Chosen Champions: Medieval and Early Modern Heroes as Postcolonial Reactions to Tensions between England and Europe

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Chosen Champions:

Medieval and Early Modern Heroes as Postcolonial Reactions
to Tensions between England and Europe

by

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy with a concentration in Literature Department of English College of Arts and Sciences University of South Florida

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DEDICATION

For my champion, my husband, with love and much appreciation.
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ABSTRACT

This project explores connections between hero and history, text and context. By engaging Postcolonial theories about the roles that invasion and oppression, play in developing national identity and how colonized people respond to such encounters in literature, I examine how experiences of invasion and hostile interaction as represented in medieval and early modern English literature influenced the creation of specific heroic values.

In my first chapter, I analyze *The Battle of Maldon* and *Beowulf* as exemplars of the Anglo-Saxon culture, observing that Byrhtnoth and Beowulf work as fictional embodiments of a fantasy of power: men of super-human strength and exceptional resoluteness who, through remarkable sacrifices, inspire men to accomplish phenomenal deeds of their own. Next, I explore Arthur in *The Alliterative Morte Arthure* and *Le Morte Darthur*, who embraces his hybridity, fluidly moving between the Anglo-Saxon warrior tradition and the French romance tradition. Last, I consider Shakespeare’s *Henry V*, which depicts a conquering hero who possesses the prowess and nobility of his heroic predecessors and the ability to succeed where they failed, securing England’s continental dominance. In each era, I contend that the authors created heroes on whom they could project a fantasized identity which defied the realities of their time, heroes who changed based upon the type of threat faced by England.

This study samples five hundred years of literature and uses this breadth to explore cross-periodic continuity, finding that the heroes of these texts respond not only to their historical context, but also to each other. This scope allows one to see how the emblem of the hero responds to the reality of the authors and audiences of these texts.
The figure of the hero develops over centuries, demonstrating that as the needs of the authors and audiences change, so, too, does the character who represents them. These literary figures provide a unique window into the culture and concerns of the authors and audiences during the medieval and early modern eras. They represent desire for strength, inspiration, glory and triumph. They reflect the agony of anxiety, vulnerability, defeat, and hopelessness. Most importantly, they reimagine, reframe, and redress reality.
CHAPTER ONE:

INTRODUCTION

All stories have a curious and even dangerous power. They are manifestations of truth -- yours and mine. And truth is all at once the most wonderful yet terrifying thing in the world, which makes it nearly impossible to handle. It is such a great responsibility that it's best not to tell a story at all unless you know you can do it right. You must be very careful, or without knowing it you can change the world.

― Vera Nazarian 174

The interactions between England and other cultures in the medieval and early modern eras can certainly be described as turbulent. In its history, the island hosted the Celts, Romans, Jutes, Angles, Saxons, Frisians, Danes, and Normans. While eventually these newcomers assimilated, still others, like later French and Spanish forces, assailed England without joining the nation, seeking to secure England as their subject by means of force. My work explores the experience of invasion and hostile interaction as represented in medieval and early modern English vernacular literature for evidence of how these encounters influenced the creation of specific heroic values. For the author, storytelling is a process in which they responds to and actively engages with the reality contemporary situation through literature. Utilizing twentieth- and twenty-first century Postcolonial theories on contact, response, and resistance, I will demonstrate how England’s exchanges with foreign forces inspired some authors to express their distress, desires, and disapproval by imbuing the heroes of their literature with qualities which make them remarkable figures of militaristic, cultural, and political prowess, culminating in the
creation of four of the greatest English literary heroes of that era: Byrhtnoth (in *The Battle of Maldon*), Beowulf, Arthur, and Henry V. I have chosen these literary figures in particular because they represent a hero type for each literary period. Beowulf and Byrhtnoth represent the Anglo-Saxon warrior ideal: the champion who is judged by his deeds. While Arthur is certainly also a warrior, in *The Alliterative Morte Arthure* and *Le Morte Darthur*, there is a distinct move to more courtly concerns where a man is not only judged by his deeds but also by his military cunning and ability to operate within the cultural conventions of medieval romance.¹ Shakespeare’s *Henry V* is a culmination of these tropes—a hero who is judged worthy because he succeeds militarily, commands his troops cunningly, interacts with other powers shrewdly, and above all seeks to serve the nation. These heroes demonstrate that the construct of the hero is ever changing to fit the experience of the author and audience, reflecting their fantasy and, at times, interrogating their contemporary situation. In England during the medieval and early modern periods that experience is one of invasion and assimilation; thus, Beowulf and Byrhtnoth, Arthur and Henry demonstrate English vitality and power and comment on the world in which they exist. My project samples five hundred years of literature and uses this breadth to elucidate connections between the literary periods; one can see these heroes not merely responding to their historical context, but also to each other, developing from those heroes who came before. In this way, my study will add to the critical conversation a cross-periodic understanding of the way the figure of the hero advances throughout the centuries expanding and adapting to fit the needs of its audience.

By drawing from both Postcolonial theories of identity and nationality and recent discussions of the medieval English experience, my study explores ways literatures of the

¹ From here forward I will refer to the *Alliterative Morte Arthure* as AMA and Malory’s *Le Morte Darthur* as Malory.
medieval and early modern eras create a particular type of hero who responds to a shared encounter with foreign forces. Ultimately, I seek to investigate the connectedness between the English people’s shared experience of invasion and anxiety and the works that they produced. In order to explore complex issues of identity and culture in the context of physical and social interaction between England and other, more aggressive or established societies, I engage Postcolonial theories about the roles that invasion, oppression, and inferiority play in developing national identity and how colonized people respond to such interactions through their literature. Often this response is two-fold: first, writers create a fantasy in which they project their desires for strength, power, victory, etc., and second, writers interrogate that fantasy, scrutinizing the hero they have created, finding his flaws, and even using him to instruct and criticize real-world contemporaries. This second element of the literary fantasy, its ability to act rather than merely react, is also crucial to Postcolonial process as it enables the figure of the hero to vigorously engage the contemporary situation, effecting change to the present through the guise of a fantasy of the past.

Although medieval and early modern English literature is not traditionally considered “Postcolonial,” such readings are increasingly common since many of the terms, concepts, and theories of Postcolonial methodologies can be applied to literature of that era. Indeed, though England was colonized by the Danes and the Normans, the terms “colonized” and “colonizer”

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2 It is true that this term is modern one, but I am applying a modern theory to pre-modern texts. While they may not have used the same word, my argument hinges on the claim that authors and audiences of these texts nevertheless, experienced what we would now call feelings of anxiety, vulnerability, concern, and inferiority — feelings they used their literature to address by reflecting a fantasy of power and privilege. Unfortunately, there is no good Anglo-Saxon or Anglo-Norman word that I have found that conveys all this feeling of angst in a way that our modern term does.

3 For recent discussions of the roles of Postcolonial theory in medieval literature, see Lampert-Weissig, Altschul, Finke and Shichtman, and Treharne.
are hard to use with precision because often the invader becomes intermingled with the society of the native peoples.

Though many Postcolonial theorists could be cited to support my argument, the seminal publications of Frantz Fanon, Albert Memmi, Ngugi wa Thiong’o, Homi Bhabha, and Benedict Anderson, in addition to more recent scholarship by Geraldine Moane, Stuart Hall, Wilson Harris, Michael Dash, and Richard Helgerson, thoroughly ground this study in the nuances of how people, culture, and, more specifically, literature interact with dominating foreigners. Fanon, Moane, Dash, and Harris seek to understand how natives cope with the trauma of colonization, with Fanon and Moane considering the psychological impacts and Dash and Harris addressing the cultural ones. Bhabha, Memmi, and wa Thiong’o also explore the impact on the natives’ culture by analyzing how it responds to interaction with the colonizer’s culture. Last, Anderson, Hall, and Helgerson investigate how shared cultural experience leads to nation building and the role literature can play in this process.

To illustrate the cultural experience of invasion and conquest experienced by the English people, it is useful here to recount briefly the history of interaction between inhabitants of England and foreign powers during the periods in which the literatures of this study were written. For Fanon, the native’s interaction with the colonizer is always oppressive, always hostile, and unbearable, but, for Anglo-Saxon audiences, the case is more nuanced. The cultural experience of the eighth through the eleventh centuries, the context for *The Battle of Maldon* and *Beowulf*, is mixed with periods of hostile interaction with foreign forces interspersed with periods of “peaceful” oppression under the rule of foreigners, the most famous of which, of course, is Cnut. While most of the eighth century is marked by infighting amongst competing kingdoms on the island – a group of people Bede forever names as the English in the same century – the last two
decades saw increased interaction with Viking forces that marked the beginning of nearly three centuries of Danish raids on England (Jones 1). Similarly, the ninth century was also replete with battles and negotiations between Alfred the Great and the Danish to secure England’s borders (Keynes 22). In the tenth century, though Æthelstan was the first Anglo-Saxon king to consolidate rule over England, he and his successors faced repeated incursions by the Danes into their lands like the one described in *The Battle of Maldon* (Stenton 376). A series of defeats like the one described in this poem and Æthelred’s weakened position created the conditions in which Danish kings would win the crown of England in the following century (Keynes “Æthelred II”).

The period in which *Beowulf* and *The Battle of Maldon* were transcribed, near the end of the tenth or beginning of the eleventh century, is particularly rife with aggression. Simon Keynes outlines the recurrent, almost habitual nature of invasion during this period, writing,

> the battle of Maldon stands at the beginning of a period during which the Vikings maintained an almost constant presence in Æthelred’s kingdom. The leadership of the army (and its mode of life) may have changed from time to time, but it seems likely that its composition remains substantially the same. The Vikings ravaged various parts of the country in the 991-4; minded their own business in 995-6; ravaged Southern England and 997-9; took time off in Normandy in 1000; ravaged Southern England in 1001; were quiescent of plotting in 1002; ravaged Wessex and East Anglia in 1003-4; and returned home, starving in 1005. (“Historical Context of the Battle of Maldon” 98)

Indeed, the experience of invasion was so often repeated and so significant to the lives of the English people as to create a sense of vulnerability evidenced in the literature of the time. These texts also address social and political concerns distinct to their eras; Byrhtnoth’s abhorrence for
the tradition of Danegeld, a practice he finds shameful, for instance, interrogates the contemporary experience, challenging the political modus operandi. The Anglo-Saxons incorporate their experience as members of the island culture that faced repeated aggression and their feelings about this into their literature; and, through this lens, the readers of texts like The Battle of Maldon and Beowulf begin to understand the feelings of vulnerability resulting from invasion.

The preceding narrative does not suggest that Viking invasions represent the end of England’s conflict with other lands. Though William was the last foreigner to invade England successfully and take the throne, England’s relationship with outside powers throughout The Hundred Years’ War of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries represents the next major conflict that influenced the literatures of this study. Throughout the 1300s, France exacerbated the long-held tensions with England over their mutual claim to Norman lands by supporting Scottish rebels in their efforts against England (Curry 18). In addition, Phillip VI of France issued an “arrière-ban on 30 April 1337 … for the French armies … to assemble by 8 July at Amiens as well as at Marmande on the frontier of Edward’s duchy,” provoking England to war by seeking to confiscate Edward III’s lands in France (Curry 19). Most historians agree that Phillip’s salvo, while enacted under the guise of judicial extradition, was actually an effort to circumvent Edward’s claim to the French throne because English Edward, the nephew of the deceased king, held a more direct claim to the French throne than did French Philip, the dead king’s cousin.⁴ Throughout the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, England’s kings fought vigorously in France to secure and increase their French holdings at battles like the Battle of Poitiers and the famed

⁴ See for instance Curry; Prestwich; Malcolm Vale, The Origins Of The Hundred Years War: The Angevin Legacy 1250–1340; and Jonathan Sumption, The Hundred Years War, Volume 1: Trial by Battle.
Battle of Agincourt. Yet, “although the conflict was punctuated by some extended periods of truce, war not peace became the normal situation” in England, and this ever present threat of war, and often invasion, permeated the latter part of the fourteenth century (Prestwich 74). This interaction with France was the background for the creation of the Arthurian literatures discussed in this study and the foundation on which the authors constructed their hero. Criticism of France’s behavior toward England during this time can be read throughout the *AMA* and *Morte Darthur*, especially in the brutally oppressive characters Lucius and the Giant who offer parallels of the monstrous conduct of France in this time. Relations with France, though peaceful since a truce declared in 1444, remained contentious, with England losing its claim to French lands little by little until 1558 when it lost its last holding – Calais (Curry 90). This last loss was part of a settlement agreed to by the newly crowned Queen Elizabeth, who sought and secured a lasting peace with France through the Treaty of Cateau-Cambrèsis in 1559.

However, England’s reprieve from continental agitation was not to last. Elizabeth I’s unmarried state was cause for great contention amongst the powers of Europe who sought to increase their holdings through an alliance. When Elizabeth ultimately proved unreceptive to the idea of marriage, tensions over England’s future rule rose amongst the nobles of her court and between foreign courts who wished for greater power in the region. In the second half of the sixteenth century, England faced a new threat from Spain which, until 1568, had made no effort to undermine Elizabeth’s rule (Patterson 217). However, in response to a conflict between her captains and Spanish forces, Elizabeth impounded Spanish ships carrying silver that ventured too close to the coast of Southampton (Patterson 216-17). This set off a round of political machinations on the part of Spain by which Philip of Spain offered support to Mary Queen of Scots with the goal of deposing Elizabeth which culminated in a clash of titans. Phillip had been
preparing for some time to invade England, and by December 1585, Elizabeth and her
government were aware of his plot. In the following summer, the queen responded to this
aggression by ordering her men to engage in a campaign to harass the Spanish fleet whenever
possible. This campaign was so successful, Spain’s conquest of England had to be postponed
until 1588 (Patterson 231-5). Resupplied and reinvigorated, the Spanish Armada set off for the
shores of England in 1588 in an attempt to bring England under the yoke of Spain. Though the
initial fleet was destroyed by weather, the environment in England was rife with rumor and panic
at the thought of a further attack, a panic magnified by two additional armadas sent by Spain in
1596 and 1597 (de Somogyi 2-3). This frenzy of anxiety provides an implicit backdrop for
Shakespeare’s fantasy of the conquering hero – Henry V in his eponymous play, first published
in 1600. The figure of Henry acts as not merely a response to a desire for power and prominence;
instead, he manifests that reality by representing England as strong, shrewd, and dominant.

Ultimately, I demonstrate that much like African, Caribbean, Indian, and South Asian
cultures, some English people used literature to assuage their feelings of inferiority, to project a
narrative of a powerful England, and to engage the social and political discourse contemporary to
the writing. Centuries before we had a name for what happened when one culture oppressed
another or how that society reflected upon and engaged with such oppression, some English
authors chronicled this dynamic in their literature and used the hero to express their findings. By
examining the characters of Byrhtnoth, Beowulf, Arthur, and Henry, we can understand the
English attempt to establish, illustrate, and maintain the values that they felt were essential to
their identity.

In his influential works, The Wretched of the Earth (1968) and Black Skin, White Masks
(1982), Frantz Fanon examines the psychological effects of colonization on the native
population. In “On National Culture,” he declares that the experience of invasion, settling, and domination by a foreign group destroys the original national culture, and this experience is something that natives work hard to overcome through reimagining their cultural identity. This domination by a foreign culture and the rise of a wholly different culture can have dire consequences for natives’ psyches, causing feelings of inferiority that can create a psychological breakdown. During the medieval and early modern periods, the English people encountered attacks by Danes, Normans, French, and Spaniards. The early medieval period was particularly marked by repeated invasions and hostile interactions with foreign aggressors on English soil. In terms of the late medieval period, the scene is not quite so stark. The experience of border vulnerability and de-valorization of culture certainly impacted the way that some English authors thought and wrote about their people and caused them to invent myths and heroes as a means of (re)capturing a sense of national pride. Nationalist literature, Fanon writes, calls on the whole people to fight for their existence as a nation by telling their stories about their heroes. This claim is pivotal to the formation of my own argument that English heroes are manifestations of a desire to fight back against the foreign incursions into their land and culture.

Although Geraldine Moane’s main argument in Gender and Colonialism (1999) centers on Irish colonization, much like Fanon, she investigates the psychological and sociological manifestations of oppression, a query applicable to all studies of interactions between the powerful and the powerless. Her discussion of the “realm of individual thoughts, feeling and actions” is particularly useful when considering how English people internalized their encounters with foreign invaders (1). She contends that oppressive social conditions “can create debilitating psychological patterns” resulting in an array of responses (1). Although she generally focuses on the impact of hierarchy on women, her discussion of the “power differential” associated with
colonization and the negative effects it can have on natives is valuable to my analysis of the motivation behind the English desire to create heroes (8). Moane explains that the consequences of colonialism can include “fear, restriction, powerlessness, insecurity, sense of inferiority, and isolation … ambivalence, loss of identity, and vulnerability to psychological distress and madness … anger, arrogance, rigidity and unwillingness to admit vulnerability or emotional weakness” (55). In the face of such crushing feelings, evidence of which can certainly be seen in the tragic forecast with which each of the texts of this study ends, there is a clear need to feel, or at least imagine, a sense of strength, pride, and hope – all things exhibited in these texts emerging from England during the medieval and early modern periods.

Also concerned with the way the conquered interact with the conquerors, Albert Memmi’s work *The Colonizer and the Colonized* (1991) attempts to paint the portrait of the two figures of the colonial conflict. Memmi begins with his portrayal of the colonizer, observing that the connection between the colonizer and the colonized is indisputable, as the colonizer only exists insomuch as he oppresses the colonized. The colonizer’s entire being, Memmi claims, is in direct opposition to that of the colonized; the colonizer enjoys privilege because he exploits the colonized. Although he enjoys a position of advantage, usurpation also has negative effects on the colonizer: because he has chosen to participate in the colonial system, he must defend it vigorously and attempt to absolve himself of any offense. This relates to my discussion of English literature because the manner in which the colonizer attempts to justify his oppression by valuing his own culture far above that of the colonized has enormous effects on the native people. Examples of this process are visible in Cnut’s execution of English nobles in 1016 and to a greater extent in the strengthening of ties to the Normandy – and Norman language and culture – when William came to power in 1066.
Because he is persistently confronted with this image of himself as inferior, the colonized begins to recognize it as a mirror. Indeed, “this mythical and degrading portrait ends up by being accepted and lived with to a certain extent by the colonized” (Memmi 87). In reaction to such a negative portrayal, the colonized subject has only two options: assimilation or revolt. The first is not really an option. Although he may try to become like his oppressor in every way, the best the colonized can hope for is to “ape” the colonizer, something that will never be accepted by the colonizer. Thus, with assimilation out of the question, revolt becomes the only option, and one type of revolt is literary resistance. In response, some English authors rebelled against the denigration of their culture by creating heroes with distinctly Anglo-Saxon qualities.

For Ngugi wa Thiong’o, assimilation is never an option, and in his work, *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (1986), he contends that native peoples must maintain their independence from a foreign culture that seeks to wipe out their traditional culture. wa Thiong’o demonstrates that “the effect of a cultural bomb is to annihilate a people’s belief in their names, in their languages, in their environment, in their heritage of struggle, in their unity, in their capacities and ultimately in themselves,” making them want to distance themselves from their own culture and adopt that of their oppressors (3). For wa Thiong’o, a “cultural bomb” is some event or practice that dismantles the native culture, replacing it with that of the oppressor. Specifically, he discusses Christian missionary work as this cultural bomb, but executing and replacing English nobles in 1016 or favoring Norman laws and language in the court of England after 1066 are also, in a sense, “cultural bombs”. Though the native language and culture was by no means completely eradicated, as past historians have demonstrated, the court did see a shift from an Anglo-Saxon culture to an Anglo-Norman one for a period of time. Much like wa Thiong’o, in her work addressing English literature appearing after the conquests
of Cnut and William, Elaine Treharne argues that the choice to write in English is a conscious one that speaks of a desire for legitimacy and a resistance to outside cultures. Indeed, even in silence, in the choice not to write, Treharne finds evidence of the impact colonization has on a people and the role language can play in this experience. These Postcolonial works are essential to this study’s investigation of how language and literature can act as a means of maintaining native identity.

Homi Bhabha also examines the connectivity of the colonized and colonizers’ identities. In his influential book *The Location of Culture* (1994), Homi Bhabha does not agree with wa Thiong’o’s claim that the only way to maintain cultural identity is to keep it separate from the culture of the oppressor. Instead, he asserts that the colonized figure forms an identity not wholly separate, yet not entirely part of the colonizer’s culture; he becomes a hybrid and develops a unique identity. This hybridization is a middle way forged between revolt and resignation. The works explored in this study demonstrate both theories: in *Beowulf*, *The Battle of Maldon*, and the *AMA*, wa Thiong’o and Memmi’s call for cultural rebellion dominates as these English authors construct English warriors in response to Danish and Norman influence, while in the Malory and *Henry V*, the writers forge figures who draw from both Anglo-Saxon tradition and that of the continental interlopers.

Michael Dash contends in “Psychology, Creolization, and Hybridization” (1996) that the idea of society as an integrated culture, organically whole, insulated by language and tradition from the relentless advance of modernity and its supposedly alienating values, has now become unpersuasive. Instead, the notion of timeless tradition has given way to a view of all societies as caught up in a process of contact, change, and transformation. (45)
Extending the work of Homi Bhabha, Dash seeks to demonstrate the tension between native and colonial culture. Exploring the “psychological strategies that [have] been devised for coping with the assaults of what Brathwaite calls the ‘outer plantation,’” he finds that creolization and hybridization strategies – blending the culture of the oppressor with that of the oppressed —are often employed as coping mechanisms, especially in literature (49). This essay helps to illustrate how literature can exorcise vulnerability and psychological trauma caused by the colonization process.

Building on Bhabha and Dash’s concept of a middle way, Wilson Harris addresses the process of maintaining native culture in the face of cultural displacement in his lecture “History, Fable and Myth in the Caribbean and the Guianas,” demonstrating that creolization – the process of developing new cultures as a response to integration of native and colonizing cultures – begins with the native culture’s attempt to imagine a different experience than that of the oppressed group. In terms of medieval England, this “creole culture” can be seen in the amalgamation of literary tropes in the combination of Anglo-Saxon warrior ideals and French courtly romance tropes at work in The Alliterative Morte Arthure and Le Morte Darthur (Townend 68). Harris posits that “the imagination of the folk involved a crucial inner re-creative response to the violations of … conquest” (24). This process is represented in these texts which allow some English authors and readers to respond in their literature to the vulnerabilities and anxieties that formed as a result of feeling inferior to the more esteemed French “language of culture” as it was perceived in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries (Townend 67). Ann Williams also contends that evidence of intermingling is noticeable in the English and Norman cultures following the Norman Conquest, citing the English desire to take Norman names as evidence of the move to hybridity. Creolization is clearly evident in the culture, society, and literature of the Middle
English period, as English people and writers adapted the culture and traditions of their French counterparts to not only include, but, celebrate English heritage.

Benedict Anderson addresses this building of uniquely native models in his well-known *Imagined Communities* (1991), where he contends that nations are constructed out of necessity arising from some societal lack. Although I disagree with Anderson that nationalism rose out of industrialism in the eighteenth century and that any cultural cohesiveness before that time was a result of religious modes of thought, his review of the cultural desire for and experience of “nationhood” is important. Anderson maintains that people form nations out of a desire for comradeship, highlighting the constructed nature of the “imagined communities” that he defines as nations (7). This idea of creating a cultural representation of a shared encounter or desire has clear implications for my study in that it illustrates the capacity for literature to act as a space in which fear and fantasy can be enacted. In essence, as Anderson posits, each of the texts examined can be interpreted as a response to a communal experience – *The Battle of Maldon* and *Beowulf* respond to Viking aggression which engendered heroes of inordinate strength, the *AMA* and Malory respond to the Hundred Years’ War producing a shrewd champion, and *Henry V* responds to French and Spanish attempts to usurp English sovereignty culminating in the creation of a cunning conqueror. These manifestations of the cultural longing for power not only mark the lived experience of the authors and audiences, but confront, challenge, and recreate that reality in the way they represent what it means to be heroic.

