative faculty actually involved real creation via *mythopoeia* (136). Chaucer’s imagination literally creates an English community because “Chaucer could think of imagination as an active, even an aggressive, intellectual process rather than a passive repository for sensations” (Knapp 136). Connecting Chaucer with his most innovative

predecessor, Dante, Knapp argues that both writers employ imagination in order “to call up situations that are not present to direct observation” which thus validates literary imagination and its ability to represent objective, rational reality (142). However, Chaucer departs from Dante inasmuch as Chaucer presents/imagines a community, while “Dante’s powerful characters inhabit isolated circles and pouches of hell” (Knapp 142). Chaucer appears as the first European writer to employ imagination-as-creation for the purposes of constructing a picture of community, writ large (the nation of England) and small (the fellowship of twenty-nine pilgrims). More important than what Chaucer imagines is by what means he imagines, namely, in the English language. Knapp quotes Benedict Anderson and others who contend that the universal and totalizing features of Latin Christendom tended to suppress and mask regional and proto-national differences (143). To write in English seriously undermines the unifying myth of the cohesion of Latin Christendom, even as it elaborates new bases (linguistic and national) for bonds of association and community. Writing in English assumes an English readership who have a recognizable English “essence” to which the mother-tongue appeals. Chaucer positions himself towards an English community even as he creates that community, in microcosm, in *The Canterbury Tales*.

Chapter Six: Conclusions

Disparate, and, at times, conflicting approaches inform the historical appropriation of the Anglo-Saxons in the fourteenth-century literary consciousness. The Anglo-Saxons become, for fourteenth-century writers, a floating concept engaged for a variety of purposes, and any straightforward discussion of “the image of the Anglo-Saxons” in fourteenth-century literature threatens to posit the fixity of the Anglo-Saxon past. If one allows the Anglo-Saxons, as presented in late medieval texts, to signify a simple immobile historical image, the evolution and appropriation of the Anglo-Saxons becomes obscured. A desire to leverage power, whether that power is cultural, political, racial, or religious, unifies the seemingly divergent possible “uses” of the Anglo-Saxons in the medieval texts surveyed here. While the desire for power allows fourteenth-century writers, readers, and auditors to ventriloquise the Anglo-Saxons, who cannot speak directly for themselves, the encounter with the past never occurs in an uncomplicated or simple manner. The profound otherness of the Anglo-Saxons remains: their paganism (before conversion), language, and cultural tradition all threaten to collapse the entire project. Chaucer’s desire to explore his nation’s Anglo-Saxon past leads him to confront the pre-Christian Anglo-Saxons and their persecution of British Christians. In this scenario, one might imagine Chaucer’s dilemma: was he to identify with his fellow countrymen (despite their religion) or with his fellow Christians (despite their different cultures and languages)? Chaucer, in his characteristically playful style, carefully avoids the situation by saving his pre-Christian ancestors via their encounter with Custance, a

Christian woman from Rome. The overall effect of a cursory reading of *The Man of Law's Tale* leads one to believe that Chaucer has succeeded in having it both ways—he does, after all, end the tale with a final vision of the Anglo-Saxons as wholly English and wholly Christian. However, one might interrogate this convenient myth of cultural continuity, and question the intangible loss of authentic “Englishness” that necessarily follows from a religious colonization by Rome and its Church.

Chaucer's turn, which effectively suppresses these questions, occurs in the other two fourteenth-century texts discussed in this thesis. The unpleasant details of the Anglo-Saxons' persecution of Christians and worship of idols and devils concerns the *Erkenwald*-poet enough to mention these historically accurate realities, but his decision to discuss these concerns in the beginning of the poem allows him to conceal these events quickly (and, one senses, nervously) by turning to a discussion of St. Augustine. The savagery of Athelston seriously distances a contemporary twenty-first century audience as much as it presumably troubled the fourteenth-century audience and the *Athelston*-poet himself. But the poet passes over these disconcerting details, and instead emphasizes the good governance imagined in the Anglo-Saxon era.

The historical imagination, as outlined in chapter one, never promised to be an accurate re-presentation of historical events in a cool, dispassionate retelling. The three poets discussed in this thesis have the latitude to selectively present a representative (or misrepresentative) “sampling” of historical events that fit into a convenient narrative established by the poets. I have argued that *St. Erkenwald* can inform contemporary readers about the variety of possible historical encounters during the fourteenth-century, even as *Athelston* presents the ways in a fourteenth-century poet can modify the general

kinds of historical encounters outlined in the discussion of *St. Erkenwald*, and craft such encounters for very specific and practical purposes. Chaucer's *The Man of Law's Tale* builds upon the first two varieties of historical appropriation, even as it persuasively interrogates the limits of such imaginative histories and their role in the construction of English identity. The paired presentation of Muslim Syria and Anglo-Saxon England reveals something unsettling (in the minds of medieval readers) about the estrangement of the past from the present, and this distance makes the project of historical appropriation all the more urgent, as the otherness of the Anglo-Saxon past demands an explanation and reconciliation which Chaucer, the *Erkenwald*-poet, and the *Athelston*-poet all try desperately to construct in their respective works.

While all three writers achieve a modicum of success, the three works leave a lingering sense of the incomplete nature of the writers' cultural project. One should not necessarily condemn the medieval writers for the open questions that remain; rather, the historical imagination of the fourteenth-century should, instead, persuade readers to continually interrogate all supposedly "dispassionate" histories. A culture cannot achieve historical objectivity, and the quest for it leads towards the perilous situation in which one might believe that historical appropriation belongs to the past, while perfect historical accuracy can exist in the present. When history begins to appear clinical and dispassionate, contemporary readers should search all the more vigorously for the subterranean assumptions and values which always linger beneath the surface. This thesis has analyzed medieval notions of the past, generally, and specific interactions between past and present in order to unkennel hidden biases which dwell within all historical documents and literary appropriations. Historical imagining is always already a re-

imagining: the trace of the past has already escaped, and even if grasped, it would forever present a lacuna into which contemporary values and ideas would reanimate the dead/unreadable historical text.

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