Also addressing the concept of a shared cultural experience, Stuart Hall claims that there are two avenues for contemplating identity: that it reflects either a shared culture or a separate individuality. He suggests that identity can be defined by the common experiences of history that draw groups together, as Anderson and Hunt insist, or it can be identified by a sense of
distinctiveness, as Fanon claims. This classification is important because the formation of the colonized’s identities occurs within this tension between not quite belonging to the dominant culture and, at the same time, not achieving an equal but separate identity. Therefore, natives construct a new identity while under the influence of other cultures – a process Hall calls diasporization. My study develops Hall’s point by suggesting that the interactions with foreign cultures throughout the centuries of conflict color the literatures that are created during these periods of upheaval both in form, which often reflects the influence of the invading cultures, and in content, which adapts the unfamiliar traditions of the invaders to create a native hero. Beowulf, for example, is himself a foreign figure, but in him the Anglo-Saxon author finds a hero on whom to project his aspirations. In Arthur, whose pedigree as an English hero is also complex (see below), some writers construct an identity that both mimics and departs from the romance conventions of the privileged French romance literature, a deliberate and dangerous choice on the part of those rebellious writers.

In this study, I explore the connection between history and hero, text and context. Specifically, I examine how some texts in early English literature respond to hostile interactions by creating a particular type of hero to counter each threat. In essence, I contend that in each era select English authors created heroes on whom they could project a fantasized identity, which defied the realities of their time, heroes who changed based upon the type of threat faced by England.

In the discussion above, I have attempted to explore how critics address the manner in which a people’s literature is the best, and sometimes the only, means of processing their anxieties over identity and thereby an important locus of power. Each of the heroes represents a response to concerns raised by border vulnerability, feelings of inferiority aroused by the
incursion of foreign cultures, and desires to expand from a once oppressed tiny nation into a
world power. Yet what none of these critics explore is how the repetitive nature of England’s
experience of invasion and foreign threat impacts the development of its literature. While other
scholars have studied specific medieval and early modern works for evidence of Postcolonial
response, my work takes a long view of nearly five hundred years of literature. This scope allows
one to see how the emblem of the hero responds, reacts, engages, catechizes, and challenges the
reality of the authors and audiences of these texts.

In my first chapter, considering The Battle of Maldon and Beowulf, I will chart the
connections between the vulnerabilities the people faced and the abilities of their fictional
heroes. From Fanon’s perspective, the authors of The Battle of Maldon and Beowulf use the
imagined space of literature to respond to the repeated invasions and threats faced by the Anglo-
Saxon people. In Byrhtnoth, The Battle of Maldon offers a hero who has both the military
expertise and the unyielding spirit required to face the might of the advancing Vikings. Although
Byrhtnoth ultimately fails in his campaign, the way he is lauded, especially by his men,
illustrates what the people desired from their hero. In his opening speech, Byrhtnoth displays two
of the most important qualities of a worthy warrior: loyalty to his land and people and
inspirational leadership. When the Vikings offer a truce in exchange for ransom, Byrhtnoth
scoffs, telling them that it would be too shameful to allow them to sail away from his land with
his people’s riches; instead, he will fight to defend his homeland (50-9).5 This willingness to risk
all to defend the homeland is an important trait, especially to a people so overrun with invaders,
but Byrhtnoth’s finest virtue lies in his ability to inspire his men to greatness. In contrast to the

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5 All references to the original text of The Battle of Maldon are from The Anglo-Saxon Minor
Poems edited by Elliot Van Kirk Dobbie. Translations cited are from Elaine Treharne’s Old and
Middle English c.890-1450: An Anthology.
Vikings depicted in this poem, whose only quality is brute force, Byrhtnoth demonstrates a nobility of soul, a greatness that sparks glory. As evidenced by their speeches, even after his death, his valor ennobles most of his men to act as he would act and defend their people even against insurmountable odds.

If Byrhtnoth represents an ideal of military charisma that English people needed from their warriors, then Beowulf expresses a desire for a perfect defender. Beowulf arrives unexpectedly to save a people from an overwhelming threat. The stories that he and others tell depict Beowulf as a warrior for peace, who sails to foreign lands to use his superhuman strength—his “þrítiges / manna mægencraeft on his mundgripe” “thirty / men’s strength in his handgrip” (379-80) – not to oppress, but to liberate: he “Hæfde þa gefælsod se þe ær feorran com, / snotor ond swyðferhð, sele Hroðgares, / gënered wið niðe” “who had come from afar had cleansed, / wise and stout-hearted, the hall of Hrothgar, / warded off attack” and (825-7 trans. Liuzza).6 Beowulf’s incredible strength indicates a type of hero required by the author, who recognizes that ordinary military heroes lack the ability to remove the Viking foes from English shores permanently, a view demonstrated by stories such as The Battle of Maldon – even the battle-ready Byrhtnoth cannot rout the Vikings. This national inability to eliminate the threat prompts the English writer to create in Beowulf a super-human hero, a hero who accomplishes feats no ordinary hero could. Although Beowulf is a Geatish warrior, I demonstrate that the poet’s choice of Old English, not Latin or Old Norse, highlights the English adoption of the Geatish warrior as their hero. Essentially, as Ngugi wa Thiong’o work asserts, language signals a claim to the hero and his authority; thus, by using Old English, the author chooses to give the Anglo-Saxons

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6 In her article, “The Beowulf Poet’s Sense of History,” Roberta Frank posits that Beowulf is “a pagan prince of peace” who, unlike the Viking invaders, uses his strength to the benefit of the people rather than any desire for personal gain (62). All Old English quotations of Beowulf are taken from Klaeber’s Beowulf 4th edition edited by Fulk, Bjork, and Niles.
ownership of the mighty warrior. Here, the Old English author demonstrate a decidedly Postcolonial hybridity in assimilating the cultural construct of another nation and coopting that construct to fit the needs of the English audience. It would be remiss to stress only the virtues of these two great Old English heroes, for indeed they are also flawed by a pride to match their greatness – a pride which ultimately proves their downfall. But, in the end, Byrhtnoth and Beowulf are not remembered for their failings but for their greatness, their ability to challenge the lived history of reality and transform the English people from conquered and cowed to powerful and proud – this is the legacy they leave English audiences.

When considering the heroes of the Middle English period, critics point to one figure as exemplar: Arthur, to whom the second chapter is devoted. Much can be made of the fact that Arthur, like Beowulf, is not English; he is Welsh. The adoption of Arthur as their hero by English authors and audiences obscures his heritage (Higham 5-6). For authors and audiences of this era, Arthur’s provenance is not as important as his prominence in that the figure of Arthur as a great king is more important in the construction of an English hero than the nation from which he hails. An example of this is Geoffrey of Monmouth, who reconciles Arthur’s Celtic heritage by absorbing Wales into his Historia Regnum Britanniae and framing the history of all of Britain as the history of contemporary England. I explore how the AMA and Malory reflect English concerns about national identity. In the late Middle English era, tension was caused by the complex identity of English readers, many of whom traced their own heritage to the Normans and had adopted Norman cultural and literary traditions. Yet they also found themselves pitted against France and facing the military and cultural consequences of possible defeat in the Hundred Years’ War. This military interaction with France brought to the surface the complicated relationship between England and France and the tension that Anglo-Norman
audiences felt about their own identity. Highlighting this, some Arthurian literature illustrates Fanon’s theory regarding the effect that psychological tension resulting from conflict has on natives, and specifically, how the Hundred Years’ War led the authors of *Malory* and the *AMA* to create texts in which an English king conquers French territory. This fantasy is similar to the way Fanon imagines the colonized would create a world where the oppressed rise to power and the colonizer falls to ruin.

Though the *AMA* and *Malory* were written three to four hundred years after the Norman Conquest, this experience of conquest set a clear precedent for the devaluing of English culture, replacing much of the aristocratic values and literature with those of the French and Anglo-Norman. This continued experience of cultural inferiority stoked the feelings of vulnerability of English audiences who faced war on the horizon and engendered conflicts of identity for those who were being forced to irrevocably break away from their Norman roots. The *AMA* and *Malory* reflect the psychological upheaval resulting from this crisis. Felicity Riddy contends that the theme of Arthur as colonizer in Malory’s work – and I would add in the *AMA* – develops from the displacement of the English from cultural privilege by the Normans; in essence, just as the Normans saw the English as inferiors, when Arthur invades France, he finds natives who are monstrous and barbaric (69). Here, once again, is an example of the blurring of the line between colonized and colonizer. Though the writers of Arthurian literature were probably themselves descended from Normans, they chose to deny French cultures and literary traditions and write stories of English power *in English*, highlighting Fanon’s suggestion that natives will eventually depart from or adapt the traditions the colonizers privilege and authorize their own traditions.

However, Arthurian literature is not as simple as throwing off the shackles of Norman oppression. The readership of Arthurian romances were most likely themselves descended from
the Normans, but the Hundred Years’ War complicates this identity and forces the authors of this genre to forge a golden mean. While French may have been the language of the elite on the continent and considered culturally superior, the texts of the *AMA* and *Malory* illustrate that English writers can compete in the romance genre with heroes who represent them. As Fanon argues, native traditions must be represented in the literature of resistance in order for native audiences to identify with the texts. *Beowulf* and *The Battle of Maldon* both reveal a reverence for Anglo-Saxon traditions of warrior culture, a view also present in the *AMA*, and *Malory* when, as Bhabha posits will happen in hybrid cultures, English authors start co-opting other cultures and languages – not just in terms of vocabulary but also in terms of ideas.

In these particular Middle English texts, it seems the authors are trying to beat the French at their own game by proving England is just as cultured as France by demonstrating English superiority within Arthurian literature. Yet, while the Arthurian romances borrow much from the French continental culture, the authors of these stories imbue them with such an *English* flavor by highlighting the Anglo-Saxon warrior ethic that these texts cannot be mistaken for just another French Romance. Though Arthur’s bellicosity is sometimes criticized as disproportionate, for authors and audiences reeling from a prolonged war with France, a ferocious and successful warrior king would have been welcomed as a blessing though he may have been castigated for his methods.

However, the cultural tension between England and France requires that the fantasy change and the hero must prove mastery not only on the battlefield, but also in the court. The *AMA* and Malory’s text focus on both Arthur’s martial prowess and his courtly skills. Because Anglo-Saxon culture was so interwoven with that of their Norman invaders by the time this Arthurian literature was written, the audience of these English romances required Arthur’s ability
to act both as an English king who upholds the earlier Anglo-Saxon warrior tradition of honor and strength, glory and courage exemplified in in heroes like Beowulf and Byrhtnoth, and a cultural equal to the French and bilingual nobles who were so integrated into English society. The Arthur of the *AMA* and Malory operates within both realms of English experience on the battlefield and within the courtly and political spheres.

Last, Arthur as a hero must offer a response to the increased political interactions with France in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries by embodying a shrewd political mind able to navigate foreign politics with ease. By the fourteenth century, the English people had higher expectations of the hero: he must be as battle-ready as Beowulf and Byrhtnoth and as courtly and politically shrewd as nobles of the French court with which England had frequent interaction. Ultimately, Arthur exemplifies the hybridity at work in the English culture of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries by uniting insular and Anglo-Norman traditions.

In the third chapter, I turn to Shakespeare’s *Henry V*, which offers the fullest realization (at least in the dramatic corpus of early modern England) of the ideal heroic English king. Henry V even surpasses Arthur as the prototypical hero who not only defends his people but also defeats their enemies. In this way, Henry V typifies the “new man” Fanon champions in his great call to action; one not based on a European ideal but forged instead from the national past and the needs of the new native. This crucial appeal inspired my proposition that, having broken from colonial culture, in Shakespeare’s time the English set about creating a hero who moves away from continental traditions. Although Fanon is calling for a redefining of self, Shakespeare’s Henry represents an early attempt to create this “new man,” albeit fictionally. While Beowulf and Byrhtnoth defend their peoples and lands, and Arthur expands the role of the hero to also act as a cultural equal to continental rivals, Shakespeare’s Henry represents the
superiority of the English hero by once again improving upon the English archetype, adapting it to face new challenges. In considering *Henry V*, I argue that having transformed from physically insecure, to socially inferior, to a major social and political force, English audiences no longer seek to define themselves using heroes who are borrowed from other cultures; instead, they use figures from the recent past to develop English standards of the heroic. Unlike Arthur, whose genealogy can only marginally be connected to English history and Beowulf, who is irrefutably not of English origins, Henry can trace his English bloodlines back through nearly three hundred years of kings born in England. Borrowing from the long tradition of English heroes before him, Henry V is the consummate king, embodying the Anglo-Saxon warrior who leads his men in battle, calling them to “imitate the action of the tiger; / Stiffen the sinews, summon up the blood, / Disguise fair nature with hard-favour’d rage”; the courtly king of the late medieval period in his dealings with the Dauphin’s messenger; and the shrewd political mind of Arthurian legend in his negotiations with King Charles (3.1.1097-99). Shakespeare depicts Henry as the “star of England: Fortune made his sword, / By which the world’s best garden he achiev’d, / And of it left his son imperial lord,” highlighting that with Henry, England finally achieves its desire for supremacy secured in the dynastic union between England and France ruled over by an English heir (*Henry V* 5.2.3365-67). Henry is not only favored by fate, but also able to rout his enemies and secure a powerful legacy for his people. With Henry, the English find a hero who possesses the military prowess of Byrhtnoth, the resoluteness of Beowulf, the nobility of Arthur, and the ability to succeed where they all failed – a hero who, though ruthlessly calculating, secures their victory. Here, we can see the continued development of the hero reaching yet another stage of antiphon reverberating with the echoes of its forbearers while encompassing the contemporary discord of its own era.
Henry V, Arthur, Byrhtnoth, and Beowulf all act within a fantasy-scape, an imaginative plane where medieval and early modern authors and audiences’ can engage their anxieties and desires and, at the same time, reconstruct their reality. This fantasy is one that transcends time and place and is crucial to understanding the communal experience of English audiences of these texts. In discussing nationhood in sixteenth century England, Claire McEachern posits that [heroic] tropes are a form of ‘similitude,’ which enact to animate comparisons between things … Originating in man’s need to name those things for which no names were extant, figures remedy the poverty of a fallen tongue … Tropes thus remedy the lapse from an Adamic insufficiency of language, with its innate knowledge of all names, by constructing forms of fellowship, whether mobilizing an implicit resemblance between things or cobbling one together so as to render the alien familiar. (89-90)

In essence, the role of the hero is as place-holder for all that some portion of a given society wishes to say but cannot, all their hopes and dreams, concerns and vulnerabilities. What, then, do these ambitions and anxieties require in the creation of a new hero trope? Someone who is battle-hardened like Beowulf and Byrhtnoth, able to engage in foreign cultural constructs with mastery like Arthur, and, most importantly, who cleverly navigates the changing terrain of the duty of a hero performing the roles of moral compass, just jurist, skilled rhetorician, military Everyman, courtly lover, and shrewd Machiavel both in turns and all at once. Yet, before we can investigate Henry’s role as the consummate champion of the English people, we must first trace the origins of this archetype in the Anglo-Saxon and Anglo-Norman portrayals of Beowulf, Byrhtnoth, and Arthur.
By examining how the heroic standard evolves over centuries, my project explicates the changing figure of the hero, demonstrating that as the needs and desires of the authors and audiences change, so, too, does the character who represents them. And yet these heroes are not merely passive figures on the page; they are also imbued with the power to speak to their contemporary audiences and champion them not only in the world of fantasy, but also within the real world, at times offering a vehicle to castigate those in power in a way no mortal man could. Hence, these literary figures, steeped in the traditions of their patrons, provide a unique window into the culture and concerns of the audience during the medieval and early modern periods. As fantasies they represent the desire for strength, glory, triumph, and inspiration; reflect the agony of anxiety, vulnerability, defeat, and hopelessness; and, perhaps most importantly, reimagine, reframe, and redress reality.
CHAPTER TWO:

BEOWULF AND BYRHTNOTH: WINSOME WARRIORS

[Storytelling] is one of the most reassuring things. It seems its very basis is that it reassures you that there is a sense to things... The story creates a form, and the form reassures [audiences] so that you can almost tell them any story ... There is something very powerful in stories, something that gives you security and a sense of identity and meaning.

― Wim Wenders qtd. by Modleski 70

Much like the native peoples of Colonial and Post-colonial countries discussed by Frantz Fanon, English writers responded to their cultural anxiety, vulnerability, and trauma by creating a rich fantasy in which their heroes have qualities that make success possible no matter how improbable that might be in reality. When discussing the role of the epic in the psycho-affective response of the native, Fanon posits that the epic “brings an urgent breath of excitement, arouses forgotten muscular tensions and develops the imagination. Every time a storyteller narrates a new episode, the public is treated to a real invocation. The existence of a new type of man is revealed to the public. The present is no longer turned inward, but channeled in every direction” (174). For the storyteller, the act of creation manifests the coping process whereby the author and audience respond to their reality sometimes in a therapeutic way and other times through fiction actively engaging the contemporary situation. Byrhtnoth and Beowulf represent fictional embodiments of a fantasy of power: men of super-human strength and exceptional resoluteness who, through their remarkable sacrifices, inspire men to accomplish phenomenal deeds of their
own. In this way, the authors of theses texts challenge their reality, reframing the English people as capable rather than helpless, forceful rather than defenseless, impressive rather than inferior.

To fully understand the cultural experience that gives rise to the creation of heroes like Beowulf and Byrhtnoth, a brief historical overview is necessary. For the purposes of this study, the eighth century, the beginning of what some critics call the “Viking Age proper,” a period of increased interaction starting around the year 780, is the most appropriate starting point and offers a clear demonstration of the type of violent conflict occurring between English people and foreign invaders (Jones 1). The Viking raid on Lindisfarne in 793 is marked in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle as a troubling hallmark of future suffering; in the entry for that year, the author writes,

> Her wæron řede forebecna cumene ofer Norðanhybbra land. 7 þ folc earmlic bregdon; þæs ormete lig rescas, 7 wæron ge seowene ñryne on þam lyfte fleogende. Þam tacnum sona fyligde mycel hunger. 7 litel æfter þam, þæs ilcan geares on .vi. idus Iañr earmlice hæðena manna hergung adiligode Godes cyrican. in Lindisfarena ee. þurh reaflac. 7 man sleght. (Plummer, E 793)

Here terrible portents came about over the land of Northumbria, and miserably frightened the people: these were immense flashes of lightning, and fiery dragons were seen flying in the air. A great famine immediately followed these signs; and a little after that in the same year on 8 January the raiding of heathen men miserably devastated God’s church in Lindisfarne island by looting and slaughter.

(Swanton, E 793)

Though this particular foray did not immediately usher in a wave of Viking aggression, it did signal the beginning of nearly three centuries of Danish incursions on English shores. The ninth
century saw raids on London, Rochester, Southampton, East Anglia, York, and Reading, and large influxes of foreign forces onto English shores.

Between 869 and 875 [the Danes] “conquered” first the kingdom of the East Angles (869), then the kingdom of the Mercians (874), and finally … the Northumbrians (875), leaving only the extended kingdom of the West Saxons … . In 876 a group “settled” in Northumbria, and in 877 another group ‘settled’ in Mercia … A further group, under Guthrum, remained intent upon subduing Wessex, and in January 878 took the West Saxons by surprise. (Keynes, “Alfred” 22)

These invasions forced Alfred to retreat into the Somerset marshes – a crushing and embarrassing defeat for the great Anglo-Saxon king.7

In the latter part of the century, Alfred the Great worked tirelessly to defend his kingdom from these assailants, securing a decisive victory in the Battle of Ethandun and establishing a treaty with the Danish Guthrum delineating the boundaries of Alfred’s Wessex and Guthrum’s Viking kingdom – what was later termed the Danelaw (Abels 163). Though Æthelstan brought all of England together under one rule in 927 when he seized York from Viking rule, this did not initiate a time of peace in the tenth century (Foot 12-19). Rather, Æthelstan and the seven Anglo-Saxon kings who followed him continued to work to repel the Viking Danes who sought victory on English shores, sometimes successfully, sometimes not. One instance of failure to secure England’s borders was the Battle of Maldon in 991, commemorated in the poem of that name in

7 For further grounding in the history of the Viking raids of the eighth and ninth centuries, see Whitelock and James Campbell, Eric John, and Patrick Wormald, ed., *The Anglo-Saxons*. 
the late tenth century. Yet the conflict with Viking forces was so common that some assert it “would be no more than a dim episode in a monotonous succession of disasters were it not for the great poem which describes the death of Byrhtnoth … in a battle against the raiders” (Stenton 376). This humiliating defeat at the hands of the Danes at the end of the tenth century sets the stage for two of the most cataclysmic events of English history – the conquests of Cnut and William. Æthelred the Unready’s disastrous policies in late 990s and early eleventh century – openly paying tribute to Danish kings for peace and slaughtering Danish settlers at the St. Brice’s Day massacre – led to increasingly weak support for the king (Keynes, “Æthelred II”). Danish king Sweyn Forkbeard used this unpopularity to his advantage, invading in 1003 and, after a ten-year campaign, seizing the throne in 1013. When Sweyn died and Æthelred returned to the throne, he and his son further alienated their people by harshly punishing any who were perceived to have sided with the Danes (Lawson, “Edmund II”). In 1016, the English conceded victory to Sweyn’s son Cnut and accepted him as their king after a prolonged campaign and siege of London (Lawson, Cnut 27, Stenton 393). After his death, and the death of his son Harthacnut, the English throne returned, briefly, to Anglo-Saxon hands in 1043, but this was not to last. In 1066 William created the age of the Normans with his victory at the Battle of Hastings. This experience of outside forces invading, settling, and, sometimes, deposing English natives is repeated throughout the eighth, ninth, tenth, and eleventh centuries, and this frequent theme underlines the literature written during this time and colors the heroes that arise from it.

Though the composition of the Beowulf poem has been greatly contested with claims dating it anywhere from the late seventh century to the beginning of the eleventh century,

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8 For a discussion of evidence for a tenth century date of composition, see Scragg, “The Battle of Maldon: Fact or Fiction?”.
9 See also Timothy Bolton, The Empire of Cnut the Great.
working with the approximate manuscript date allows for a more specific connection between experience and literature. There are three reasons the manuscript date offers the best option for examining the cultural milieu that surrounds the text. First, the *Beowulf* poem of the late seventh century, if it existed, may have looked very different than the *Beowulf* which was eventually copied down, but we have no way of knowing how this “urtext” might have differed. Further, while we do not know who may have read or heard the poem before it was written down, we are sure that the eleventh century *Beowulf* was at least experienced by the scribes who copied down. Last, using this date also allows for greater connection to *The Battle of Maldon* poem as *Maldon* is most often argued by Edward B. Irving, John Niles, and others to have been written in the years following the actual battle, 991. Though the manuscript of *Beowulf* is dated near the year 1000, the historical events surrounding this date help to establish the foundation for feelings of vulnerability that are demonstrated in both texts.

Even when they are not fighting off the alien horde, the position of Anglo-Saxon people was insecure at best and deadly at worst, something highlighted by Cnut’s execution of English noblemen who might have threatened his claim to the throne. As Fanon theorizes, this tenuous position causes a great deal of psychic trauma which leads the authors to seek escape from their harsh reality. Thus, when they produce a fantasy world in *The Battle of Maldon* and *Beowulf*, authors and audiences use these texts to imagine a scenario where their desires for power and prominence are realized. These particular stories, with their focus on muscularity and military prowess, serve to highlight the type of vulnerability being expressed, as a physical and martial

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11 Kiernan specifically dates the manuscript to the early eleventh century in *Beowulf and the Beowulf Manuscript*. 
insecurity, and the heroes of these stories clearly respond to those concerns. The characters of Byrhtnoth and Beowulf are representatives of aspects of the Old English warrior-hero, and each deals with the concerns of a people who seem absorbed with the hero’s physicality and whether he can rout the enemy. Beowulf and Byrhtnoth share an uncommon ability to combat seemingly insurmountable adversaries, even if they themselves are felled. However, their most important virtue is their ability to inspire, a trait that bodes well for future generations of warriors both in the poem and in the audience. Beowulf is, of course, a very successful, almost superhuman hero. In his early encounters, he not only wins but wins spectacularly. Byrhtnoth, too, has a successful reputation, and his men and the poet praise him as a powerful military leader. Despite their victories, these heroes must fail in the end: Beowulf dies defeating the dragon, and Byrhtnoth falls in battle. These failures signal that the poets knew that no matter how much they might desire a hero who could conquer any foe, reality had taught them there was no such thing as absolute success in a time when a victory was followed by yet another test. This paradox of spectacular heroes who ultimately fail clearly illustrates the vulnerability experienced during this time.

To cope with the threat of invasion, Anglo-Saxon writers play out their desire for agency in the type of hero they exhibit in their literature. For the writers of the Old English period, invasion impacted the way authors thought and wrote about the myths and heroes they invented as a means of (re)capturing a sense of national pride. The heroes of The Battle of Maldon and Beowulf respond in an imaginative way to the real threats faced by the people of England, a reality which stimulated the authors to create a literary version of the experience they faced so that their heroes might succeed in ways their warriors could not. This ability to reframe reality contributes to rallying national pride since, as Fanon asserts, nationalist literature, or, literature in
which native people tell stories of empowerment, calls on the people to fight for their existence as a nation by telling *their* stories about *their* heroes. This drawing together of diverse populations into a ‘collective identity’ is something that Sarah Foot attributes to the earlier savvy of King Alfred, who promoted “the term Angelcynn to reflect the common identity of his people in a variety of texts dating from the latter part of his reign” (25). Foot further contends that, for “his efforts in cultivating the shared memory of his West Mercian and West Saxon subjects, King Alfred might be credited with the invention of the English as political community” (25). Alfred’s effort “to shape the English imagination [by] collating and presenting a coherent historical whole [and] implanting in the minds of his people a personal and cultural feeling of belonging to the Angelcynn, the English kind” is advanced by the later poetic creations of *The Battle of Maldon* and *Beowulf* poets who unite the English audience behind powerful and successful heroes (Foot 36-7).

**Byrhtnoth the Seasoned Savior**

In *The Battle of Maldon*, the author creates a hero who has both the military expertise and the unyielding spirit required to face the might of advancing Vikings. From the very beginning of the poem, the author describes Byrhtnoth in terms of his military prowess and capacity for leadership, saying,

\[
\text{Het þa hyssa hwæne hors forlætan,} \\
\text{feor afysan, and forð gangan,} \\
\text{hicgan to handum and to hige godum. (2-4)\textsuperscript{12}}
\]

\[\text{\textsuperscript{12}}\text{All references to the original text of *The Battle of Maldon* are from *The Anglo-Saxon Minor Poems* edited by Elliot Van Kirk Dobbie. All translations of *The Battle of Maldon* from Elaine Treharne’s *Old and Middle English c.890-1450: An Anthology* unless otherwise noted.}\]
Then he commanded each one of the warriors let his horse go,
to drive it far away and to advance on foot
to turn thoughts to hands and to be of good courage.

It is clear from this description that Byrhtnoth has the intelligence and experience to make wise decisions as a military strategist. Ordering the horses driven away is a prudent decision not only because they would a hindrance in the close quarters of combat, but also because they offer an opportunity for men to abandon the field of battle as Offa and his sons do after Byrhtnoth’s death. Later, he further demonstrates his skill as a combat veteran when instructing and positioning his men.

Đa þær Byrhtnoð ongan beornas trymian,
rad and rædde, rincum tæhte
hu hi sceoldon standan and þone stede healdan,
and bæd þæt hyra randas rihte heoldon
fäste mid folman, and ne forhtedon na. (17-21)

Then Byrhtnoth began to encourage the warriors there,
he rode about and gave them advice, taught the warriors how they should stand and maintain position,
and urged them to hold their shields properly,
securely with their hands, and not to be afraid at all.

Byrhtnoth’s experience as a tested commander can be seen in his expertise in arranging his troops, ordering their ranks, providing instruction, and marshalling their courage; and through his leadership and encouragement he demonstrates his capacity as a great commander. The poet’s alliteration links these wise instructions and rhythmically evokes the pounding of war drums
with repeated cacophonous pulsing consonants. In these choices, we can almost hear Byrhtnoth’s rousing call to arms.

However, it cannot be argued that Byrhtnoth is a perfect tactician. His prideful choice to allow the Viking horde to cross the defensible river and onto the battlefield (86-90) is a poor one further compounded by his decision not to negotiate with the Vikings by paying them tribute in exchange for peace (46-62). But when scholars criticize this choice, they focus on the poet’s use of “ofermode,” arguing that it is an implicit criticism of the Byrhtnoth’s decision (89). The use of the word “ofermod,” defined by Bosworth-Toller as “pride, arrogance, over-confidence” to describe Byrhtnoth’s attitude, is not nearly so simple as it has a multitude of definitions (736). Helmut Gneuss offers six categories or groups of meanings in which the definitions fall: excessive or foolish pride, overconfidence, recklessness, overboldness, great courage, magnanimity (119). It is clear from the breadth of definitions that this term offers a vagueness that can be interpreted in both positive and negative ways; thus, Byrhtnoth’s choice, while calamitous, does not necessarily decrease his heroic value. Thus, we must search for other clues in order to understand how to interpret Byrhtnoth’s character and actions.

The best way, then, to judge the poet’s assessment of Byrhtnoth is to consider how the text treats his mistake. Some scholars insist Byrhtnoth’s pride is “a desire for [personal] honor and glory,” confirmed by his faulty choices (Tolkien 14). Others declare Byrhtnoth’s pride is acceptable, even venerable – as Hill terms it, a “heroic overconfidence” – and the poet portrays this characteristic favorably (Hill 118). Perhaps the best answer lies somewhere in the middle. It is true that Byrhtnoth’s ego lead him to make a terrible miscalculation that leads to a massacre of

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13 D.G. Scragg, for instance, claims in his introduction to the poem that Byrhtnoth’s ofermode can be compared to the classical Greek understanding of hubris which is always cast as a flaw of the hero.
his men. Nevertheless, Byrhtnoth’s pride in his people, his satisfaction in being their representative, and his belief that they are too great to so cheaply hand over their honor are all positive attributes for a hero who embodies the fantasy of a vulnerable author and audience. Where Tolkien sees Byrhtnoth’s pride as a flaw, this overabundance of pride is also what makes him stand out as a hero. Indeed, the poet portrays Byrhtnoth as making no claims on personal glory; instead, he “sæd Metode þanc / ðæs dæsweorces þe him Drihten forgeaf” “gave thanks to the Creator / for the day's work that the Lord had granted to him” (147b-48). Furthermore, tellingly in his last prayer the poet does not depict Byrhtnoth seeking forgiveness for arrogance or pride, evidence the poet does not see his actions as needing forgiveness (Davis 159). Undeniably, Byrhtnoth errs in his decision to allow his enemy to cross into his land and to refuse to negotiate, and it is a valid judgement that these mistakes result from an overabundance of pride; however, to judge the pride that leads to these decisions as purely a flaw is to judge it by a modern understanding when “extremism in the defense of one’s land and people simply is no vice in a Germanic ethical universe” (Davis 159). Furthermore, though Byrhtnoth dies and his choice leads to the death of many men, the poet and soldiers continue to refer to him in good terms: “leofne” (beloved), the “þeoden” (people’s protector), “winemagas” (dear kinsman), “swa leofne men” (such a loved man) (208, 232 – translation mine, 306, 319 – translation mine). “The heroic idiom of The Battle of Maldon is anything but naïve. Its use suggests at once admiration, nostalgia and regret – admiration for the greatness of a secular magnate, nostalgia for the heroism of a brighter day, and regret that such heroism makes death its companion” (O’Brien O’Keeffe 117). The tone of the poem suggests that Byrhtnoth’s vices are forgiven in light of his virtues.
Yet Byrhtnoth’s worth is not merely in his capacity as a battle strategist; he is in and amongst his men, fighting spectacularly to repel those forces that threaten his people and land. In describing Byrhtnoth’s prowess, the poet writes, “He sceaf þa mid ðam scylde, þæt se sceaf toðærst, / and þæt spere sprengde, þæt hit sprang ongean” “He thrust then with his shield such that the spear shaft burst, / and that spear-head shattered as it sprang in reply” (136-7). In this report, the poet evokes the gruesome details of battle, drawing the audience into the scene and painting a vivid picture of Byrhtnoth’s awesome martial capacity. The poet continues, depicting the stalwart Byrhtnoth thrusting his weapon through the neck of his enemy, and relying on his experience to guide his hand “þæt he on þam færscæðan feorh geræhte” “so that he this ravager’s life would fatally pierce” (142). That he is successful and “æt heortan stod /ætterne ord” “near [his enemy’s] heart stood a deadly spear” is a testament to Byrhtnoth’s fighting ability (143-44a). In these moments the author’s desire to illustrate Byrhtnoth’s talent for fighting is distinctly displayed; the poet depicts the hero in action, slicing and stabbing and slaying his foe. The poet stresses “frod wæs se fyrdrinc” “that warrior was … wise,” and his ability to defeat the attackers he faces illustrates this experience (140). Far from the reckless choice to invite the Vikings onto the battlefield, Byrhtnoth’s expert fighting ability demonstrates his acumen.

Byrhtnoth’s ability to fight beyond human endurance typifies his commitment to the cause and unwavering heroic performance (140). Byrhtnoth’s skill is tested by the fact that he is severely wounded again and again, first by a “suþerne gar / þæt gewundod wearð wigena hlaford” “spear of southern make / [by which] the lord of the warriors was wounded” then “Forlet þa drenga sum darð of handa, / fleogan of folman, þæt se to forð gewat / þurh ðone æþelan Æþelredes þegen,” “Then a certain warrior sent a light spear from his hands, / let it fly from his clutches, so that it went forwards / through the noble thane of Æthelred” (134b-
Despite these serious wounds, he fights on and "bræd bill of sceðe" “pull[s] his sword from its sheath” and strikes his enemy (162). It is only after receiving a third wound to his arm which makes it impossible to hold his sword that Byrhtnoth falters. His ability to strike down his opponents even with a puncture wound and a spear embedded in his body not only establishes his expertise, but his might. By highlighting Byrhtnoth’s knowledge as a commander and his prowess as a fighter, despite a particularly poor strategic choice, the author sets about creating the building blocks of a great hero and illustrates the powerful qualities desired by the author and audience.

In an age when the threat of combat was ever present – indeed the last twenty years of the tenth century saw thirteen years of intense conflict with Vikings and Danes – the Battle of Maldon-poet forged a hero whose strengths compensated for the feelings of insecurity and vulnerability inherent to the lived experience of invasion. Byrhtnoth, while not perfect, is a capable and competent leader of men whose own fighting prowess is depicted as nearly superhuman. This archetype of expertise and virility demonstrates what Fanon calls “muscular dreams, dreams of action, dreams of aggressive vitality” in which the author and audience escape the reality of their situation through fantasy, through creating a reality in which they are strong and secure and dominant (15). Byrhtnoth is the embodiment of this wish and the poet makes clear in his portrayal that Byrhtnoth’s virtues far outweigh his failings.

Byrhtnoth the Unwavering Patriot

Just as Byrhtnoth’s strength reflects a fantasy of power for the author and audience, so too do his other qualities indicate their desires. Another pivotal trait of The Battle of Maldon’s hero is the zealousness with which he defends his people from all threats: both physical and
 psychic. In line 50, Byrhtnoth demonstrates this unwavering commitment telling the Viking’s messenger to deliver back a “miccle láþre spell” “a much more hateful message” from him:

her stynt unforcuð eorl mid his werode,
þe wile gealgean eþel þysne,
Æþelredes eard, ealdres mines,
folc and foldan. (51-4)

here stands, with his troop, an earl of untainted reputation,
who will defend this native land,
the country of Æthelred, my lord’s
people and ground.

Byrhtnoth’s loyalty to his people is abounding; he stands ready to defend his people and native land even at the cost of his and his troop’s lives. Byrhtnoth defiantly answers the Viking messenger with pride both as an English nobleman and as proxy for Æthelred and indicates a willingness to make the greatest sacrifice and, in so doing, displays the depth of his devotion.

Contrasted within the text to Byrhtnoth’s disloyal followers Odda and his sons Godrich, Godwine, and Godwig, Byrhtnoth’s unwavering devotion to his cause certainly stands apart. Whereas Godrich, Godwine, and Godwig seem to feel that once Byrhtnoth falls they have no duty to remain on the field, the poet depicts this choice as faithless. Indeed, John Hill argues that “in a different poem or narrative, in Beowulf’s world, for example, or in any number of sagas,” the options of strategic retreat and posthumous vengeance are seen as honorable alternatives to falling in battle; however, the Battle of Maldon “poet characterizes the flight of Odda’s sons in strongly negative ways” (Hill 117). When Odda’s sons betray their fallen lord and steal his horse (186–97), they confuse his troops, who think their leader is retreating, which causes “manigne
man aflymde” “many men to flee”; thus they earn the poet’s censure (243). The poet’s depiction of Odda’s sons as not only deserters, but also thieves and cowards, illustrates his contempt for their lack of a sense of duty. Thus, by contrast, Byrhtnoth’s devotion to his countrymen, an allegiance he proves with his death in their defense, reveals the author and audience’s longing for a hero with phenomenal fidelity.

In his refusal to pay Danegeld, a practice in the tenth and eleventh centuries when English nobles and people would pay a ransom of treasure to ensure that the invaders would leave them in peace, Byrhtnoth also displays a pride in his people because he believes that to pay would dishonor his people (Stenton 376). He argues

To heanlic me þinceð
þæt ge mid urum sceattum to scype gangan
unbefohtene, nu ge þus feor hider
on urne eard in becomon. (55b-58)

It seems too shameful to me
that you should go to your ships with our tribute
without a fight now that you have come this far
here into our land.

Byrhtnoth’s focus on the shame associated with submitting to a system of oppression without so much as a protest highlights the psychic trauma Fanon, Memmi, Bhabha and others argue is inherent in the practice of colonization. This humiliation is, for Byrhtnoth, a wound which

14 Bhabha specifically addresses the immense impact shame caused by colonization can have on the native in his forward to The Wretched of the Earth. He writes, “The native may not accept the authority of the colonizer, but his complex and contradictory fate – where rejected guilt begins to feel like shame – hangs over him like a Damoclean sword; it threatens him with an imminent disaster that may collapse both the internal life and the external world” (xxxix).
cannot be borne; he must fight, for, as Memmi theorizes, “revolt is the only way out of the colonial situation” (127). Contemporary texts, like *The Battle of Brunanburh*, see this type of aggressive defense as laudable, and main characters are praised for defending the *hord* and *hamas*, ‘treasury and homes’ (Baker 205). There appears to be evidence that the practice of Danegeld was common; the *Chronicle*, for instance, records that “it was determined that tribute should first be paid to the Danish men, because of the great terror they were causing along the coast” (Keynes, “Historical Context of the Battle of Maldon” 91). Yet the poem seems to interrogate the practice. Whereas the chronicler, according to Keynes, justifies such an action by taking authority from “Sigeric, archbishop of Canterbury, who ‘first advised that course,’” the poet makes clear that for him the best course of action is a military response (91). Evidence of the poet’s more hardline approach is apparent in Byrhtnoth’s vow, “Ne sceole ge swa softe sinc gegangan; / us sceal ord and ecg ær geseman, / grim guðplega, ær we gofol syllon” “You shall not get treasure so easily: / weapon-tip and edge shall arbitrate between us first, / the fierce game of battle, before we give you tribute” (59-61). Here, “The poet defines how, in his opinion, the Danes should be opposed. His attitude is clear: he believes in military opposition, a refusal to pay tribute, decisive leadership and a determination to see battles through to the end” (Scattergood 22). *The Battle of Maldon* can thus be seen as commenting on the events outside the literature since the poet offers an alternative to and criticism of the “shameful” practice of Danegeld (55b). This concern with the practice of Danegeld illustrates the unease the poet and his audience share over the humiliation of having been defeated to the point of bribing the combatants to go away instead of fighting honorably, and Byrhtnoth’s refusal to buckle under acts as an attempt to make real in fantasy what cannot be true in the reality – the ability to stand against foreign aggressors no matter the cost. John Niles advocates this
transformative power of fiction, positing that “oral poetry provide[s] a site where things happen, where power is declared or invoked” (“Reconceiving Beowulf” 143). What this means is the poem represents a desire to reframe the historical facts of the battle of Maldon and recast it as a triumphant stand against a foreign foe. Byrhtnoth embodies the author and audience’s desire to respond with courage to a force that seems insurmountable and to alleviate frustration and shame by depicting a hero who will not surrender to the overwhelming threat, no matter the personal cost. By experiencing Byrhtnoth’s heroism, the audience attempts to assuage their feelings of inferiority, for who could feel inferior when Byrhtnoth is willing to defend them even unto death? The author and audience wished to experience this pride and fearlessness themselves, so they created it in their hero. In a time when audiences clearly desired relief from the onslaught of invaders, warriors ready, willing, and able to defend the people are pivotal. This longing for a warrior who would defend them not only from physical threats but also from dishonor highlights the fear and frustration the author and audience experienced and wanted to alleviate through their literature. Byrhtnoth’s willingness to defend the homeland, even while his fellow countrymen are shamed into participating in such an exchange, epitomizes the extent of Byrhtnoth’s devotion to the English. He will not submit to the Danegeld; instead, he chooses “an absolute solution … a break and not a compromise” as retribution for the terrible shame perpetrated on his people (Memmi 127).

Byrhtnoth the Inspirational Figure

Though extraordinary, Byrhtnoth’s loyalty to country is not his greatest asset; his most admirable quality lies in his power to inspire his men to greatness. His ability to galvanize his men to fight in spite of overwhelming odds exhibits the author’s desire to create a hero who is
not only loyal, but inspires that same loyalty in others. Clearly, no one warrior can turn the tide of the Viking invasion; only a passionate army, like the one Byrhtnoth creates, could have a hope of defeating the invading hordes.

John Hill asserts that Byrhtnoth’s relationship with his men epitomizes the cultural standard for loyalty; however, he claims that this fealty is borne out of a sense of obligation and duty. Hill contends that these warriors “resolve to ask nothing for themselves alone or of Byrhtnoth” and, in so doing, “they collectively internalize an injunction whereby the dead Byrhtnoth is allowed to be everything to them:” their “beloved lord” (Beowulf 248), a reflection of their own honor, and the epitome of steadfast loyalty to country (“Triumphant Lordship” 125).

The choices that these warriors make illustrate how far beyond the conventional limits of obligation they are willing to go for Byrhtnoth. Byrhtnoth’s men passionately demonstrate their devotion to him throughout the poem. At the beginning of the poem, Offa’s unnamed kinsman is reported to have freed his “leofne … hafoc” “beloved hawk” when it becomes clear Byrhtnoth will fight the Vikings (5-6). While this is a small moment, the personal sacrifice inherent in this choice to free his treasured creature illustrates the lengths to which Byrhtnoth’s men will go for him. A few lines later the poet imagines the thoughts of Eadric, another of Byrhtnoth’s warriors, commenting, “wolde [he] his earle gelæstan, / Frean to gefeohhte, ongan þa forð beran / gar to guðe” “[he] wanted to serve his leader, / his lord in fight, so he began then to carry forward / his spear into battle” (11-13a). The author chooses “willan” meaning “wish or desire” (Klaeber 456) when describing the Eadric’s choice to join Byrhtnoth on the battlefield; this conscious and passionate decision to join the cause is a far cry from a soldier’s duty. The poet further amplifies this feeling, continuing, “þa hwile þe he mid handum healdan mihte / bord and brad swurd; beot he gelæste / þa he ætforan his frean feohran sceolde” “as long as he could hold with his
hands his shield and broad sword; he fulfilled his boast when he was obliged to fight in front of his lord” (14-16). These moments of omniscience, where the poet provides the inner thoughts of a character, are pure artistic invention, as the poet later reports the English warriors are all killed in battle leaving, none to tell the author his thoughts and feelings. Thus, the author’s choice to frame Eadric as choosing to die for his lord highlights his personal connection to Byrhtnoth and the hero’s ability to inspire greatness.

As Hill painstakingly details, there were any number of acceptable options available to Byrhtnoth’s warriors that would have fulfilled Anglo-Saxon expectation of the relationship between lord and thegn besides fighting to the death. They could have merely won glory through battle, chosen discretion as the better part of valor and withdrawn, sought revenge against Byrhtnoth’s enemies, responded with an arrogant and brash free-for-all, or, indeed, “anything else” (Hill 125). Indeed, both Byrhtnoth’s death and example provoke his men to transcend their own fear of mortality, to act as he would (and did) act, and to defend their people even to a probable death. “The retainers in effect become the apotheosis of loyal retainership, their way being the only way, and their deeds being meritorious enough to be announced to a no doubt astonished world” (Hill 126). In establishing this profound connection, the poet guarantees that the warriors’ love and loyalty allows for only two choices: death or vengeance.

After Byrhtnoth’s death and the shameful flight of Odda’s sons, the poet’s rhetoric swells as he describes:

\[ ða ðær wendonð forð  wランス þegenas, \]

\[ unearge men  efston georne; \]

\[ hi woldon ða ealle  oðer twega, \]

\[ lif forlætan  oððe leofne gewrecan. (205-208) \]
Then proud thanes came forward there,
the undaunted men hastened eagerly:
they all wanted one of two things,
to give up their life or to avenge their beloved lord.

The author’s description of the Byrhtnoth’s men as “unearg” “undaunted” and “efston” “hasten[ing],” “georne” “eagerly” to their deaths contravenes all human survival instinct (206). This fervor illustrates the Byrhtnoth’s capacity to kindle a devotion in his men that leads them, beyond all reason, to seek out their own deaths. In their vow to succeed or die trying, the poet flamboyantly touts the English warriors as proud and undaunted, characterizing them as incredibly loyal to their fallen leader. Overing argues, in her discussion of Beowulf, that the restriction of heroic choices to either success or death demonstrates a need for resolution that highlights the heroic and inescapable nature of dying in the pursuit of victory. She writes, “it must be one or the other, and the ‘other’ must always lose” (xxiii). Rather than release them from their bond, Byrhtnoth’s death is the catalyst that incites his men to feats of valor as warrior after warrior –Aelfwine, then Offa, then Leofsunu, then Dunnere, then Oswold and Eadwold, then Byrhtwold, then Godric – first vow their loyalty, then plunge into battle, exciting their comrades to do the same. Edward Irving argues that The Battle of Maldon illustrates that the best way to transmit heroic values and inspire heroic actions is through imitation (“Heroic Role-Models,” 370). Here Byrhtnoth stimulates his men to action by embodying the very model of selfless sacrifice defending his country from the invading Vikings with force (60-1) then proves his dedication by forfeiting his life in that defense (181).

The warriors’ acts of speech in remembrance of Byrhtnoth (212-224, 231-243, 246-253, 258-9, and 312-19) take up far more space than his own speeches (45-61, 93-95, and 173-80),
yet, by recalling him in each of their speeches, Byrhtnoth’s warriors illustrate not only their loyalty, but also his capacity to inspire greatness. These speeches have intensely mimetic and inspirational power. By not only acting as Byrhtnoth did, but also vowing to act as he did, the speeches of these warriors function as “heroic articulatory performance … signaling [a] present, active choice” to follow Byrhtnoth’s example (Frese 92). Byrhtwold’s tribute accentuates the mimetic quality of the warriors’ speeches as he declares, “Hige sceal þe heardra, þe heorte þe cenre, / mod sceal þe mare, þe ure mægen lytlað” “The mind must be tougher, the heart the bolder, resolve must be greater, as our strength becomes less” (312-313). In this rallying cry, Byrhtwold fixates on Byrhtnoth’s very best qualities and enjoins his comrades to fashion themselves after their great lord. The second function of the warriors’ speech acts, motivation, is also present in Byrhtwold’s exhortation. Invoking their fallen lord, he counsels his fellow soldiers, “A mæg gnornian / se þe nu fram þis wigplegan wendan þenceð” “He who thinks to turn away from this battle-play now will always regret it” (315a-316). Here, Byrhtwold gathers support for the conflict with the Vikings, ensuring that Byrhtnoth’s sacrifice is not in vain. Last, Byrhtwold imitates the action of his beloved lord and offers his own life in the service of his country pledging, “fram ic ne wille, / ac ic me be healfe minum hlaforde, / be swa leofan men, liegan þence” “I will not go away, but by the side of my lord, of such a dear man, I intend to die” (317b-319). Here Byrhtwold demonstrates Byrhtnoth’s greatest heroic attribute – his ability to inspire his men to greatness.

Though Byrhtnoth falls to the Viking army – as many English warriors do – the legacy he inspires demonstrates the author and audience’s desire for a warrior who can reframe a crushing defeat into a moving manifestation of English capacity for self-sacrifice and loyalty to country. As Simon Keynes maintains, the people of the tenth century endured “a threat of a kind not
experience since the days of King Alfred the Great; and news of the outcome of the first major engagement must have undermined any sense of security born of years of freedom from attack sustained on such a scale” (98). In response, they created a hero who spoke to that sense of insecurity. Whereas, in life, Byrhtnoth could only accomplish the feats of a single hero, in death he inspires an army to fight beyond the normal expectations of the heroic. Thus, the poet moves beyond the constraints of reality and imagines a history in which, even in defeat, the English prevail.

Byrhtnoth’s Failure and Death

The fact that more than half of the poem takes place after the death of the main character makes clear that The Battle of Maldon is no fairytale: Byrhtnoth’s own choices contribute to the sad slaughter of Byrhtnoth and his men. In fact, those as venerable as Tolkien insist that it is Byrhtnoth’s great pride that leads to his downfall and the defeat of his men. However, what Tolkien and other critics neglect to acknowledge is that the idea that death and defeat equal failure is a distinctly modern viewpoint. While to modern readers it may seem that Byrhtnoth fails and therefore the poet must regard him critically, this point of view is “not shared by people in all times and places” (Baker 201-202). Though “it is difficult for modern readers to understand, heroes who deliberately walk into situations where death is a near certainty, … the certainty of the heroic death is more attractive than an outcome that is uncertain with respect to both life and honour” (Baker 208). Byrhtnoth’s willingness to face certain death honorably, more than his ability to defeat the Vikings, is the hallmark of his greatness to both the author and the audience. Roberta Frank further supports this claim, asserting Maldon “draws attention to a Boethian world in which bad fortune is better than good, and life won by its loss” (“The Ideal of
Men Dying” 106). In this way it demonstrates the audience and author’s longing for “a military class imbued with notions of Christian service and sacrifice” willing to face their own mortality in the preservation of their people (“The Ideal of Men Dying” 106). Therefore, Byrhtnoth must not be evaluated by our modern values; instead, we must examine him by the standards of his time, which rate him exemplary. The poet is clear in his many editorializations that Byrhtnoth is to be judged heroic for his actions.

Ultimately, Byrhtnoth’s virtues are what make it possible for the author and audience to contend with reality, for his eventual failure has already been written in history. Although Byrhtnoth’s campaign unravels, ending in his death, his unwavering defense of the English people and his ability to inspire loyalty in others demonstrates to the author and audience that reality is perhaps not as important as fantasy. In this text, the author takes poetic license to create a hero who is not bound by the real or historic. As D.G. Scragg argues, this allows the author to do more than merely recite facts of battles and frees him from the reality that recalls failure allowing him to find “nobility in defeat” (O’Brien O’Keeffe 117). By delving into the fantasy of literature, the poet glorifies the heroic loyalty demonstrated by Byrhtnoth and his warriors, recasting their humiliating defeat at the hands of the invaders into a moment of greatness. This fictive quality allows the poet to create a richer and more important record than that of history, one that not only recounts what did happen, but also what might have happened. As Said has written, “men make their own history;” a function of the Postcolonial experience that The Battle of Maldon illustrates vividly (5). For the author and his audience, The Battle of Maldon’s value lies not in relating the events of a major battle, but in imagining the heroic qualities of the warriors who fought it and allowing the audience to create a world where they can alleviate their frustrations with repeated losses to the Danes and experience victory, no matter how momentary,
before the next incursion. In this way, they draw power from their fiction which can only be exercised by “through the production of truth” (Foucault 93). Though Byrhtnoth ultimately fails to turn back the invaders, by inspiring his men, and the audience, to take up the cause, he allows for at least the fantasy of hope – one not tied to the reality of defeat.

Beowulf the Adopted Hero

If Byrhtnoth represents a desire for an inspirational military leader with unwavering loyalty, then Beowulf represents the desire for the perfect defender. Because Beowulf is unrestricted by the bounds of history, the author is able to create in him not just a hero, but a superhero. Though the story itself may have been composed much earlier, we know that Beowulf still had relevance in a time contemporaneous to The Battle of Maldon poem due to the dating of the Nowell Codex around the late tenth or early eleventh century. Much as in the time of the battle of Maldon, the scribes who copied down Beowulf were also faced with the inability of English forces to eliminate the Viking threat once and for all. This insecurity prompted them to relate a story in which an English writer created in Beowulf a super-human hero, a hero who accomplishes feats no ordinary hero could – the only type of hero who could face the Vikings and crush them.

Critics have pointed to Beowulf’s Geatish ancestry as evidence that he may not represent a true Anglo-Saxon hero; if that is the case, then Beowulf does not stand alone as a foreign figure embraced as a representative of English heroism. Stenton supports this point with his assertion that “Of the three heroic figures whose names are attached two extant English poems, Beowulf belonged to the center of what is now Sweden, Finn to Frisians, and Waldhere to the south of Gaul,” yet each of these heroes is recognized as an English hero (193). Nicholas Howe makes a
similar claim in his work regarding the connections between *Beowulf* and *Exodus* where he posits that the English people appropriate the story of the Israelites’ flight from Egypt as a cultural parallel of their own experience. Just as the Anglo-Saxons draw on the prestige of a foreign people to gain power, in this poem the author chooses to give the Anglo-Saxons ownership of the mighty warrior, seeing his heritage as less important than his heroism. *Beowulf* represents a figure on whom the poet and his audience can write their fantasies of power. Though at the time of composition it could be claimed that *Beowulf* is closer in kind to the foreigners present than to the Anglo-Saxons, the fact that the story is copied down in Old English supports the idea that that the poet has adopted *Beowulf* as *their* hero and signals that adoption by drawing him into *their* culture by means of *their* language. The use of the vernacular to write these stories is telling for postcolonial theorists like those of Ngugi wa Thiong’o, who asserts that language is the heart of a people and allows natives to mark the difference between themselves and their persecutors. Therefore, since *Beowulf* is appropriated by an Old English poet, his story becomes one that symbolizes the experience of the Anglo-Saxon people, regardless of where he comes from or whom he is fighting.

To compound this ambiguity of ethnicity, the poet deliberately sets his story in the distant sixth century and references Germanic and Danish heroes, emphasizing the values useful to contemporary audiences and connecting them to their heroes through shared claims to heroic Scandinavian ancestry (Frank, “The Beowulf-poet’s Sense of History” 56). Though it might be too much to suggest that this poem bridges the cultural gap between conflicting peoples, Roberta Frank’s assertion that the author makes conscious choices is a valid one. By setting *Beowulf* in the distant past, the author is able to connect his audience with the laudable warrior values that are very relevant to the contemporary cultural experience without being restricted by a historical
record. This removal from the concreteness of history allows *Beowulf* to act as an imagined plane where the audience embraces the hero as their own. Further, while Frank suggests that the nationality of the hero is designed to highlight commonalities to be found in cultural diversity, I would contend that the transcendent quality of ambiguity can be applied to the characters as well as the time. Though *Beowulf* may be a Geatish warrior visiting a Danish people, the text was conceivably created, performed and copied for an Anglo-Saxon audience who might see an unknown Geatish warrior as a safe foreigner, someone just unknown enough that they could project their own fantasies on him. The figures, setting, values, and culture of the poem are not so foreign as to be unfamiliar; though “the narrator places the action of *Beowulf* in another country and another, earlier, time, … an Anglo-Saxon audience learned in a vernacular poetic tradition could have deduced that the people and action of the poem belong to a familiar past” (Clark 43). Thus, the text works as a tool of nostalgia in which the author and audience “works out its collective relationship to the present through the poetic representation of a heroic past,” essentially grounding the story in the recognizable while at the same time freeing it from the constraints of historical reality (Trilling 4).

From the very beginning, *Beowulf* is heralded as a warrior for peace, one whose sole purpose is to protect and defend.15 The stories *Beowulf* and others tell about him represent him as a protector who sails to a foreign land not to oppress, but to liberate, as one “Hæfde þa gefælsod se þe ær feorran com, / snotor ond swyðferhð, sele Hroðgares, / genered wið

15 My use of the term “warrior for peace” draws from Roberta Frank’s argument that *Beowulf* is “a pagan prince of peace” which I discuss below. However, this term has too many Christian connotations, likening *Beowulf* to a Christ-like figure, and, while critics such as Klaeber (“The Christian Elements in ‘Beowulf’”), Goldsmith (“The Christian Theme of *Beowulf*”; “The Christian Perspective in *Beowulf*”), Huppè (*The Hero in the Earthly City*), and Garde (“*Sapientia, ubi sunt, and the Heroic Ideal in Beowulf*”) among others have made this argument, it is not relevant to my study.
nīðe” “Who had come from afar had cleansed, wise and stout-hearted, the hall of Hrothgar, warded off attack” (825-7). Frank contends that

the Beowulf poet seems especially concerned to distinguish between justifiable and unjustifiable aggression, to place the warlike activities of his pagan hero in an ethical context. Beowulf resorts to arms out of concern for the defenseless and for the common good, not exclusively out of lust for conquest, ambition, or vengefulness. He is … a pagan prince of peace. (61-2)

It certainly cannot be said that Beowulf’s motivations for coming to the Danes’ rescue are purely altruistic. He subscribes to the Anglo-Saxon value of glory-seeking through violent encounters, but this type of violence does not preclude him from a classification as a hero. In fact, Peter Baker insists that such violence was an expected means of earning prestige and honor in medieval society (10). What is significant about Beowulf’s ferocious behavior is that it is used in the defense of others. This distinction is, indeed, important for an author and an audience whose experience with armed foreigners has more often than not resulted in the foreigner enacting violence upon them instead of in defense of them. Responding to that feeling of defenselessness, the author crafts a hero who, unlike England’s invaders, uses his strength to the benefit of the people rather than any desire for personal gain. Beowulf’s arrival to Hrothgar’s land is revealing because he arrives providentially to save a people from an overwhelming and recurring threat, illustrating the author’s and audience’s desire for an intervention on their behalf against their overwhelming and recurring threat.

As a providential gift Beowulf carries the mantle of a hero. Our first introduction to the stalwart savior is one of brief suspicion followed by flamboyant praise.

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16 All Old English quotations of Beowulf are taken from Klaeber’s Beowulf 4th edition edited by Fulk, Bjork, and Niles. All translations of Beowulf are from R. M. Liuzza.
Næfre ic maran geseah

eorla ofer eorþan ḍonne is eower sum,
secg on searwum; nis þæt selduma,
wæpnum geweorðad, næfne him his wīte leoge,
ænlic ansyn. (247b-251a)

I have never seen

a greater earl on earth than that one among you,
a man in war-gear; that is no mere courtier,
honored only in weapons – unless his looks belie him,
his noble appearance!

This focus on their tools of war and “worthiness” indicates that the armor a man wears represents character value in a heroic society. In essence, the war gear acts as “material manifestations or representations of the proven or inherent worthiness of whoever possesses them” whose function is “that of a tangible, material symbol of the intangible abstract qualities of virtue in a warrior” (Cherniss 81). Therefore, the specific descriptions of the war-gear in this and other passages validate the weapons as masterfully crafted and highly valuable and, by extension, the Geats as successful warriors. War-gear earned as rewards for success in battle “is the concrete representation of the honor which [a warrior] has won in battle and is, indeed, the only tangible proof of the honor and esteem to which his deeds entitle him” (Cherniss 92).

Later, Beowulf is again deemed notable and worthy of weapons by Wulfgar: “Hy on wiggetawum wyrðe þinceð / eorla geæhtlan; huru se aldor deah, / se þæm heaðorincum hider wisade.” “In their war-trappings they seem worthy of noble esteem; notable indeed is that chief who has shown these soldiers the way hither” (368-70). The poet, too, indicates that “wæs se
“That iron troop was worthy of its weapons” (330b-331a).

Armor in the Germanic society represented in Beowulf has symbolic value; Beowulf’s war-gifts act as physical manifestation of his worth in Hygelac’s court (Mullally 231). Thus, treasure-gifts become markers of his status and worth as warrior for both the warrior himself and strangers. These treasure-gifts become important as currency of courage because they function as physical representations of the valor that warriors have displayed through courageous deeds and identify the warrior as honorable. Although the objects clearly have monetary value, the many allusions to war gear signify more than mere financial worth; they stand as symbols of the heroic life.

Anglo-Saxon society and Beowulf provide a cultural context which allows the sign of treasure to easily signify virtue – specifically courage and loyalty – because the exchange of war gifts for worthy deeds would have been culturally understood. In her seminal work on the sign function of swords in Beowulf, Gillian Overing maintains, “we can assume that the familiarity with the sword sign and its visual and semantic connotations would have been far greater for the contemporaneous reader or listener” than they are for modern audiences (43). Indeed, Overing goes so far as to claim that the arms of a warrior can even replace the possessor, asserting that “the suspicious coastguard sees not men approaching, but beorhte randas (bright shields, 231), or—a more important substitution—in the dragon fight, it is the sword that fails, and not Beowulf’s strength” (46). This interchangeability of arms and the man develops the symbolic nature of gifts and demonstrates the way warriors are both represented and a representative of their weapons. For the audience, these tangible representations of Beowulf’s excellence help to mark him as a satisfactory champion.
Beowulf the Superhero

Beowulf’s past deeds are also used as evidence of his worthiness. In the exchange with Unferth, Beowulf describes a swimming contest with Breca, but it is no mere swim meet. To prove his value, Beowulf explains that they swam for several nights with their swords and dressed in armor before being separated by a flood; then, in the midst of the storm, he engaged a “mihtig meredeor” “mighty sea-beast” (558), killing it by hand. Next, he kills so many of the “manfordædlan” “man-eaters” (563) who attempted to make him their meal that they have “þæt syðan na / ymb brontne ford brimliðende / lade ne letton” “never hindered the passage of any sea-voyager” (568b-70a) again. The author’s use of litotes here is especially telling; it illustrates the ironic attempt at humility where Beowulf demonstrates his extreme prowess by remarking off-hand that his efforts resulted in a monster-free sea as if such an accomplishment were inconsequential. In all, Beowulf kills nine sea-monsters after swimming five days while weighed down by armor. The recounting of this incredible feat serves an important purpose in the characterization of Beowulf as a superhero. George Anderson argues that the Breca episode serves to demonstrates Beowulf’s capacity as an Anglo-Saxon hero, writing,

As a young man in his twenties, … Beowulf has physical attributes which are nothing short of overpowering; he is a fabulous swimmer and diver, for one thing. Nothing could be more appropriate than to find a maritime colossus as the hero of the only complete surviving epic in Old English literature. For even if Beowulf is not himself Anglo-Saxon, he has the attributes of a seafaring man, for which the English have always been famous. (65)

The Breca episode serves not only as evidence of Beowulf’s ability to do what no mortal man could, but to reinforce Beowulf’s inclusion in the Anglo-Saxon culture.
Neither Beowulf’s past deeds nor his past glory, however, are the most important concern of Hrothgar’s people or the audience; his ability to perform new feats and deliver them from their crisis is far more valuable. To fulfill this desire, the poet crafts in Beowulf a superhuman. When introducing Beowulf, the poet describes him thus: “se wæs moncynnes mægenes strengest / on þæm dæge þysses lifes, / æþele ond eacen” “he was of mankind the strongest of might in those days of this life, noble and mighty” (195-198a). He is not merely strong, but the strongest of mankind. Later, Hrothgar quantifies this strength proclaiming, “þæt he þritiges / manna mægencræft on his mundgripe / heaþorof hæbbe” “he has thirty men’s strength, strong in battle in his handgrip” (379b-81a). And again, in the midst of his battle with Grendel, Beowulf’s strength is recalled when the poet remarks that:

Sona þæt onfunde fyrena hyrde
þæt he ne mette middangeardes,
eorþan sceata, on elran men
mundgripe maran. He on mode wearnð
forht on ferhðe; no þy ær fram meahte. (750-754)

As soon as that shepherd of sins discovered
that he had never met on middle-earth,
in any region of the world, another man
with greater handgrip, in his heart he was
afraid for his life, but none the sooner could he flee.

Here especially, Beowulf’s strength is underscored. Perhaps the poet’s and Hrothgar’s descriptions could be seen as pure hyperbole, a symbolic exaggeration to highlight the hero’s
quality, but, when tested, his strength proves authentic, and it is unmatched by anything Grendel has seen in “any region of the world” (752).

Indeed, even age is no match for Beowulf’s great strength. Some fifty years after his fight with Grendel, Beowulf’s capacity to vanquish his foes is still palpable in the lines, “Ƿagen guðcyning / m(od) gemunde, mægenstengo sloh / hildebille, þæt hyt on heafolan stod / niðe fenyded” “Still the battle-king / remembered his glory, and with his mighty strength / swung his warblade with savage force, / so that it stuck in the skull” (2677-2680). While Beowulf’s sword is described as “geswac æt sæce … gomol ond grægmæl” “weakened at battle, ancient and gray”, the stalwart Beowulf is never described as such (2681-2682). When Beowulf fails, the poet endeavors to absolve Beowulf of the blame writing, “þæt sio ecg gewac / … bat unswiðor / þonne jos ðiodcyning þearfe hæfde / bysigum gebæded” “that edge failed … bit less strongly that the king on the nation needed it to do, hard-pressed in battle”; here it is the sword that fails, not Beowulf (2577-80).

Furthermore, “in addition to qualities of bodily strength there are in Beowulf moral virtues of more than passing worth: there's nobility and gravity and unshaken courage” (Anderson 67). Even when his own elderly body falls short, the poet highlights that it was not for lack of spirit on Beowulf’s part for “sceolde [ofer] willan” “he was forced against his will” (2589) to retreat from the dragon just as, the poet reminds us, “æghwylc mon / alætan lændagas” “every one of us must give up these loaned days” (2590-2591). The poet’s repeated efforts to stress Beowulf’s immense strength even in his declining years, while at the same time excuse any failing as equipment failures rather than heroic ones, illustrate his desire that Beowulf’s legacy of vitality be preserved even past his death. In their various eulogies of him Beowulf’s people name him “mærne þeoden” “mighty prince” (3141) and “beadurof(e)s” “battle-brave
one” (3160) and “duguðum demdon” “judged well his prowess” (3174). When elevated beyond warrior to king, Beowulf also takes on the people’s desires for a strong hero and puts their needs before any and all limitations – even his mortal ones – giving the last, full measure of his devotion – his life in the service of his people.

The preceding passages not only serve to place Beowulf squarely within the epic tradition, they illustrate the type of hero the author and audience of this time and this text needed. Beowulf’s ability to perform deeds of strength no mere mortal could is important when facing monsters, whether they are demons from the deep or a multitude of invading Vikings. And Beowulf’s inexhaustible strength of spirit leads him to give all in the defense of his people. In this way, Beowulf acts as a fantasy-scape of perseverance and endurance for a people weighed down by the reality of sustained assault by foreign forces.

Beowulf’s Foils

As Beowulf’s heroic strength is tested and magnified, so are the enemies he must overcome. In Beowulf, the multiple monstrous enemies parallel the multiple invading forces. The type of foe Beowulf faces is no mere mortal – just as the English people did not face an enemy that a routine hero could overcome. One clear illustration of the parallel drawn between Beowulf’s monstrous enemies and the experience of the audience is the ambiguity with which the poet describes Grendel’s attack on Heorot. “The poem represents the violence and power of the struggle between Beowulf and Grendel obliquely rather than with the events of graphic images, just as the horror of Grendel’s long reign of terror appeared chiefly through the distress of the Danes” (Clark 76). This obscurity can then be read as symbolic representing a larger, longer, cultural anguish and the feelings of insecurity inherent in the repeated experience of
hostile interaction between the English and foreigners. The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* offers many reports of the Vikings’ monstrousness: whenever they are mentioned it is as heathens, raiding armies, gangs, and perpetrators of slaughter. The *Chronicle* provides further evidence of Vikings’ terribleness in the entry for 793; as quoted above, here the writer records that “† folc earmlic bregdon; † wæron ormete lig rescas, 7 wæron ge seowene fryne on þam lyfte fleogende” “terrible portents came about over the land of Northumbria, and miserably frightened the people: these were immense flashes of lightning, and fiery dragons were seen flying in the air,” foreshadowing the “hæðena manna hergung” “raiding of heathen men” that same year (Swanton, E 793). This passage directly connects the foreign forces invading England’s shores with the monstrous. *Beowulf* builds on this tradition wherein the monstrous stands in for the magnitude of Viking forces and its hero responds to the historical experience of insecurity by conquering monster after monster to defend his adopted and ancestral people. Thus the poem allows the Anglo-Saxon author and audience to use Beowulf as a fantasy of strength who does not yield to any “monstrous” invasion, but, in fact, vanquishes his foes in fantastic ways.

Each time Beowulf performs, he rises above ordinary human capability to that of a superhero. Beowulf has to be an awe-inspiring hero because the adversaries he faces within the text and as a representative of the native fantasy are so overwhelming (Fanon 15). History has shown the Anglo-Saxons that their mortal heroes, like the historical Byrhtnoth, will fail when faced with sheer magnitude of the invading people. Therefore, in Beowulf, the author creates a hero who is more than human to circumvent this reality.

Not only are the monsters Beowulf fights useful for representing the threat the Anglo-Saxons faced, they also help the author and audience to define Beowulf as a hero by acting as a mirror to him (Irving, *A Reading of Beowulf* 190). Grendel, for instance, is described as “the
shadow-goer” (703), “the demonic foe” (706), “the evil marauder” (712), “the fiend” (725), “this
loathsome creature” (732), “that maneater” (737), “that monster” (739), “that shepherd of sins” (750), “the notorious one” (762), “the harm-doer” (766), “the captive of Hell” (787) while
Beowulf is lauded as “a hall-guardian” (666), “the good man” (675), “the strong-hearted man” (746-7), “He who among men was the strongest of might” (789), “the courageous kinsman of
Hygelac” (813), “wise and stout-hearted” (826), “the battle-brave one” (834). These
descriptions demonstrate that the poet carefully constructs “a stark contrast between the thoughts
and actions of the two combatants” (Orchard, A Critical Companion to Beowulf 192). Andy
Orchard also calls attention to the similarities in the way
we are told much of the perceptions of the individual participants. So, at the start
of their conflict, Grendel’s mother ‘perceived’ and ‘beheld’ (onfunde . . . beheold,
lines 1497a and 1498a) her foe, whilst Beowulf ‘noticed’, ‘saw’, ‘noticed’, and
‘perceived’ his amazing surroundings (ongeat...geseah...ongeat... onfand, lines
1512b, 1516b, 1518a, and 1522b). (A Critical Companion to Beowulf 196)
While for Orchard these comparisons evoke sympathy for the villains of the story, Edward Irving
suggests in his seminal work the negative statements and negative figures, like Grendel, are used
in the poem to define the “ideal hero” by what he is not. Similarly, episodes which seem to have
nothing to do with Beowulf, like the battle of Ravenswood, exist to highlight Beowulf’s triumph,
illustrating the world without a hero is doomed to the “perpetual violence which is man’s lot” (A

17 The Old English text of these quotes read: “sceadugenga” (703), “s[c]ynscaþa” (707 in
mægene strengest” (789), “se modega mæg Hygelaces” (813), “snotor ond swyðferhð” (826),
“hildedeor” (834).
This concern would be very familiar to the author and audience of this poem and their anxiety about their inability to categorically vanquish their foes is demonstrated throughout the text and underscored by these negatives of Beowulf. More than just a foil to the hero, Grendel’s mother acts as a subversive figure, one who holds up a mirror to the patriarchal society which she disrupts. Much like the invading foreign culture, Grendel’s Dam “threatens the existence of the symbolic structures that uphold representation” by acting aggressively outside her assigned role (Trilling, “Beyond Abjection” 16). She “signifies the threat of alterity” and Beowulf, in defeating her, protects more than the physical security of the Heorot; “the danger he faces is not just from the fangs and claws of a monster; he must also uphold the unity and stability of society as a whole, and he will accomplish this by maintaining his own physical integrity” (Trilling, “Beyond Abjection 17-18). Once again, Beowulf’s great strength is the tool by which he defends not only the Danes from a monster bent on killing them, but also from one who threatens the fabric of their society.

Though some have dismissed the historical value of Beowulf as “a pastiche, as something akin to our historical novel, … for all its absorption with antiquity the poem almost certainly reflects social realities of the Anglo-Saxon audiences’ world rather than a historian’s reconstruction of an earlier society” (Clark 48-49). The heroic values upheld and the culture described are not ones of a long distant past, but of one contemporary to an eighth, ninth, or tenth century composition, and to an early eleventh century recounting. This creation of a world which would have been very familiar to an Anglo-Saxon audience makes it possible for that audience to place themselves within the text and use it as a vehicle for their desires and anxieties. It follows then, that the experience represented symbolically in Beowulf’s battles is that of the Anglo-Saxon people of this time.
Beowulf’s Flaws

Some critics, such as John M. Hill, stress that when judged against the tenets of Germanic society, Beowulf is depicted as a successful warrior. However, by not acknowledging that Beowulf is flawed, Hill’s argument renders the character flat and less interesting. Reality must intrude into fantasy; the author and the audience must contend with the fact that, no matter how extraordinary, a hero is fallible. Beowulf does make a mistake in subverting the traditional relationship between warrior and king in which warriors engaged in single combat and kings did not. He sets aside his role as king when he fights the dragon, and the poet offers implicit criticism of Beowulf’s acts by drawing parallels between “Heremod’s selfish acts [that] appear to have plunged the Danes into the lord-less danger they faced before the mysterious arrival of Scyld Scefing” and “Beowulf’s own deeds [that] condemn the Geats to a predictably grim future at the poem’s end” (Orchard, A Critical Companion to Beowulf 263). Beowulf, like Heremod, forgets that God

seleð him on eple eorþan wynne,

to healdanne hleoburh wera,

gedeð him swa gewealdene worolde dælas,

tide rice, þæt he his selfa ne mæg

for his unsnytrorum ende geþencean. (1730-34)
gives him to hold in his homeland
the sweet joys of earth, a stronghold of men,
grants him such power over his portion of the world,
a great kingdom, that he himself cannot
imagine an end to it, in his folly.
Hrothgar’s lesson is explicit: God dispenses and kings must remember that, in time, their strength will fail. Beowulf forgets this warning to the detriment of his people when he chooses to fight the dragon single-handedly. Yet where the poet is clearly critical of Heremod, calling him, among other things, “fyren onwod” “sin possessed” (915), “the poet seems very careful not to condemn Beowulf in similarly explicit terms” (Orchard, A Critical Companion to Beowulf 263). This distinction lies, perhaps, in the type of rule the two kings exhibited. Heremod’s reign was, according to Hrothgar, marked by a dereliction of duty whereas Beowulf is lauded by Wiglaf as a prince who “beagas geaf” “gave rings” (2635) and “maðmas geaf” “treasure gave” (2640), a “golgyfan” “gold-giving lord” (2652).

According to Baker, Beowulf’s actions, though they ultimately lead to his death and place his people in a tenuous position, are understandable when taken in the context of the audience’s culture. In terms of Anglo-Saxon warrior society, it is the responsibility of warriors to perform glorious deeds and the responsibility of the lord to reward them. For Beowulf,

had he lived, he would have been a triumphant king in possession of a dragon’s hoard, having done a thing that few before had done. The value of the treasure in honour would have been incalculable, and he would have distributed treasure in honour to his favorite thegns, who could carry it with enormous pride in serving a king who is capable of such a deed. (Baker 221)

While Beowulf’s choice to pursue the treasure alone is condemnable, the potential windfall of both treasure and glory presented a reward that would have greatly outweighed the potential risk. Furthermore, if one considers the responsibilities of an Anglo-Saxon king, one must acknowledge that it would be “a serious mistake not to fight. … the modern way of thinking
about defense would seem unacceptably passive to an early medieval king, who had good reason to believe that he did not play the predator he would surely end up as prey” (Baker 213-14).

In this way, Beowulf’s search for glory is not explicitly condemned by the poet though his actions certainly have negative consequences; rather, the poet’s portrayal of the hero is mostly complimentary with little attempt to chastise or rebuke Beowulf for his decision. Orchard sees the final word of the text, “lofgeornost” “most eager for fame,” as evidence of the ambiguity of the poet’s final judgement. He maintains every instance of the use of the word “lofgeornost” in prose “carries unreservedly negative connotations” (Pride and Prodigies 54-55). Tom Shippey, on the other hand, contends that “the careful and unusual symmetry” of the last two lines of the text “mildest of men and the most gentle, / the kindest to his fold and the most eager for fame” (3181-82) indicates “that all four adjectives are meant to be in harmony” (Shippey 41). This ambiguity about the end of the poem and the poet’s appraisal of the hero highlights how complicated Beowulf is as an ideal. He is at once imperfect and exemplar which allows for a rich and round portrayal of an ideal warrior-king. Rather than disparaging the hero, the tragic end reflects the author and audience’s understanding that the future is uncertain and ultimately, the hero, even with flaws, is all that can protect them from a terrible enemy.

One can certainly see that the authors of these two poems are dealing with apprehension over the “grim sense of future disaster” (Orchard, A Critical Companion to Beowulf 99). This concern over what the future holds is evident in both texts and certainly understandable in an age when the menace of foreign aggression is ever present. Yet each ending contains some element of hope: Wiglaf as a representative of future honorable warriors in Beowulf, and the historical reality that the battle of Maldon did not (at least immediately) result in a return to Viking rule.
But the uncertainty about what the future may hold when even heroes fail can be read in the despair over the lost lords.¹⁸ In this time of physical insecurity, “poetry not only gives voice to a given mentality or worldview, but is also a form of play, a mental theater in which issues of worldview are precisely what are at stake” (Niles, “Reconceiving Beowulf” 146). This theater of the mind allows for a setting where the author and audience are able to confront their vulnerabilities and construct a hero who embodies the strength and cunning, prowess and expertise, valor and virtue necessary to confront those anxieties. In *The Battle of Maldon* and *Beowulf*, the author and audience “resort to dreaming, imagining, acting out, [and] inventing a reactive vocabulary of violence and retributive justice in their bodies. . . [and] their psyches” in order to combat the physical and psychological impact of repeated contacts with violent foreign peoples (Bhabha in *Wretched of the Earth* xx). Thus, these poems offer the means by which a disempowered few can reflect, reframe, and revise their reality, as only fantasy can.

¹⁸ I am aware of the fragmentary nature of *The Battle of Maldon* and acknowledge that we have no way of knowing what might have come next in the story; however, the warriors’ grief over losing Byrhtnoth is repeated throughout and well established by the end of the fragment.
CHAPTER THREE:
ARTHUR: THE LITERARY HYBRID

It has been suggested that romance is an evasion of history (and thus perhaps attractive to a
people trying to evade the recent past). But I am more persuaded by arguments that find in it the
head-on encounter with very real, pressing historical forces and the contradictions inherent in
them as they came to be experienced by writers. Romance, an exploration of anxiety imported
from the shadows of European culture, made possible the sometimes safe and other times risky
embrace of quite specific, understandably human fears.

—Toni Morrison 36

The theater of the mind at work in the texts of Beowulf and The Battle of Maldon
continues to be evident in the later Middle Ages with the late fourteenth- and mid-fifteenth-
century texts the Alliterative Morte Arthure and Sir Thomas Malory’s Le Morte Darthur.19 The

19 Henceforth, these texts will be referred to as the AMA and Morte Darthur. In addition, I will
be using the Winchester version of Malory’s text because it is one less author between the text
we read and Malory’s invention. Vinaver suggests that there were probably two stages of
copying between Malory’s original holograph and the Winchester manuscript (xxxvi-xxxvii),
while others such as P.J.C. Field, Malory: Texts and Sources (c-xxxvi), and Helen Cooper,
“Opening up to the Malory Manuscript” claim only one. For me, then, the Winchester is less
problematic in terms of authorial intention than the Caxton, which was edited.
Much debate still exists about how much of Le Morte Darthur can be attributed to Malory and
how much credit should be given to Caxton; for a review of the subject see Jean McBain’s
“Caxton’s Edition”; The Malory Debate, ed. Wheeler, Kindrick, and Salda; the articles in the
Noguchi; Moorman; Salda; and the eminent William Matthews’ presentation, reprinted in the
The Caxton version does have elements that are interesting for my argument. For instance, the
edits which frame the Saracens in Lucius’ army as more of a threat than others allied with him
character of Arthur, arguably the quintessential hero of the Middle Ages, represents a development in the hero trope – here authors and audiences desire a hero who not only seeks glory and defends his people with his superior strength, but also cunningly acquires further renown both in the military arena and in the courtly one. As social constructs responding to societal pressures, the texts act as an aperture through which we can espy both the aspirations and anxieties of some English people of this time (Brewer, “The Construction of a Hero” 1). The Arthur created in the *AMA* and *Morte Darthur* embodies new concerns for a new age; instead of fear over Viking invaders, these texts highlight a focus on English sovereignty in European spheres, the relationship between a king and his vassals, and the necessity for a king who epitomizes the courtly ideals which are the mark of contemporary nobility. All of this, of course, comes in addition to being the doughty champion they have come to expect from Anglo-Saxon heroes.

To understand how the texts reflect, respond to, and interrogate the cultural experiences of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, one must first examine what those experiences were. It should be noted that I locate the production of the *AMA* at the end of fourteenth century. Though it is impossible to know for sure when the poem was created, Larry Benson (*King Arthur’s Death*), Mary Hamel (*Morte Arthure*), and Valerie Krishna support this view based on references to the poem’s sources and contemporary allusions. Further, many critics see direct correlations could be read as an attempt to paint Arthur as a holy warrior defending not only England’s sovereignty but also its faith. However, for the purposes of brevity, I shall not address Caxton’s revisions here.

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20 For more on the dating of the *AMA*, see also Benson, “The Date of the Alliterative *Morte Arthure*”; Finlayson, “Morte Arthure: The Date and a Source for the Contemporary References”; Göller; and Matthews, *Tragedy of Arthur*. 
between the plots of the *AMA* and *Morte Darthur* and the historical events and figures surrounding their creation; the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries were rife with upheaval. Christine Chism observes that

the royal court in the decades flanking the turn of the fourteenth century had seen … long periods of guarded policy and the careful rebalancing of the shifting self-interests of its many constituents, but from the 1380s on, these periods of political equilibrium had been repeatedly shattered by paroxysms of insurrection, vengeance, and preemptive punishment. (Chism 67)

Richard II’s rule of the fourteenth century witnessed an epidemic of political discord and civil division beginning with animosity between Richard and his parliament and nobles. The years between 1386 and 1388 saw Parliament rebuke Richard, threaten him with deposition, and execute or exile all of his favorites at court – acts Richard, who lacked military support, was forced to endure (Tuck). Though he negotiated and maintained a peaceful relationship with parliament for nearly a decade, his rise to power marked a period of retribution against those who led the dissent against him in the 1380s (Tuck). By the end of the fourteenth century, Richard had either killed or banished anyone who might threaten his rule, including the Duke of Bolingbrook, a legitimate contender for his throne, whom he relegated to France (Tuck).

However, this exiled duke found support in an antagonistic France and returned to England in 1399, successfully overthrew Richard, and was crowned Henry IV within five months (Saul 415-23). The *AMA* and *Morte Darthur* address this disorder and, especially in Malory’s work, indict such dissonance as the cause of the destruction of an ideal England. Evidence of turmoil is also

As for Malory’s *Le Morte Darthur*, there is a general consensus that he completed his manuscript while serving a sentence at Newgate Prison between March 1469 and March 1470 (Shepherd xxvi).
present in literature contemporary with Malory, with “fifteenth-century chronicles reflect[ing] the effects of political tension during the last decade of Henry IV’s reign and the beginning of Edward IV’s rule,” which experienced the infamous Wars of the Roses between Henry’s house of Lancaster and the house of York, each vying for control over the crown (Radulescu, “Malory and Fifteenth-Century Political Ideas” 36; see also Griffiths). This civil war, during which Henry VI was removed from, then restored to, the throne of England, then executed, exemplifies “the climate of anxiety that Malory’s fifteenth-century readers lived with” (Radulescu, “Malory and Fifteenth-Century Political Ideas” 36; see also Griffiths). This experience of instability informs the authors’ creations of Arthur and what they require of him.

Adding another layer of historical experience to draw from, the Hundred Years War, occurring from 1337 to 1453, offers clear parallels to the events of each text. “It has usually been thought that Arthur’s invasion of Europe bears an unmistakable relevance to the adventures of Edward III in France, and indeed the fact that both campaigns have the same *casus belli*—the English king’s refusal to pay homage to a foreign monarch and his subsequent claims to the foreign throne—makes a comparison inevitable” (Patterson 212). Indeed, the feeling of vulnerability caused by the Hundred Years War informs each text’s portrayal of Arthur’s response to Lucius in the creation of triumphant narrative of continental occupation. This narrative represents a fantasy of success at a time when the English had suffered the reversal of most of their gains at the Treaty of Bruges in 1357, the death of their great hero Edward, the Black Prince, in 1377, and, finally, French victory at the Battle of Castillon, culminating in the loss of all English holdings in France in 1453. Thus, Arthur’s imperialistic efforts can be seen as analogous to contemporary desire to recapture national prestige by reclaiming continental holdings, recalling the successes of Edward III, including the much celebrated victory at Crécy
Audiences of this period would have to contend with the experiences of political turmoil, civil division, and war, providing a multilayered background from which the texts draw inspiration and significance. For “cultural texts are rooted in overlapping realities in the contexts they inhabit and invariably sediment multiple realities simultaneously” (Heng n.77, 382). In this way, the texts are fluid and changing, available at any moment for appropriation by the audience.

The authors of these Arthurian texts were not alone in drawing a connection between reality and fantasy; this practice was matched by the audience, who, in turn, drew on the texts to imagine a new reality. Edward III is an example of one such reader who “found it in his political interests to promote himself as a second Arthur,” drawing authority and influence from Arthur’s vaunted status (Chism, *Alliterative Revivals* 189-90). It is thought that Edward created The Order of the Garter, for instance, in an attempt to recreate Arthur’s Round Table, casting himself as its leader. Thus, “the cultural currency of Arthur’s legendary monarchy [helped to] cement loyalties among the restless nobles to forestall the rivalries and differences between royal and magnatial interests” (Chism, *Alliterative Revivals* 189-90). This invention illustrates how these Arthurian texts are not merely mirrors to reality, but tools for fashioning a new reality.

The themes discussed in these texts – defense against a foreign power, the bonds of community, loyalty to king and good governance in return, the desire for a self-sacrificing and inspiring leader –are subjects germane to audiences of all social strata. Indeed, the authors also go to some length to connect the heroes of their works to the audience. The repeated references to “oure noble knyghtes of mery Ingelond” and “our king” illustrate that the authors and audiences of these texts saw themselves in King Arthur and his men and, through their

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21 For more on the contemporary context of Edward III and Richard II, see Keiser, DeMarco, and Vale.
possessive announcements, held them up as representatives of their collective group (Malory 126.5, various in *AMA* and Malory). Catherine Batt demonstrates that the use of the pronoun “our” “assumes the readers’ unambiguous and collusive responses to the story… [and] promotes a specific nationalistic” sentiment (Batt 79).

This emphatic avowal of Arthur as English is not without complication, however; Arthurian tradition exists in Welsh poetry some six hundred years prior to his depiction as an Englishman. Yet, while it is true that Arthur as a figure has his roots in Celtic, particularly Welsh, tradition, much like Beowulf before him, Arthur is as much defined by the desires of his audience as by his history. In both the *AMA* and Malory, Arthur is painstakingly and exhaustively titled King of *all* the British Isles, “Sir Arthur of England” (*AMA* 3500), “rightwys Kynge borne of all Englond” (Malory 8.12). Malory also names him “Arthur [who] wan alle the North, Scotland, and alle that were under their obeissaunce; also Walys” (11.35-36), modeled after contemporary English kings who were titled King of England and France and Lord of Ireland, and repeatedly claimed as “our king” as mentioned above (Ormrod). These choices on the part of the authors highlight their insistence that Arthur belongs to the English people. Patricia Ingham claims in her work *Sovereign Fantasies* that the English people have a vested interest in showing that Arthur is English, arguing that the nation and people’s identity is irrevocably tied to that of their sovereign (79-106). Regardless of whether or not the historic

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22 All Malory citations are from the Norton edited by Stephen Shepherd. Citations reference the page number and line number on that page.
23 For a comprehensive survey of pre-Galfridian traditions of Arthur, see Thomas Green’s *Concepts of Arthur*.
24 Some parts of Malory’s text, like this quote, are represented in all caps; for ease of reading I have normalized the text.
25 This title, King of England and France and Lord of Ireland, was first used by Edward III in 1340.
Arthur can be correctly titled an “English” king, English authors have claimed him as the representative of their experience and that inherently imbues him with all the credentials he needs. Further, as I will argue momentarily, history, in terms of postcolonial literary response, is not as important as the audience’s perception and experience of history.

Though English authors and audiences had adopted Arthur as their hero, Arthurian romance had its roots in French culture. Significantly, these Arthurian texts appealed to diverse audiences. England and France had deep ties in the mid-twelfth century when the foundations of the romance genre were being established, so much so that Helen Cooper asserts in *The English Romance in Time* that the two countries largely formed a single cultural unit: they were linked both linguistically (through the aristocratic language of Anglo-Norman, gradually begin in to separate itself from the western dialects of French) and politically (through Henry II’s holding of both England at large areas of modern-day France in a single Angevin empire). (22)

In French romance, Arthur’s knights and his court are often the dominant feature and Arthur himself “is almost a decorative element …, furnishing the poet with a splendid background for the adventures of his real heroes” (Korrel 173-74, emphasis added). Perhaps the two best-known French Arthurian writers, Chrétien de Troyes and Marie de France, have, in fact, little concern for the character of Arthur within their Arthurian tales. When French authors do address him, Arthur is portrayed as “a mere puppet to be played with by Gawain. … [And,] in spite of the many declarations of prowess and largess, Arthur is rebuked on several occasions for not living...

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26 See Hodges and Ingham for a more detailed discussion of the tradition of Arthur as symbol of resistance for “the English; the British, understood as all the peoples of the island; or the Celtic British, especially the Welsh” (Hodges 558-59).
up to his reputation. ... in the Vulgate Cycle all the supposed virtues of Arthur are systematically undermined” (Korrell 183-86). Consequently, the hero of the *AMA* and *Morte Darthur* bears only a passing similarity to his French counterpart.\(^{27}\)

The *AMA* and *Morte Darthur* represent a blending of cultures, exhibiting striking similarities to the epic-heroic tradition of the Anglo-Saxon culture of past centuries in addition to the chronicle and courtly Romance traditions in vogue at the time. The English Arthurian tales were also grounded in the tradition of Geoffrey of Monmouth, who authorized the legend of Arthur, “presenting these traditions in a twelfth century *entourage*, … [raising] the legendary Arthur to a place of respectability”; and “Wace [who] further elaborated on the courtly aspect and made the ‘matter of Britain’ more fashionable” (Korrel 173; see also Ashe 2-3).\(^{28}\) The *AMA* and *Morte Darthur* are not merely romances; they represent a hybridization of form following a process which K.S. Whetter explains: “most genres contain aspects of one or more other genres mixed in with the dominant kind, but … where the generic mixture is too great to allow one genre to dominate the result is a generic hybrid” (Whetter “Genre as Context” 46). The *AMA* and *Morte Darthur* are hybrids which pick and choose elements from the French romance genre and the English chronicle genre to create texts that speak to their experience. For Albert Memmi, “culture is a kind of curio shop, where each of us can pick and choose according to our desires and fears”; in so doing, we create culture that is unique to our experience (41). These Arthurian texts defy generic classification because they are the blending of two cultures in an attempt to

\(^{27}\) In the interest of brevity, I have not included an extensive comparison of the French and English Arthurian traditions. Those interested in the topics might examine Michael Glencross’ work *Reconstructing Camelot*; Kenneth Hodges “Why Malory’s Launcelot is not French”; and the series of essays in *Culture and the King* edited by Martin Shichtman, James Carley, and Valerie Marie Lagorio.

\(^{28}\) Vinaver argues that Malory was also aware of other contemporary romances such as *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and *Sir Orfeo*. 
glorify an undoubtedly English hero within a French tradition. By merging these two genres and creating a new form in which to establish Arthur, Malory and the *AMA-poet* construct texts “designed to interrogate expectations: expectations of genre, of reader or audience, of critic, of the Arthurian legend” (Whetter “Genre as Context” 60).

By appropriating Arthur as defined by the French sources that inform the romances and then focusing more on the British tradition from which English stories draw, Arthurian romances represent the fantasy of a formidable empire – a return to a fantasy past when England was a powerful nation ruled by a mighty king (Ingham 90-106). In the authors’ efforts to coopt and adapt French tradition, and use it to write an fantasy of conquering France, one can read a sense of one-upmanship at work. During the Hundred Years War, France attempted to force England to behave as a subject within its kingdom; this period was distinguished by discourtesy and humiliating efforts to control the English sovereign in order to maintain French holdings (Curry 19). While within his own borders, the English king reigned supreme; by weakening him to a mere Duke in France, the continental powers made it clear that he was not seen as an equal.

Given the contentious relationship England had with the court of France leading up to the Hundred Years War, one can understand the frustration and anxiety about reputation conveyed in the choice of subject and genre. Moreover, the content of these texts, an exaltation of England, also serves as evidence to support England’s claim to equal status by reaffirming England’s ‘historical’ claims in Europe.

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29 For more of the debate regarding the *AMA’s* genre if it is not a romance, see: Finlayson, “*Morte Arthure,*” who draws attention to similarities with *chanson de geste*; Pearsall, who sees it as an epic; Ramsey, who considers it a historical romance; Matthews, *The Tragedy of Arthur,* who argues that the poem is a fortune tragedy; and Everett, “The Alliterative Revival,” Benson, “The Alliterative *Morte Arthure* and Medieval Tragedy,” and Clark, who discuss the similarities between the poem and contemporary chronicles.
Despite Edward III’s effort to use Arthurian texts to legitimize his authority, both texts are set in the distant past. This removal from a time any living person remembers opens a space for literary re-imagination, allowing the *AMA* and *Morte Darthur* to “be appropriated for interpretations that fit the immediate historical or cultural moment of subsequent new readers” (Cooper, *The English Romance in Time* 4). The author and audience’s contexts, then, are essential to the creation and interpretation of these literary exercises for, as N.J. Higham suggests, the real figure of Arthur is not as important to the audience of Arthurian literature as the fictional hero is as a symbol to be used for their purposes. Indeed, “if history, as Claude Lévi-Strauss suggests, ‘is partial in the sense of being biased even when it claims not to be’ (*Savage Mind*, 257-58), then the audience and its desires had as much force in forming a historical document as the ‘objective facts’ that are supposed to give that document its shape” (Finke and Shichtman 43). Just as Geoffrey of Monmouth, Bede, Wace, Laȝamon, and the authors of the *Brut*, *Cambrian Annals*, *Historia Brittonum*, and others take authorial license in their accounts of Arthur, so too do Malory and the *AMA*-poet (re)fashion their own reality by creating a fantasy of majestic kingship. Raluca Radulescu demonstrates this principle by examining the most popular works of the time, finding that national history worked as a means of “self-fashioning” social and political identity (54). For these texts, “to write the past is always to address the past’s uses for the present, to animate the writer’s own desires and fears concerning the past” (Chism *Alliterative Revivals* 7). Arthur, then, functions as a signifier, a placeholder, on which to project the most pressing concerns and most ardent hopes of that era. Because they “are closely intertwined with … the socio-political contexts” of the time, the *AMA* and *Morte Darthur* illustrate how groups of people sharing a cultural experience engage with their issues, be they literary, contemporary, social, political, cultural, or historical (Whetter “Genre as Context” 60).
In examining how the *AMA* and *Morte Darthur* allow the authors and audiences to come to terms with their reality and to challenge that reality, one can delve into the way these particular Arthur archetypes represent the desires and anxieties of those people. In medieval literature, the connection between the real and the imagined is manifold, allowing “characters [to] move in and out of the fictional frame” (Brewer, “The Presentation of the Character of Lancelot” 38). Thus, medieval literature allowed for a continuum between fiction and reality in which the actors and the audience were interchangeable, a quality that supports a postcolonial reading of the texts as avenues for fantasy. We can read these texts, then, as “the material concretion of the collective will of cultural agents and forces acting overtime to preserve, develop, and transmit a story felt to be important” (Heng 8). The *AMA* and *Morte Darthur* are productions of this type of cultural expression; thus, as Elaine Treharne contends in her work on eleventh and twelfth-century conquests, “the cultural, and particularly, textual consequences of [the] historical [process] can fruitfully be examined for their illumination of traumatized response” and, through this investigation of the literary productions from the late fourteenth and mid-fifteenth centuries, we can learn about the experiences of the people of that era (10-11).

The *AMA*-poet and Malory created from earlier Arthurian tradition a hero who reflected the late-fourteenth and mid-fifteenth centuries – a hero who responds to the anxieties inherent in the contemporary experience while at the same time challenging continental perceptions of England as inevitable losers in a conflict with France. The Arthur that is revealed embodies, without dissonance, all the heroic values compounded with those of a fourteenth century monarch, the whole modified by the sort of romanticizing vision which allows a contemporary chronicler to record objectively the
massacres of the Hundred Years’ War and at the same time to conceive of the whole action as a type of chivalric combat. (Finlayson 257)

He is exceedingly comfortable in the courtly realm, but what sets Arthur apart in these texts from his French counterpart is that, in the *AMA*, “Arthur’s motives are those of an Anglo-Saxon hero – conquest, revenge, generosity to his friends, and implacable hatred to his foes,” and he is far closer in kind to the tradition of the chronicles and *chanson de geste* than those of French romances (Benson “The Alliterative *Morte Arthure*” 76).

**Arthur the Conqueror**

Rather than a *chevalier*, a courtly knight, the English Arthur is most often named a conqueror; indeed, this title becomes almost “a compulsive refrain (e.g., in lines 26, 44, 132, 220, 232, 343, 680, 987, 1208, 1579, 1654, 2242, 2262, 2356, 2394, 2621, 2639, 3178, etc.)” in the *AMA* and throughout Malory’s work (Heng 154). In addition, both authors take the time to ground Arthur’s exposition with a list of places that fall under his rule. The *AMA* begins with a list of all the places Arthur rules: Aragyle, Orkney, Ireland, Scotland, Wales, Flauders, Fraunce, Holland, Hainault, Brugoigne, Brabaunt, Bretain the less, Guienne, Gothland, Grace, Bayonne, Bourdeaux, Touraine, Toulouse, Poitiers, Provence, Valence, Vienne, Overgne, Anjou,-Navarre, Norway, Normandy, Almaine, Estreiche (which was conquered “by conquest full cruel”), Denmark (“dressed all by drede of himsleven”), and Swetherwike (won “with his sword keen”) (*AMA* 30-47). Malory, too, exerts himself to demonstrate the breadth of Arthur’s command even before he sets out on his incursion into Europe, writing, “Arthur wan alle the North, Scotland, and alle that were in their obeissaunce; also Walys, a parte of it, helde ayenst Arthur, but he overcam hem al – as he dyd the remenaunt, thurgh the noble prowesse of hymself and his
knyghtes” (11.35-38). While the *AMA* covers the first few years of Arthur’s reign, Malory returns to the topic of Arthur’s conquest repeatedly throughout his text, listing, for example, the French cities he conquers on his way to battling Lucius and, later, the numerous Italian cities that have fallen during his march. By taking pains to catalog Arthur’s conquests, both authors highlight Arthur’s incredible military and imperial skill – “this is an Arthur who is pre-eminently heroic, … who knows … a great deal about war” (Benson, “The Alliterative *Morte Arthure*” 75-6). One of the hallmarks of the poem especially is that it is a poem of battles and though Malory’s text includes tournaments, quests, and ladies, it also includes prominently features combat (Benson, “Introduction” 5). Rather than focus on tournaments, feasting, and ladies, the *AMA* is concerned predominantly with the martial ability of its ruler.

This portrayal of Arthur the conqueror is a manifestation of the “muscular dreams” Fanon discusses as responses to tension within the colonized person (15). In addition to directly reflecting the deeply troubling reality of England and its people during the fourteenth and fifteenth-centuries, these authors instead hearken back to a bygone age and spotlight a hero who represents England as powerful, imperial, and in command.

**Arthur the Fighter**

The character of Arthur is not merely a figure behind a chessboard. The hero of the *AMA* and *Morte Darthur* is also martial in his own right. In the *AMA*, Arthur can often be found in the thick of battle. Against the Romans, Arthur “Demenes the middilward menskfully himselven” (*AMA* 1988); and at Metz, The king ferkes forth on a fair steed

*With Ferrer and Ferawnte and other four knightes;*
Then they bended in burgh bowes of vise,
Bekers at the bold king with bustous lates,
Allblawsters at Arthur egerly shootes
For to hurt him or his horse with that hard wepen.
The king shunt for no shot ne no sheld askes,
But shews him sharply in his sheen weedes,
Lenges all at leisere and lookes on the walles. (AMA 2420-21, 2424–30)

In both of these examples, Arthur is not only portrayed as leading the battle, but also fighting
courageously and valiantly. Against the Romans he is depicted as leading the charge mightily and, when searching
for weaknesses in Metz’s defenses, Arthur leisurely surveys the scene with apparently no alarm
for the French soldiers who eagerly shoot their crossbows in an attempt to injure the king. In
lines 2428–9 the poet stresses Arthur’s ferocity and bravery by tying his actions to his
noteworthy appearance with the alliterative repetition of “sh.” A sound more often associated
with shushing than battle, in these lines it becomes a sibilant hiss highlighting the “shunt” and
“shot” and “sheld” of the king. In using this device, the author represents audibly the percussion
of Arthur’s battlefield action. Arthur is even depicted as extraordinarily brave, “braver than his
counterpart in the chronicles, when he goes in search of the giant’s whereabouts himself, and
leaves Kay and Bedver behind under the pretext of going on a pilgrimage” (Korrel 211). In these
instances, the poet represents Arthur as a hero who places no priority on his own safety and is
devoid of fear; instead, he is focused on the battle at hand (Finlayson 252–3).

Arthur’s willingness to engage the enemy personally in order to secure his kingdom is
also demonstrated in Malory with the eleven kings episode. In his response to the rebel kings,
Arthur’s boldness is magnificent. In an encounter with King Cradilment of North Wales, Arthur attacks and “with hys swerde he smote the kynge [Cradilment] on the helme, that a quarter of the helme and shelde clave downe; and so the swerde carve downe unto the horse necke, and so man and horse felle downe to the grounde” (Malory 21.27-30). Later, he writes,

Kynge Arthure was so blody that by hys shylde there myght no man know hym, for all was blode and brayne that stake on his swerde and on hys shylde. And as Kynge Arthure loked besyde hym he sawe a knyght that was passyngely well horsed. And therewith Kynge Arthure ran to hym and smote hym on the helme, that hys swerde wente unto his teeth and the knyght sanke downe to the erthe, dede. (Malory 24.37-43)

Malory depicts Arthur’s fighting expertise in a manner reminiscent of the Anglo-Saxon heroes discussed in chapter one – so much so that Terrence McCarthy likens him to “Beowulf’s bairns,” a man “of a heroic strain of whom one inevitably stands in awe” (“Beowulf’s Bairns”153). This sternness is particularly clear in gruesome detail Malory provides of this battle scene.

Some critics have argued that by accentuating this ferocity the authors draw attention to the mercilessness required to maintain absolute rule (Chism, Alliterative Revivals 214). It is true that Arthur is willing to go to any measure to secure victory for his country including unrelenting siege and fierce combat; yet one must recognize that this quality is carefully constructed by the authors. At times in each text, Arthur’s behavior is undeniably ruthless as he mercilessly pursues victory and power. These transgressions are depicted deliberately and, as choices of both Malory and the AMA-poet, indicate that Arthur’s function as a successful warrior and conqueror, regardless of the means to this end, is essential to the authors’ definitions of an ideal king.
Arthur’s eagerness to fight his enemies in both texts demonstrates that the _AMA_ and _Morte Darthur_ function within a framework of “epic-heroic values privileging prowess, glory and honour” (Whetter, “Warfare and Combat in _Le Morte Darthur_” 175). This pursuit of courage and martial strength reflects a tenet of fifteenth-century courtly society which held ‘worship’ as the knight’s most important concern (Benson, _Malory’s Morte Darthur_ 151). As the idealized hero, Arthur must epitomize this principle and he does so masterfully. Whereas in the French romances he is portrayed as weak, easily manipulated, cowardly, sinful, corrupt, inferior, and, mostly, as “a foil to demonstrate Launcelot’s superiority,” here, Arthur is undeniably a force to be reckoned with (Korrel 183-86). This portrayal of Arthur is very reminiscent of the Anglo-Saxon heroes discussed in the previous chapter and would fit comfortably in the category of epic-heroic literature.

**Arthur the Superhuman Warrior**

Another way Arthur’s character seems honed to manifest a harkening back to the heroes of an earlier age is his superhuman strength and fortitude. “One aspect of Arthur’s interiority [that] …receive[s] forceful visceral expression, the beating pulse of Arthur’s chivalry and his prime mover … is a vital anger that the poem calls ‘brethe’” (Chism, _Alliterative Revivals_ 214). In his interactions with the Roman ambassadors Arthur displays his distinction from the average soldier. In this episode, having received the insulting demand for tribute and obeisance, the narrator reports,

> The king blushed on the berne with his brode eyen,

> That full bremly for brethe brent as the gledes,

> Cast colours as the king with cruel lates
Looked as a lion and on his lip bites. (AMA 116-19)

So fearsome is his countenance that “the Romans for radnes rusht to the erthe, / For ferdness of his face as they fey were” (AMA 120-23). When questioned as to why they cower, the Romans respond, “The vout of thy visage has wounded us all! / Thou art the lordliest lede that ever I on looked. / By looking, withouten lees, a lion thee seemes!” (AMA 137-9). Furthermore, this “brethe” is the breath of life, the fire that exists that sets Arthur apart from all the other characters of the story; it is what makes him great, and it enables Arthur to accomplish superhuman feats. Arthur’s ability to strike fear into his enemies with mere look is a quality unmatched by any of the other great warriors of the poem, which illustrates the poet’s desire to craft in Arthur an ultimate hero whose abilities reach far beyond the standard.

In Malory’s case, rather than reduce or eliminate references to Arthur’s fierceness as he does in Arthur’s war with Lucius, the rebuke of Cador, and the portrayal of the negotiations with the Countess of Clarysyn, for example, the author celebrates this quality with moments like the eleven kings episode and his repetition of the Roman Senator’s scene. Also in Morte Darthur, the Romans cower from Arthur’s “grymme countenaunce” and the spokesman is so “aferde” to look in Arthur’s face that his “herete wolde nate serve for to sey [his] message” (114.17-18). Here, again, the author emphasizes Arthur’s ability to subdue his adversaries to the point of prostration by means of only a fierce glare, a feat which illustrates his exceptional capacity as an intimidating force – a strength he readily employs against his enemies.

Yet Arthur’s “brethe” is not the only example of his superhuman ability to outdo ordinary warriors (AMA 117). When he meets Mordred on the battlefield, the narrator explains that “when Sir Mordred was mighty and in his most strenghes; / Come none within the compass, knight ne none other, / Within the swing of sword, that he ne the swet leved” (AMA 4221-3). But, while no
other knight is able to come within a sword’s reach of Mordred without losing his life, Arthur bypasses its compass, walks straight up to Mordred and engages him in battle. So awesome is Arthur’s feat here that even the narrator cannot help but be impressed by him, describing his actions as “knightly,” “doughty,” and “freshlich” (AMA 4230, 4241, 4249). Once more, Arthur is able to accomplish something no other warrior can – entering within the swing of Clarent without falling before it.

One last example of Arthur’s fantastic capacity to overcome the constraints of normal men is evident in his capacity to fight through wounds, even mortal wounds, to vanquish his foe. Our first exposure to this characteristic of Arthur’s occurs when, during their fight, the Giant “caught [Arthur] in armes, / And encloses him clenly to crushen his ribbes; / So hard holdes he that hende that ner his herete bristes!” (AMA 1133-35). Arthur is able to prevail, however, and “with an anlace egerly smites / And hittes ever in the hulk up to the hiltes” despite his crushed ribs (AMA 1148-49). Arthur’s capacity to discount what for a normal man would be terrible pain to subdue the enemy illustrates his preeminence as a warrior. In his encounter with Lucius, Arthur again demonstrates this vigor when the emperor

egerly at Arthur he strikes,
Awkward on the umbrere, and egerly him hittes;
The naked sword at the nose noyes him sore;
The blood of the bold king over the breste runnes,
Bebledde at the brode sheld and the bright mailes! (AMA 2246-50)

Arthur fights on despite this serious wound without so much as an acknowledgement of its occurrence, a feat any normal person would be hard-pressed to accomplish if stuck by a sword in
the face. In spite of his gushing facial wound, Arthur strikes a blow against Lucius so hard it open his chest – a sight which strikes such fear into Lucius’s men that they flee the field.

Finally, during Arthur’s greatest battle, his annihilation of Mordred, the narrator describes Arthur receiving his mortal wound, “the freke fiched in the flesh an half-foot large, / That derf dint was his dede”; yet he fights on:

… with Caliburn his sword full knightly he strikes,

Castes in his clere sheld and coveres him full fair,

Swappes off the sword hand, als he by glentes –

An inch fro the elbow he oched it in sonder

That he swoones on the swarth and on swim falles –

Through bracer of brown steel and the bright mailes,

That the hilt and the hand upon the hethe ligges.

Then freshlich the freke the fente up-reres,

Broches him in with the brand to the bright hiltes,

And he brawles on the brand and bounes for to die. (AMA 4242-51)

His hand to hand battle with Mordred exemplifies Arthur’s great ability and willingness to go above and beyond the limits of the human body to accomplish heroic feats. Not only is Arthur’s valor manifested in the poet’s attention to detail, his painstakingly painting an agonizing picture of Arthur’s death, it also highlights the hero’s capacity to rise above and overcome catastrophic wounds to destroy his enemies. Though Arthur is mortally wounded, he leaves the field victorious, while Mordred leaves mutilated and in pieces, losing his arm much as Grendel does in his encounter with Beowulf.
The *AMA*’s depiction of the brutality and gore evidenced in Arthur’s battles is certainly more pronounced than Malory’s; but Malory does strive to portray Arthur’s ability to overcome his wounds to fight and defeat his enemies. In the Lucius episode, the author embellishes on Arthur’s wound, writing that it was no mere facial laceration but, “nyghe unto the tunge” (137.22-3). Though he is less explicit in other aspects of the battle carnage, Malory’s revision of this detail highlights that his Arthur is still a herculean hero. Similarly, Malory describes Mordred’s blow against Arthur as “he smote hys fadir, Kynge Arthrue, with hys swerde holdynge in both hys hondys, uppon the syde of the hede, that the swerde perced the helmet and the tay of the brayne” (686.7-9). Yet, despite at least a skull fracture and at most exposed brain matter, the king recovers his strength enough to make preparations for the end of his rule. These bodily expressions of Arthur’s supremacy are especially telling for Geraldine Heng, who claims that “the idea that the truth of a person may somehow be read on his body, or within his body, suggests a certain capacity, on the part of a narrative, to essentialize the body as the ground of reference and truth” (Heng 168). Therefore, the spotlight focused on the superhuman feats that Arthur’s body is capable of illustrates the authors’ desires to present a hero who is extraordinary.

In terms of literary representation of the cultural experience, Arthur’s preternatural fighting prowess satiates authors and audiences who feel disheartened and yearn for a hero who can overcome incredible constraints to ensure success. Contextually, the military interactions with France during the Hundred Years War; the weakness of England’s greatest hero, Edward the Black Prince; and, for Malory, the distant memory of the dream of reclaiming French lands can certainly be seen as parallel to episodes in the *AMA* and *Morte Darthur.* Thus, Arthur’s “brethe” and exceptional stamina respond to the contemporary context and can be read as evidence of the desires of the authors and audiences to fashion a fantasy version of their best warrior (*AMA* 117).
Arthur’s Foes as Foils

Beowulf, especially, shares this indomitable quality with Arthur, making them both imposing figures to confront. However, their fearsomeness does not deter dreadful foes from defiantly challenging their might. Beowulf’s Grendel offers clear parallels to the monstrous Giant of Mont Saint Michel, described in the *AMA* as “a tyraunt beside that torments [Arthur’s] pople, / A grete giaunt of Gene” who shares Grendel’s demonic parentage as he was “engendered of fendas” (841-42, 843). In addition, the Giant is accused of slaughtering innocents with an appetite for nobles and without concern for alliances or monetary gain:

For both landes and lythes full little by he settes;

Of rentes ne of red gold reckes he never,

For he will lenge out of law, as himself thinkes,

Withouten license of lede, as lord in his owen. (994-97)

Again he exhibits qualities much like the cannibalistic Grendel who shows no interest in Heorot’s riches and covets instead its people. This disregard for the rule of law and political alliance can be seen as an allusion to the disdain with which France held England’s claims, laws, and alliance during the Hundred Years War. During the war, France’s Phillip VI supported Scotland’s rebellion, confiscated French lands, and rescinded French titles held by the king of England for nearly two hundred years, and finally called his vassals to war with England in 1337 (Prestwich, *Plantagenet England* 304-305). In addition, the fact that both the Templar knight and Arthur name the Giant a “tyraunt” illustrates their resentment toward any usurper of power who oppresses the people (*AMA* 842, 991). This detail can, perhaps, be seen as criticism of the French and a nod toward their monstrousness from the perspective of the English author. Just as the
Giant disregards all bounds of civility, and courtly politics in turn, by feasting on the noble women and children of the area, France, in its disregard for alliances, liege bonds, and respect for a fellow sovereign, demonstrates its own courtly monstrousness.

The *AMA* also contrasts Arthur’s generosity with the Giant’s avarice. While the Giant is depicted as greedily gobbling up children from a “cowle full crammed of crismed childer,” Arthur unreservedly offers the whole of the Giant’s treasure “to commouns of the countree, clergy and other,” keeping only the Giant’s club as his trophy (1051, 1215). The Giant’s acquisitiveness draws a parallel with the behavior of France during the Hundred Years War wherein Phillip VI repeatedly solicited both funds and troops from Edward’s vassals in Gascony and continued to treat the duchy as part of his territory rather than under Edward’s jurisdiction (Prestwich, *Plantagenet England* 304). Arthur, on the other hand, is portrayed as rendering unto the common people what was theirs and taking only one keepsake to mark his victory. The poet’s drive to create such contrasting figures of covetousness and magnanimity emphasizes the contemporary concern over France’s illicit actions in Gascony and beyond during the time of the Hundred Years War.

Malory also measures Arthur against the figure of the Giant, painting a grotesque picture of a creature with “teeth lyke a grayhounde – he was the foulyst wyghte that ever man sye – and there was never devil in helle more horryblyer made” (123.38-41). Arthur, on the other hand, is depicted as powerful, striking the Giant with a first blow so forceful that it “that the sylpped blade unto the brayne rechis,” yet generously dispensing the Giant’s hoarded and undeserved treasure to his men (Malory 124.3-4). Most important, Arthur is welcomed and celebrated as a sovereign for whom the people of the land thank God (Malory 125.17-18). Tellingly, this cannibalistic, monstrous, tyrant is nearly the first ‘person’ Arthur encounters upon landing in
France. Clearly, the giant is the antithesis of an ideal noble king – he is, in a word, monstrous. But he is not just monstrous: the *AMA* and *Morte Darthur* present the giant with a “kirtle, ‘spun in Spain’ and ‘garnished in Greece’ and bordered with the beards of slain kings”; thus, the Giant is not merely an animalistic creature, he is a highly stylized, worldly representation of despotic rule clothed in the cultures of the continent (Everett 62-63). Ultimately, the Giant serves as a mirror by which to measure Arthur’s capacity to defend his people from a physical threat and his willingness to treat them justly; furthermore, the Giant also represents the author and audience’s fears of foreign conquest and desire for a hero who would defend them as well as Arthur does.

In exchange for ceasing his reign of terror, he demands Arthur’s beard, a symbol of his masculinity (Heng 120). The Giant wants Arthur to humiliate himself (and thereby his people) in order to secure peace – a situation quite analogous to Phillip’s VI’s demand that, in order to maintain his holdings in France, Edward extradite Robert of Artois for plotting to overthrow the French king (Prestwich, *Plantagenet England* 306-7). When Arthur defeats the Giant and assumes his cloak of beards, this “effectively makes Arthur over into the giant’s successor, in a chain of displacement and substitution that confirms Arthur as the latest personification of territorial dominance and tributary exaction” (Heng 127-8). This act of acquisition stands as a physical signifier of Arthur’s newly absorbed territory, the first step in a triumphant colonial march in which he recaptures lost agency, sovereignty, and power. In addition, it reframes the English as dominant rather than subordinate, commanding rather than compelled, and rewrites the reality of history as a fantasy which favors the authors and audiences rather than their continental counterparts. While Arthur’s triumph as conqueror is something that would have appealed to the author and audience, the fact that Arthur associates himself with the dreadful Giant by assuming the physical sign of the Giant’s reign of terror calls into question Arthur’s the
connection between Arthur as conqueror and Arthur as hero. Though he is certainly successful in his quest for domination, this affiliation with the monstrous indicts Arthur’s behavior and interrogates the contemporary standards against which the hero is measured.

Mary Hamel notes that Arthur “turn[s] into the giant’s alter ego himself by the corruption of conquest” during the campaign against Lucius, creating “more weeping and cursing widows in Tuscany” than the giant did in St. Michel (n. 4284-6, p. 395). Yet whereas Hamel draws Arthur as analogous to the Giant in the number of lives taken, creating victims wherever he goes, her view is not complete. It is true that in his campaign against Lucius Arthur’s army does create widows, both texts acknowledge this; but, while the Giant gluttonously revels in the taking of lives, Arthur takes pains to protect the innocents. When the Countess of Claysyn and her ladies who plead for Arthur to cease his siege of their city, the narrator describes Arthur’s response as

The Kynge avalys his vyser with a knyghtly countenaunce and kneeled to hir hyldely with full meke wordes, and seyde, “Shall none myssedo you, madam, that to me longis, for I graunte the chartysrs, and to thy cheff maydysns, unto thy chyldern, and to thy chyff men in chamibr that to the longis” (Malory 147-8.42-4, emphasis added)

Arthur mercifully promises to spare the Countess, all her children, and her noble ladies and lords, and provide her a livelihood, on the condition of their city’s surrender. Though there are casualties of his war – as there are in any war – if Arthur were the tyrant Hamel names him, he would have no care for the suffering of those affected by his endeavor. “The giant-episode, coming as the climax to this expository section and as the transition to the conflict with the Roman Emperor,” establishes Arthur as hero in his own right as he sets out to meet Lucius in battle (Finlayson 263).
Much as the Giant stands as an antipode with which to contrast Arthur’s adherence to the rules of courtly politics, martial strength, and generosity, Lucius offers the means by which to examine Arthur’s role as a just and a justified combatant. With Lucius, Arthur responds to a threat against his kingdom in which a foreign sovereign seeks to strip the English monarch of his authority in his own lands. In his defense of English sovereignty, Arthur interrogates criticisms of English aggressions against France during the fourteenth century conflict and justifies them with his account of England’s hereditary claim against Rome – itself a parallel for England’s assertion that Edward III had a more direct line to the throne of France than Phillip VI (Curry 19). Both the *AMA* and *Morte Darthur* take pains to illustrate that Arthur is justified in denying Rome’s authority because of his legacy of sovereignty; the *AMA* Arthur proclaims

I have title to take tribute of Rome

Mine auncestres were emperours and ought it themselven,

Belin and Bremin and Bawdewyne the third;

They occupied the empire eight score winters,

Ilkon eier after other, as old men telles;

They covered the Capitol and cast down the walles,

..............................................................

Senn Constantine, our kinsman, conquered it after,

That eier was of Yngland and emperor of Rome. (275-80, 282-83)

Here Arthur traces his heritage through a line of Roman conquerors who he claims held the throne of Rome for hundreds of years before Lucius dared ask tribute from their heir. Arthur turns Lucius’s demand back onto him and imperiously challenges, “Thus have we evidence to ask the emperor the same, / That thus regnes at Rome, what right that he claimes” (286-87).
Similarly, in *Morte Darthur*, Arthur posits,

> For this much have I founde in the cronycles of this londe: that Sir Belyne and Sir Bryne, of my bloode elders, that borne were in Bretayne, and they hath ocupied the empyreship eyght score wyntyrs: And aftir, Constantyne oure kynnesman conquerd hit – and dame Elyneyes sone, of Ingelonde, was Emperoure of Roome – … And thus was the Empyre kepte be my kynde elders, and thus have we evydence inowghe to the empyre of hole Rome. (115.18-23, 25-26).

In this last line, an addition of Malory’s, Arthur makes explicit that he owes no homage to Rome, in fact, that Rome owes him allegiance. This small inclusion also illustrates the level of legitimacy Arthur attributes his claim to and his belief that his “evidence inowghe” justifies the action he will take to restore his birthright as emperor of Rome (115.26). While the two texts both detail Arthur’s claim to the throne, Malory’s portrayal stresses the legality of Arthur’s claim by offering “evyidence” (115.26).

Arthur’s preoccupation with his hereditary claim to Rome parallels the dynastic conflict between Phillip VI of France and Edward III of England whereby Edward and his advisors believed that his right to rule was usurped by Phillip, who was further removed from the line of succession as a cousin rather than a nephew of the previous French king Charles IV (Curry 19; see also Prestwich, *Plantagenet England* 302). In this episode, we can see the both authors adjudicating current events in the guise of historical fiction. By responding to Lucius’s unjustified display of dominance and taking on the mantle of conqueror himself, Arthur redresses the wrongs done to his people both within the story and without, and, through his campaign against Lucius, Arthur defines himself and his country against those who seek to subjugate them – a process that is necessary “for a nation to exist” (Memmi 54). Indeed, for a country to redress
the pains of hostile interaction with foreign oppressors and secure power, “it must … win its place among other nations, against them if need be” which is exactly what Arthur sets out to do in his campaign against Rome (Memmi 54).

Lucius is more than just a pretender to the throne which Arthur can easily dismiss, however; he does have some credible claim to the realm of Rome. According to his senators’ charge, Arthur “occupies the lands / That owe homage of old til him [Lucius] and his elders” (AMA 98-99), and as evidence that Arthur should offer this same tribute, the senators call attention to the fact that Arthur’s “fader made fewtee” according to their “rolles” (AMA 112). The reference to control over lands that are not his echoes Phillip VI’s claims that France, not England, held jurisdiction in the duchy of Gascony, and by citing Arthur’s father’s offer of homage to a foreign king, the poet draws comparisons to Edward I’s act of deference to Philip IV and France’s expectation that Edward III would follow this example (Prestwich, Plantagenet England 302). Arthur himself acknowledges that at some point in the past Rome was “teenfull tint” (AMA 272). Yet Arthur frames this loss as a cowardly land-grab whereby “alienes, in absence of all men of armes, / Coverd it of commons” (AMA 273-74). The choice of the word “alienes” and his insistence that the sovereignty of Rome was won in a cowardly manner are important distinctions that indicate Arthur’s belief that Lucius’s claim (and that of those who came before him) was unjust and, therefore, this later insistence on obeisance is as baseless. Here again, parallels to the situation with France can be seen; just as Arthur demonstrates the contempt with which he holds the oppression of a foreign power, Edward III, though required by his father and king to pay homage to Phillip VI, did so while making it abundantly clear that he was acting under duress by wearing his crown and sword – symbols of his own authority (Wilson
194). These decisions on the part of the poet certainly make clear what side he authorizes in this feud between Arthur and Lucius and the analogous dispute between England and France.\textsuperscript{30}

The focus on Lucius as a foreign dictator who draws his power from a claim made by “alienes” is further accentuated by the focus on his foreign and monstrous allies. The \textit{AMA} spends nearly thirty lines listing the foreign and pagan accomplices Lucius has brought against England and Arthur whose exoticism ranges from dukes from Damascus to sultans from Syria (570-99). By locating Arthur’s campaign and some of his enemies on a fixed map with familiar place names, the poet at once reassures readers of the texts’ historicity while at the same time highlighting the unfamiliar nature of Arthur’s enemies and framing Arthur’s response as just (Patterson 213). Arthur’s army, on the other hand, is solidly seated in the realm of England being made up of the kings of Cornwall, Scotland, Orkney, Brittany, Wales, among others and launched from Sandwich and York.

\textit{Le Morte Darthur} similarly showcases the strangeness of Lucius’s accomplices from the far reaches of the Earth – India to Egypt, Nazareth to Portugal, Alexandria to Armenia – and, as it does in the \textit{AMA}, this exhaustive account effectively renders Lucius the alien other contrasted to Arthur’s familiar Englishness. Malory makes some revisions, displacing some of the classical and middle eastern references with more contemporary powers. By replacing Thebes and the land of the Amazons with Portugal, for instance, Malory updates the text for his later audience and ensures that the alien enemies remained a relevant threat. By amending the text to reflect the concerns of his audience, Malory ensures that the contemporary audience would still have identified with Arthur’s army of familiar, local faces, against the foreign foes.

\textsuperscript{30} Malory, too, has the senators reference the past homage paid by Arthur’s “fader and other tofore, thy precessours” but does not include a rebuttal from Arthur (Malory 113.20- 114.1). Instead, the author focuses on the discourtesy of the message as reason enough for war.
In addition to the host of foreigners detailed to accompany Lucius on his campaign, the *AMA* the poet also recounts that with Lucius rode “sixty giauntes before, engendered with fendas, / With witches and warlaws, to watchen his tentes / Aywere where he wendes wintres and yeres” (612-14). Lucius’s close association with practitioners of magic and beings fathered by fiends is something that Catholic England would find reprehensible, emphasizing how thoroughly dissimilar he and his retinue are from the hero and audience of the text.

In this same fashion, Malory, too, capitalizes on Lucius’s fantastic accomplices by describing the giants in Lucius’s battalion. Malory, however, highlights Lucius’s cowardice in using them by writing that “he lete ordeyne for to awayte on his persone and for to breke the batayle of the frunte of Arthurs knyghtes” (118. 37-9). By depicting Lucius as hiding behind his demonic allies, Malory further strips him of any similarity he has to the brave and honorable Arthur.

By framing Lucius and his army as so disparate, the authors indicate “that [Lucius’s] claim of overlordship of England is itself monstrous” much in the same way Memmi argues colonizers differentiate themselves from the colonized in order to justify their oppression (Whetter, “Warfare and Combat in *Le Morte Darthur*” 172, Memmi 8). Lucius’s army in all their exoticism represents the audience and author’s concern for what exists beyond England’s borders and sense of vulnerability in engaging with it while at the same time legitimizes Arthur’s aggressive response to Lucius’s dominion.

Indeed, those concerns are justified as Lucius’s delight in his disorder is reprehensible and abhorrent. The people of France complain to Arthur that Lucius

is enterd into Fraunce

With hostes of enmies, horrible and huge;
Brinnes in Burgoine thy burges so rich,
And brittenes thy baronage that beldes there-in;
He encroaches keenly by craftes of armes
Countrees and casteles that to thy crown longes (AMA 1239-40).

Though nothing in Lucius’s behavior is outside the bounds of warfare for this period—Arthur himself commits many of the same acts in his campaign—what sets Lucius apart in his undertaking is the satisfaction he seems to enjoy in the suffering of others. The poet characterizes him as “riotes himselfe” which translates at the very least to “behaving in a dissolute manner” and at the worst to “taking pleasure” in his mercilessness (AMA 619; Middle English Dictionary, “rioten” (v.)). In this same way, the poet describes Lucius’s going about “with a huge will” or “appetite,” a word which brings with it a host of corrupt and depraved connotations (AMA 620; Middle English Dictionary, “wil(le” (n.)). Lucius’s sheer delight in his evil works illustrates the poet’s censure of his brutal assault.

Malory’s version of events does not include the narratorial commentary on Lucius’s behavior. Rather, he is remarkably straightforward in his description, reporting Lucius’s march in the vein of “Lucius com unto Cullayne, and thereby a castelle besegys, and wane hit within a whyle, and feffed hit with Saresyns” (119.1-2). The only criticizing Malory’s narrator does in this way is to remark that “the Emperour, with all hys horrorbe peple, drew to passe Almayne to dystroy Arthures londys that he wan thorow warre of his noble knyghtes” (118.41-3, emphasis added).

Though both narrators make some effort to denounce Lucius, or at least his allies, the venerable William Matthews argues that Arthur is a mirror of Lucius much like Hamel equates of Arthur and the Giant, pointing to Arthur’s behavior during the siege of Metz as evidence that
undercuts his moral high ground. For Matthews, this negative portrait signals an increasingly hostile attitude toward war in the fourteenth century, marking the *AMA* as “the first time a critical portrayal of the national hero on the basis of deep concern with the moral problem of war” exists (179). Yet if we consider the way the poet himself regards Arthur’s so-called ‘battle atrocities,’ we observe that they are offered in such a way that is justified by the narrators and contemporary military protocols. As K.S. Whetter explains,

> In stark contrast to modern liberal thinking, the notion of just war was entirely acceptable in the Middle Ages. … medieval laws of war and siege condoned the wholesale slaughter of a city that refused to surrender…. however much the destruction of monasteries and hospitals later in the alliterative *Morte*’s Metz siege offends modern sensibilities, we cannot condemn Arthur’s actions by *medieval* siege conventions. … By the conventions of both medieval warfare and martial poetry, then, the siege of Metz … is, … more a corroboration than a condemnation of Arthur’s character, kingship, and heroism. (Whetter “Genre as Context” 56)\(^{31}\)

In the *AMA* Arthur’s tactics are, admittedly, ruthless, so much so that the narrator steps into the frame to editorialize that “the pine of the pople was pitee for to here” (*AMA* 3043). However, Arthur is described in the scene following the surrender of Metz as noble, virtuous, wise, setting law, maintaining order amongst his troops, etc. (*AMA* 3054, 3055, 3090, 378-83). This juxtaposition between criticism of his treatment of the piteous people and admiration for his laudable qualities and actions highlights the complicated nature of this hero. He is a fully round character; in turns commendable and condemnable. Arthur is perhaps more aggressive in his

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\(^{31}\) For a further discussion of the war manuals of this era, see Benson, “*Morte Arthure* and Medieval Tragedy.”
campaign against Tuscany but, I would argue that, rather than Lucius’s savagery for pleasure’s sake, Arthur’s purpose is strategic. The *AMA*-poet depicts Arthur’s troops as tormenting the people, making them wail in woe while pitilessly plundering and despoiling the land, so ruthless is their drive that word spread of his deeds clear across Europe. The speaker then reports that, having conquered Tuscany, “there sujournes this soveraign with solace in herte, / To see when the Senatours sent any wordes” (*AMA* 3170-1). This deliberate cease-fire on Arthur’s part while he waits on word from Rome speaks to calculated battle plan – that his brutality was designed to achieve a specific end. As Whetter argued, these tactics, while uncomfortable for modern readers, were acceptable by medieval convention and, it must be said, successful – Rome hears of Arthur’s campaign and sends an Ambassador to negotiate Arthur’s coronation in exchange for peace.

Where Arthur follows the conventions of war to achieve his goals, the emperor Lucius’s disregard for the rules of courtly combat is represented as despicable (Radulescu, “Malory and Fifteenth-Century Political Ideas” 43). Lucius is justified in burning cities, seizing castles, and razing forests during a warring offensive but his behavior toward the people he encounters on his campaign is unsanctioned by contemporary combat manuals. His treatment of non-combatants, confounding Arthur’s “commouns, clergy and other” (*AMA* 1245), churlishly denying them mercy (“Frithes no frauches, but frayes the pople,” *AMA* 1248), killing civilians and pillaging their goods (“he felles thy folk and fanges their goodes,” *AMA* 1249), and executing all who comes within his reach without regard to diplomacy or civility (“All to dede they dight with dintes of swords / Dukes and douspeeres that dreches there-in,” *AMA* 1253-4), illustrates how utterly contemptible Lucius’s actions are in this text. In medieval society, “lawful behavior was … the foundation of civilization”; thus, Lucius’s disregard for it casts him undeniably as the
villain while Arthur can be identified as a hero “by the scrupulousness with which [he] obey[s] rules even in the most compromised of circumstances” (Ramsey 82-83, 83-84). Arthur generally upholds the strictures of courtesy and enforces them among his own men, proclaiming

\[
\text{On pain of life and limm and lesing of landes} \\
\text{That no lele lege-man that to him longed,} \\
\text{Sholde lie by no ladies, ne by no lele maidens,} \\
\text{Ne by no burgess wife, better ne worse} \\
\text{Ne no bernes misbid that to the burgh longed. (AMA 3079-83)}
\]

In this quote Arthur demonstrates his adherence to the rule of law by protecting the commoners who have no place on the field of battle. Though Arthur has his own moments of brutality, his observance of the rules of combat contrasted with Lucius’s blatant disregard of them definitively sets Arthur apart from Lucius.

Malory, too, paints Lucius as the villain in these interactions: a character whose methods are brutal and to the detriment of those he means to rule, with Arthur the conquering hero. He writes, Arthur “sette lawys in that londe that fured longe aftir – and so into Tuskeyne, and there thy tirrauntys destroyed” and “stabelysshed all the londys frome Rome unto Fraunce” so that those he conquers are made more secure by his acquisition of their lands (Malory 139.23-5, 150.6-7). Malory, more than the *AMA*-poet, glorifies Arthur’s tactics, condensing much of his campaign against Metz and Tuscany each only warranting three lines of description compared to the 672 combined lines the *AMA*-poet grants. Malory devotes five times as many lines to highlight Arthur’s victories and the benefits he provides the people he has conquered.\(^\text{32}\) An example of this effort to exonerate Arthur is Malory’s restructuring of the events of the story. “In

\(^{32}\text{Specific comparisons can be found for Metz in the }AMA\text{ lines 2420-3077 versus }Le\ Morte\ Darthur’s\ 147.33-5\text{ and for Tuscany lines 3149-64 versus 149.13-15.}
all the French books, and in the [AMA] …, the story of the Roman campaign and triumph is followed forthwith by the story of Arthur’s downfall” (Brewer “‘the hoole book’” 47). Instead, Malory “postpone[s] the tragic end and turned his second tale into a tale of triumph … in tribute to Arthur, and to all that Arthur stands for in his imagination” (Brewer “‘the hoole book’” 47). Malory seeks to relieve the tension between Arthur as triumphant conqueror and Arthur the fallen hero by separating the conflict with Lucius by fifteen books from the poignant end (Whetter, “Warfare and Combat in Le Morte Darthur” 178). In so doing, Malory alleviates the criticism implied by ordering the destruction of Arthur’s court immediately following a brutal war, painting it instead as the result of Mordred’s treachery. Here we see evidence of Malory adapting his source, the AMA, to suit the needs of his hero who he wishes to represent elements of the Anglo-Saxon warrior ideal in positively. “The hero’s … honor and glory are, for the author, the audience, and especially the characters themselves, paramount concerns. Such honor and glory are … most commonly proven, maintained, and defended through violent action” (Whetter, “Genre as Context” 56). Therefore, the author molds the Arthurian legend to reflect this desire and modifies his text to respond to any implicit criticism of Arthur’s war by separating the king’s questionable tactics from his ultimate fall from grace. In this distancing move, one can read Malory’s desire to further discharge any claims that Arthur’s behavior in the Roman wars is responsible for the end of his reign. This adaptation highlights the ability of literature and authors to alter the historical – here the traditional structure of events – to fit their needs.

The deliberateness of these choices demonstrates the unique ability of literature to interact with reality, questioning and sometimes criticizing the values and ideals of a society. While Arthur is certainly the hero of these stories, he is not without flaws, nor does either text
attempt to whitewash them. The AMA complicates what it means to want to be the victor but disapprove of the path to victory; one can imagine that having experienced conquest, it is hard to approve of the process. By celebrating Arthur’s glories in the war against Lucius and separating this achievement from the calamitous end, Malory delays Arthur’s failure so as to cast blame on poor management like the choices to support Gawain past all reasonableness and to select Mordred, whom he had been warned would try to usurp him, as his regent.

Just as some critics cast Arthur as a double of Lucius when, in fact, his actions are far more acceptable to both contemporary readers and the speakers of each text, so too do they see Mordred as Arthur’s match. Mary Hamel argues that Mordred’s avarice, pride, and violence are all reflections of Arthur’s own sins, and when Mordred seizes Arthur’s realm and rentis “he follows the example of Arthur’s greed of conquest, and perhaps a less noble greed in his later concern for the ‘rentis of Rome’ (3587) at a time when his world is falling apart” (305). However, Mordred’s seizure of his uncle’s property is done unlawfully and after he has been entrusted with its protection while, as discussed above, Arthur is justified in recovering the ancestral claims which had been appropriated by Rome without warrant. Evidence of Mordred’s childish and selfish desire for kingship can be seen even in the arguments of critics who seek to justify his behavior. Dorsey Armstrong claims that Mordred believes “in denying him the opportunity to join the rest of the knights on the campaign against Lucius, Arthur is in effect punishing Mordred, who he has raised according to an ideology in which warfare and conquest are the dominant ideals” (Armstrong 91). Thus, according to these critics, Mordred is justified in seeking glory in whatever avenue is left available to him. However, though Arthur does block

\[33\] Chism also argues in “Disastrous Politics” that Mordred was justified in his anger with Arthur and, had he made an appeal to parliament like contemporary noblemen did of Richard II, he would have been found validation for his claim that he was unjustly distanced from the king (83).
Mordred’s access to the war machine, he does this for the good of the state, to secure an heir and avoid civil unrest should the king fall in battle. Further, if Mordred prioritized the good of the country before his own desires as Arthur does, he would understand the necessity of this sacrifice. In the *AMA*, Arthur does not leave Mordred behind merely to go gallivanting in meaningless frivolity – he is abroad defending England from oppression. Arthur must secure the kingdom against his own potential death by naming someone his regent, and Mordred, with his close familial ties, is the best candidate. Ultimately, Mordred’s childish upset at being left out of the fun contrasts with Arthur’s reasoned acceptance of his own mortality to highlights the disparity between the two and emphasizes Arthur’s loyalty to the state and willingness to put public duty before his private desires. The *AMA*-poet’s contempt for Mordred’s treachery is clear in the number of insulting titles he gives the usurper, particularly “the name ‘Malebranche’ [which] is applied to the grotesque demons who guard the bolgia of the barrators in the eighth circle of Hell” in Dante’s *Inferno* – the circle of fraud and the corrupt (Hamel 304). If the poet thought Mordred justified in his motivation, he would not style him in such a way. This title and the doubt it casts on Mordred’s seemingly spurious rationale for usurping his throne requires that Arthur stand again as a defender of England, and of just causes, against the one he named as his steward.

Arthur is portrayed generally as glorious and righteous in his defense of his country; Mordred is revealed, in turns, to be corrupt and cowardly in addition to traitorous. Not only does he usurp the throne of his king, father, and uncle; Mordred does it, according to the *AMA*, with foreign mercenaries while the king is elsewhere defending the kingdom. In the poem, Craddok recounts to Arthur the horror of Mordred’s rule, especially his bequest of English lands to Danes,

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34 Other epithets include: “cherles chekyn” (4181); “cawtelous wriche” (4185); “derfe dogge” (4218); “felone” (4236); and “false theefe” (4253).
Saracens, and Saxons and the use of foreign mercenaries from Surgenale, Ireland, and Argyll (AMA 3527-36). Mordred has recruited foreign mercenaries to secure his power and, worse yet, installed them as lords and given them power over the English people. Thus, “Mordred’s revolt … threatens the proto-nation,” making his betrayal an unforgivable act to a nation of readers with a past rich in foreign invasion (Hodges 568). This move by Mordred is reminiscent of Fanon’s discussion of the colonized bourgeoisie who, in an effort to secure their own power, subjected their own people to more subjugation (106). The AMA’s highly critical portrayal of Mordred and his gruesome death, then, can be read as a response by the authors and audience to their experience and a fantasy of justice and vengeance whereby the disloyal, treacherous, egotistic villain stands for those who would threaten the sovereignty of the English nation and receives a justified terrible death. The authors’ disdain for Mordred and his contemptible acts, thus, provide an explicit contrast to Arthur’s unwavering devotion to his people.

Mordred features in Malory a bit differently; rather than as a childish and selfish rebel, the Morte Darthur consistently depicts him as a character associated with fraud, intrigue, and betrayal. Perhaps the greatest departure Malory makes from the AMA is his inclusion of the romance between Guenevere and Launcelot, and it is here that Mordred’s treacherous nature is first revealed. Though one might think alerting the king to the adultery between his wife and chief knight would be viewed as a positive act of loyalty, Malory is anything but complimentary in the way he depicts Mordred’s plot to expose Launcelot and Guenevere. The narrator introduces the tale saying, “hit befelle in the moneth of May a grete angur and [unhap] that stynted nat tylle the floure of chyvalry of [alle] the worlde was destroyed and slayne” (Malory 646.9-11). This explicit indictment charges that Mordred’s actions are the direct cause of Arthur’s death and illustrates the gravity of his coming betrayal. The narrator compounds the
criticism of Mordred by making clear that his actions were compelled by a pettiness and underhandedness, calling Mordred an “unhappy knight” and explaining that he “had ever a prevy hate unto the Quene, Dame Gwényver, and to Sir Launcelot – and daly and nyghtly [he] ever wacched uppon Sir Launcelot” (646.12, 14-16). By characterizing Mordred as inherently dissatisfied and deceitful, the author emphasizes his contemptible nature.

Though Mordred’s treasonous conduct is portrayed by Malory as reprehensible, Arthur also bears a measure of responsibility for the situation as Mordred is only brought to power by the king’s choice to follow Gawain to besiege Launcelot. When Gawain discovers that his brothers have been killed by Launcelot, he is overwhelmed by a thirst for vengeance, crying

“wyte you well, now I shall make you a promise which I shall holde be my knighthode, that from thys day forewarde, I shall never fayle Sir Launcelot untyll that one of us have slayne that other” (Malory 659.15-17). With his vow, Gawain also invokes Arthur’s responsibility to support this quest, demanding

My kynge, my lorde, and myne uncle … I require you, my lorde and kynge, dresse you unto the warres, for wyte you well, I wolle be revenged upon Sir Launcelot; and therefore, as ye woll have my servyse and my love, now haste you thereto and assays youre frendis. (Malory 659.18-21).

In these lines, Gawain appeals to Arthur’s three-fold duty; as king, Arthur is obliged to redress the unlawful deaths of Gareth and Gaheris; as lord, he is required to support Gawain’s cause as

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35 Bonnie Wheeler is, perhaps, the most eminent scholar on Malory’s Gawain. As I have not the space to address all of her great scholarship here, I refer readers to her work in: “Romance and Parataxis and Malory” in particular as well as many of her other works. For a review of those who see Gawain through a critical lens, see also Bennett, “Sir Thomas Malory's Gawain”; Knight, The Structure of Sir Thomas Malory's Arthuriad; and Bartholomew, "The Thematic Function of Malory's Gawain."
Gawain has loyally supported him; and, as uncle, he is compelled to participate in the familial quest for vengeance (Cooper, “Arthur in Transition” 130).

That Arthur chooses to fulfill these commitments is not at issue, for Arthur is right to invest himself as he does; however, Arthur’s duty to Gawain must be measured against his larger duty to England. In decamping from his country to pursue Gawain’s justice, Arthur leaves it vulnerable to the duplicitous Mordred. Further, it is clear from the author’s descriptions of Arthur’s state of mind during the war with Launcelot that he later recognizes his mistake and deeply regrets his choice. Malory repeatedly illustrates Arthur’s contrition in moments such as “Kynge Arthur wolde takyn hys quene agayne and to have bene accorded with Sir Launcelot, but Sir Gawayne would nat suffir hym by no maner of meane” (662.11-13) and “whan thys Bysshop was com unto Carlyle he shewed the Kynge his bullys; and whan the Kynce undirstode them, he wyst nat what to do. But full fayne he wolde have bene accorded with Sir Launcelot, but Sir Gawayn wolde nat suffir hym” (664.43-46). Arthur later despairs so greatly of his decision that he “felle syke for sorow of … the warre betwyxte hym and Sir Launcelot” (Malory 677.9-10). Arthur’s immense mental anguish and later acknowledgement that he never should have entered into a war against one of his most valiant knights illustrates clear acknowledgement of his failure. Here Arthur demonstrates his anagnorisis, reaching a level of self-awareness that admits his faults and culpability.\textsuperscript{36}

\textsuperscript{36} Gawain also professes his error, writing in his deathbed letter that he forgives Launcelot for the wound that led to his death and would have all the world know it was his own “sekynge” that was the cause of his death, not any fault on the part of Launcelot (Malory 682. 5-7). What is more, Gawain also admits to the greater harm he has caused, weakening the king and country by creating a rift between Arthur and Launcelot. To this end, Gawain beseeches Launcelot, “for all the love that ever was betwyxte us, make no taryng, but com over the see in all the goodly haste that ye may wyth youre noble knyghtes, and rescow that noble kynge that made the knyghte, for he ys full straytely bested wyth an false traytoure” (682.13-17).
When Mordred is next discussed, he fully realizes his villainy and assumes the role of treasonous usurper. While Arthur has been in France fulfilling his duty as liege lord in Gawain’s quest for vengeance, Mordred, whom he has entrusted as proxy, has through deceit seized the throne of England. The author details Mordred’s coup, describing,

he lete make lettirs as thoughe that they had com frome beyonde the see, and the lettirs specifyed that Kynge Arthur was slayne in batayle with Sir Launcelot. Wherefore Sir Mordred made a parlemente, and called the lordys togydir, and there he made them to chose [hym] Kynge … afterwarde he drew hym unto Winchester, and there he toke Quene Gwenyver, and seyde playnly that he wolde wedde her (Malory 679.1-10)

When Gueneverere refuses to marry him, Mordred lays siege to her stronghold and attempts to murder the Archbishop of Canterbury who dares to question his behavior. The lengths to which Mordred is willing to go to secure his coup – falsifying documents, compelling parliament, pursuing an incestuous and unwanted relationship with the Queen, and terrorizing a holy man – are considerable and clearly outside the bounds of decency. Mordred’s behavior echoes Memmi’s theory of the pyramid of petty tyrants in which natives turn on each other, seizing power for themselves in order to assuage his feelings of inadequacy (17). These efforts to depose Arthur are denounced in the most explicit terms.

Malory portrays Mordred so negatively so as to illustrate his contempt for the act of betrayal; he even goes so far as to include a rare moment of narratorial intrusion censuring the disloyal Englishmen who were swayed to Mordred’s side, writing “Lo, ye all Englysshemen, se ye nat what a myschyff here was? For he that was the moste kynge and nobelyst knyghtes – and by hym they all were upholdyn – and yet myght nat thes Englyshemen holde them contente with
hym” (Malory 680.25-29). In naming Mordred’s conduct mischief and condemning those who repudiated the “moste kynge and nobelyst knyghtes,” Arthur, the author contrasts their behavior with Arthur’s extreme goodness. Eventually the English people recognize the error of their ways and acknowledge Arthur’s justified position in his battle against Mordred, saying “that Sir Mordred warred uppon Kynge Arthure wyth wronge,” but this contrition does not save them from the narrator’s rebuke (Malory 683.6).

Despite the authors’ moves to glorify Arthur by contrasting him with monstrous, reprehensible, and cowardly rivals, some scholars still find Arthur’s actions against these foes censurable. One of the dominant criticisms of Arthur in his interactions with each of these foils is that he is too battle-hungry. Armstrong, for instance, claims that the *AMA* “represent[s] Arthur and his men as wholly and almost univocally embracing a narrow ideology of kingship, one in which warfare and conquest take precedence over peaceful rule” (93). Armstrong’s assertion takes a modern view of conflict; peaceful protest is not a virtue of the medieval world and certainly not of the Anglo-Saxon tradition on which the authors of both the *AMA* and *Morte Darthur* draw. Further, if one reads the *AMA* as part of the epic-heroic genre, as does Whetter, it must be acknowledged that “there is no alternative to war in the *Morte Arthure*. … [The *AMA*] is not merely epic-heroic in genre; … it is martial, in subject and values. … war is what this poem is all about” (Whetter, “Genre as Context” 50). In this same way, where some scholars criticize Arthur for seeking personal glory, it must be recognized that he is a warrior king in a community which values battle as the process where men of this age demonstrate their worthiness and

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37 Countless scholars have taken this view of Arthur’s wars, reading them as excessive, vain, “reckless,” (Finlayson, “The Concept of the Hero” 249) and “deserving tragedy” (Hamel, “The Dream of a King” 308-9). See Matthews’ seminal work in *The Tragedy of Arthur* as well as Twomey, “Heroic Kingship and Unjust War”; Armstrong, “Rewriting the Chronicle Tradition”; Hamel, “Adventure as Structure”; Göller, “Reality vs. Romance”; and Lynch, “Peace is Good.”
connection to their society (Armstrong 89). Furthermore, the texts finds no fault with Arthur for this behavior; the narrator of Malory’s text, for instance, remarks in the first chapter of the *Morte*

“whan [his men] herde of [Arthur’s] adventures, they marvayled that he wold joupardé his person so alone. But all men of worship seyde hit was myrry to be under such a chyffrayne that wolde putte hys person in adventure as other poure knyghtis ded” (38. 33-36). Arthur’s actions, though harsh, are justified, and his interactions with his enemies only further illustrate his divergence from their monstrous and cowardly behavior, defining Arthur as heroic by contrasting him against the contemptible.

Thus, Mordred, Lucius, and the Giant of Mont Saint Michel work in these texts as foils of Arthur. Where they are portrayed by the *AMA*-poet and Malory as grotesque, gluttonous, illegitimate, reprehensible, alien, petty, treasonous, and despicable, Arthur shines by comparison as an archetype of bravery, generosity, legitimacy, mercy, and steadfast English heroism. Through this juxtaposition, these characters act as the fictional representations of contemporary concerns which the authors and audiences are able to interrogate through their conflicts with Arthur. Even though both texts have nuanced personalities, the result is the same laudable hero.

**Arthur the Leader**

The *AMA* and *Morte Darthur* are not solely expositions of Arthur and his knights’ individual deeds in battle; Arthur’s leadership abilities create a strong bond between him and his men. That Arthur’s speeches manifest a powerful connection between him and his men is evident not only in how the men respond to Arthur, but also in how Arthur reacts to his men falling.

One of the defining qualities of Arthur’s leadership is his ability to reassure and invigorate his men through oratory. Evoking the spirit of Byrhtnoth from ages past, Arthur’s
speeches inspire his men, motivating them to accomplish the impossible. In the *AMA*, the narrator describes Arthur’s speech to his troop of eighteen hundred men, galvanizing them to action against Mordred’s sixty thousand. Arthur starts his speech by invoking the Lord and arousing his men’s courage, proclaiming:

I beseek you, sirs, for sake of our Lord,

That ye do well today and dredes no wepen!

Fightes fersly now and fendes yourselfe,

Felles down yon fey fold, the feld shall be ours! (*AMA* 4084-88)

He further incites them to action by offering the rich reward of heaven for heroic deeds done on Earth (*AMA* 4089-92). He then joins the band of brothers as a warrior in his own right, ordering, “Take no tent unto me, ne tale of me recke; / Bes busy on my banners with your bright wespons, / That they be strengively stuffed with steren knightes / And holden lordly on-loft ledes to shew” (*AMA* 4094-7). In this speech Arthur not only instructs his knights on how to perform admirably in the war arena. He directs them to make no effort to protect him; rather they should be busy with their weapons defending the banners which represent their country. He further stimulates their warring spirits by promising the destruction of their enemy, evokes their loyalty to him as motivation, promises divine protection, and praises their service to him. These speech-acts are the means by which Arthur ensures his men’s investment in the cause and devotion to its success. His effort is richly rewarded when “jolyly enjoines these gentle knightes” emboldened and eager to being the battle (*AMA* 4109). While Chism contends “we are prepared to an extent, eventually, to roll our eyes skeptically when” Arthur and his men face down such

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38 Though the most obvious definition of “joli” is, of course, “cheerful, glad,” in the context of this passage, the alternate of “stoutly, boldly” seems more appropriate (*Middle English Dictionary*, “joli” (adv.)).
overwhelming odds, I would argue that she reads this creative work of fiction with too much focus on realism (Chism, “The Disastrous Politics” 74-5). These texts are not represented as chronicles, and our narrators never claim historiography as their aim. The _AMA_ and _Morte Darthur_ are fictional accounts of an age gone by where men fought giants and an English king conquered the world; thus, the overwhelming odds are not meant to be read realistically, but symbolically as representing the superb fighting talent of its champions. For example, so great is the inspiration of Arthur to his men, that, like Arthur himself, they will fight through mortal wounds to continue their assault. In the Roman war episode,

  Sir Kayous knew well by that kidd wound
  That he was dede of the dint and done out of life;
  Then he raikes in array and on row rides,
  On this real renk his dede to revenge:
  “Keep thee, coward!” he calles him soon,
  Cleves him with his clere brand clenlich in sonder. . . . (_AMA_ 2177-82)

Kay acknowledges that he has received his death blow, yet he does not falter; rather, he fights on, gathering herculean strength from Arthur’s influence not just to kill his enemy, but slice him in two.

  Arthur’s speeches to his men also become a rallying measure in Malory. An example of this can be seen during the fight with Lucius in which, having observed that Lucius’s giants have “kylled downe many knyghtes, with clubbys of steele crusshed oute hir braynes,” Arthur encourages his troops by crying,

  Fayre lordys, loke youre name be nat loste! Lese nat oure worshyp for yondir bare legged knavys – and ye shal se what I shall do as for my trew parte! He toke there
oute Excalyber and gurdys towarde Galapas, that grevid hym moste. He kut hym
of by the kneis clenly there in sondir.

Now art thou of a syse, seyde the Kyng, lyke unto oure ferys! – and than he
strake of his hede swyftely. (Malory 135. 31-38)

Arthur’s evocation of the knights’ honor and worship, in addition to his dark humor and bold
actions, emboldens his men so that immediately following his confrontation with Galapas, the
author describes ten of Arthur’s great warriors engaging and successfully routing fifty giants
(Malory 135.39-45). This direct response to Arthur’s inspirational oratory demonstrates the
incredible capacity to encourage his men to acts of greatness.

Though “speech making and fighting may sound like strange companions, … they are
very much alike. Both are specific responses to specific situations that involve a threat or
problem of some kind. Both are formal, socially recognized modes of self-assertion” (Ramsey
85-86). In this situation, Arthur’s speeches act as the necessary response to an unsettled army.
Though Lee Ramsey argues that speeches do not offer psychological insights into the texts, that
they represent, rather, stock expressions of aggression, I think this gives too little credit to their
complexity.39 Perhaps it is true that speech acts do not provide insight into the specific
character’s feelings and motivations, but they do offer insights into the anxieties behind the
building of the characters. When Arthur’s men falter and quail in the face of overwhelming and
terrifying odds, we can read the contemporary apprehension about how to confront an
intimidating adversary. Accordingly, Arthur’s speeches illustrate what qualities authors who
encountered similar cultural situations found important when crafting their heroes; they harken

39 For more on the debate between textual and psychological approaches to reading Malory, see
Ackerman’s “‘Every man of worshyp’: Emotion and Characterization in Malory’s Le Morte
Darthur.”
back to an Anglo-Saxon tradition of attaining power and mastery through words, and they represent the capacity for words to share this power with its audience – both the knights in the text and the readers outside of it.

Even when he is not present on the field, Arthur’s kingly persona is a well from which his men draw courage. In one such instance, Idrus and Gawain, wielding Arthur’s name as a talisman and employing their feelings of loyalty to him, ride out to meet an army of fifty thousand Romans with their mere five thousand and are successful in crushing their opponents (AMA 1490-1540). Elsewhere, Cador invokes Arthur as a rallying figure who “comfortes his pople,” saying,

Think on the valiant prince that vesettes us ever
With landes and lordshippes where us best likes.

Foyne you not faintly, ne frithes no wepens,
But look ye fight faithfully, frekes yourselfen;
I would be welled all quick and quartered in sonder,

But I work my deed, whiles I in wrath lenge. (AMA 1724, 1726-7, 1734-37). Again, the parallel between this impassioned speech and its Anglo-Saxon forbears is clear. This scene is reminiscent of Dunnere in The Battle of Maldon who exhorts his comrades “Ne mæg na wandian se þe wrecan þenceð / frean on folce ne for feores murman” (He who thinks to avenge his lord upon that people / cannot draw back or fear for his life) (259-59). In these passages, both vassals call upon their fellow warriors to act courageously in the name of their lord, casting Arthur and his men as the fourteenth-century heirs of the illustrious Anglo-Saxon warrior tradition. Dorothy Everett, too, sees echoes of Byrhtnoth in Arthur and his men, writing
that the speeches given in the *AMA* read like the “fourteenth-century version of … *The Battle of Maldon*” (62). In this way, much like Byrhtnoth, Arthur inflames his men to greatness both with his speech and by drawing them into fellowship with him; “their love for him invests them with passion to overwhelm the floods of the enemies against which they define themselves and from whose destruction they garner power and name” (Chism, “The Disastrous Politics” 70). Chism sees the heights to which the figure of Arthur can inspire his men as potentially dangerous, arguing that “the fact that the initiative of Arthur’s captains is frequently excessive … both expresses their passion and hints at a problem with it: that its very fervor it is self-spending, heedless, and eventually exhausting” (Chism “The Disastrous Politics” 70-1). Chism is correct that the love Arthur’s knights have for him incites them to their detriment and, given her reading the text as a chronicle discussed earlier, it would appear excessive. However, as fantasies of heroism, the texts show that his men hold Arthur in such regard that they are willing to act against their own self-interests, putting their lives in danger in order to win triumph for themselves and for their king and country. What Chism does not allow for is that Arthur and his knights are fully aware that the consequences of their actions may be death but choose to act nevertheless. The *Morte Darthur* and *AMA* do more than merely reflect and ideal of Arthur’s ability as a leader. They interrogate that ideal, holding it up against the consequences of loss and reaffirming martial prowess and the ability to drive men to greatness as important elements in the construct of an ideal hero.

Another feature which defines Arthur as a commander is the great esteem in which he holds his men. Because he is so much a warrior himself, proving “his nobility in combat as vigorously as any of his knights,” Arthur appreciates his men all the more because he understands their experience (Benson, “The Alliterative *Morte Arthure*” 76). Indeed, “By making
Arthur at heart an ideal knight with a thin veneer of royalty, the poet constructs a fantasy of solidarity between king and noble at a time of intensifying factional division and alienation between royalty and the nobility climaxing in the deposition of Richard II” (Chism, *Alliterative Revivals* 190). For Arthur, nothing ranks as important as his men, and his boundless emotionality when they are threatened illustrates the tremendous value he places on them.

When Ewain is injured, Arthur warns a Roman Senator that “There shall no silver him save but Ewain recover” (*AMA* 1572). Though this is the only injured knight mentioned, Arthur’s desire to engage in the exchange of prisoners for treasure is quenched in the face of his knight’s pain. This same concern for the lives of his men is echoed later when Cador, who prevails against his Roman foes, is rebuked by Arthur for the loss of his knights. Arthur chides,

Sir Cador, thy corage confounds us all!
Cowardly thou castes out all my best knightes!
To put men in peril, it is no pris holden,
But the parties were purveyed and power arrayed;
When thou were stedde on a strenghe thou shold have with-stonden,
But yif ye wolde all my steren story for nones! (*AMA* 1922-27)

Arthur’s rebuke impugns Cador’s decision to risk his men when they were unprepared and criticizes his seemingly valiant success as cowardly since he has returned while fourteen of his men have fallen, a decision Arthur deems abhorrent. Though he eventually praises Cador’s victory, for Arthur, nothing is as important as his knights – not even victory.

This deep bond is also what drives Arthur from despair to rage when his knights are mortally wounded. When he discovers Gawain, dead on Mordred’s battlefield, Arthur’s grief is extreme. He “glopins in herte, / Grones full grislich with gretande teres, / . . . / His lippes like to
the lede and his lire fallowed / Then the crownd king cries full loud” (*AMA* 3949-50, 3954-55).

So great is Arthur’s grief that “sweltes the sweet king and in swoon falles” (*AMA* 3969). Arthur’s reaction is so overwrought that his lords rebuke him, calling for a more respectable, manly attitude as befits a monarch (*AMA* 3975). While modern scholars might join these lords in criticizing Arthur’s reaction as unmanly, Weiss argues that swooning is “never” conceived of as a “symptom of weakness or effeminacy [in medieval literature]: rather, where it is not a sign of religious ecstasy it is a recognized response to overwhelming grief or physical pain, sympathetically received; it is closely associated with death” (Weiss 123). Thus, Arthur’s reaction is a testament to the depth of his feelings for Gawain, not evidence of his faintheartedness. The poet’s extremely hyperbolic language of groaning, weeping, shrieking, staggering, fainting, and repeatedly kissing Gawain’s corpse echoes Arthur’s extravagant emotions at the sight of his slain knight. These feelings cause his great strength to fail him for the first time sending him into a swoon. Where neither tyrant nor giant nor hordes of enemy soldiers could fell Arthur, he is brought low by his one weakness – his men.

Arthur’s depth of feeling is so great that, “when a stupefied Arthur comes upon the bodies of each of his favorite knights in turn … [he] lays them down together, and gazes on their corpses like a man who no longer desires to live, and was lost all joy” (Heng 175). Faced with the destruction of his Round Table, he bemoans that

… ne had Drighten destained at His dere will

That He had deemed me today to die for you all?

That had I lever than be lord all my life-time

Of all that Alexander ought whiles he in erthe lenged! (*AMA* 4157-60)
Here, the poet depicts Arthur in almost messianic terms, willing, and in fact eager, to sacrifice himself in the place of his men, so much that he proclaims he would prefer that fate than to be ruler of the legendary Alexander’s kingdom. Arthur’s great love for his men leads to a rage that is not assuaged until he has conquered Mordred and every one of his allies and renewed the bonds between himself and his fallen men by joining them in death. Arthur’s lament over the bodies of his men and his death in defeating their enemy reveals his greatest wish – not to win glory or conquer the world, but to sacrifice himself in the defense of his knights.

Malory’s work also showcases Arthur’s intense love for his men as he is overcome with emotion and compelled to swoon in this text too. When he hears of Gaherys and Gareth’s deaths, the author reports that “Arthur “sowned for very pure sorrow” and, as he does in the AMA, Arthur faints when he finds Gawain on the shores of Dover, here clinging to life (Malory 657.28-9). Malory, however, elaborates on Arthur’s grief, and where he “swafres up swiftly” after his collapse in the AMA, Arthur instead “toke Sir Gawayne in hys armes, and thryse he there sowned” finding Gawain’s imminent death so distressing that he is repeatedly brought down by his emotions (AMA 3970, Malory 681. 16-17).

Arthur’s passion for his men is not restricted to mournful cries; his capacity for rage is also underscored. When Arthur learns of Kay’s terrible wounding by a “coward knight” in the AMA, he is driven by his grief to howl out his pain. Then, in the super-human way we have seen him perform elsewhere, Arthur meets Lucius’s men one by one: cleaving one man in half so forcefully that he disembowels the horse below him before falling on another, ripping through his armor “that the middes of the man on the mount falles,” then bursting “through the sheltrons with his sharp wepen,” to shred the troops’ banners and shields; “brothely with brown steel his brethe he ther wrekes” (AMA 2172, 2197-2217).
The magnitude of Arthur’s capacity for vengeance can also be observed in Malory in his reaction to the destruction Mordred has wrought against the English warriors. The narrator describes the scene Arthur encounters as an utter wasteland:

he saw hys people so slyne frome hym. And so he loked aboute hym and cowed se no mo of all hys oste and good knyghtes leffte no mo on lyve but to knyghtes …. and yette tey were full sore wounded. …. Than Kynge Arthur loked aboute and was ware where stood Sir Mordred leaning upon hys swerde amonge a grete hepe of dede men. (Malory 685.18-22, 27-29)

In these lines we see Arthur’s greatest nightmare unfold before him as he stands among the bodies of his dead and dying knights, those men to whom he earlier credits “all the worship in the worlde” and exclaims, “there was never a kyng sauff myselff that welded evir such kyghtes” (Malory 133.20-21, 22-23). In reaction to this devastation, Arthur vows, “Now tyde me dethe, tyde me lyff … he [Mordred] shall never ascape myne hondes” (Malory 685.41-42). Once again, the profound attachment Arthur feels for his knights is paramount and the lengths to which he will go for them is demonstrated. Arthur employs his warring spirit to honor his vow by confronting Mordred in a Mars-like display of prowess and bravery that ultimately leads to his own destruction. Korrel argues that Arthur should have “taken the unknightly attitude of ‘discretion is the better part of valor’” and conceded when Lucan tried to dissuade him from engaging Mordred (280). But when Arthur views Mordred, “leanyng uppon hys swerde among a grete hepe of [Arthur’s] dede men,” there is no choice for him but to avenge his fallen men, even if that means joining them (Malory 685.28-29).

The strength of the bond between Arthur and his men is so important that Malory, in particular, adapts the French sources in order to stress the deep and permanent connection he
imagines between Arthur and the Round Table knights. Elizabeth Archibald writes, “‘Compaignie’ is common in the French romances in the sense of temporary companionship,” but, in the *Morte Darthur*, “Arthur’s knights are described, both by themselves and by the narrator, as belonging to a collective body … the ‘felyshyp’ of the Round Table and title which Malory seems to have invented” (313). Malory changes his French sources to fit his purposes. Even Malory, who is generally much more circumspect in recounting battle scenes, pays particular attention to Arthur’s capacity for vengeance on the part of his slain knights, writing King Arthur

rode in the thyckeste of the pres and raumped downe lyke a lyon many senatours noble.

He wolde nat abyde uponn no poure man for no maner of thyng – and ever he slow slyly and slypped to another, tylle all were slayne to the numbir of a hondred thousand (Malory 138.2-7 )

This treatment of the battle between Arthur and Mordred illustrates that while the author and audience may no longer have the same thirst for blood indicated by the *AMA*, this type of savagery is still more than acceptable in the case of a liege lord’s vindication of wrongs against his people.

Ultimately, Arthur’s intense grief and immeasurable rage demonstrate his devotion to his men and his willingness to wreak vengeance in their names just as the incredible odds his men are able to overcome speaks to his capacity to inspire. The portrayal of these qualities represents an ideal hero for fourteenth and fifteenth-century authors and audiences: one who is able to motivate and captivate, appreciate and retaliate.
Arthur the Shrewd Statesman

Still, Arthur’s prowess, fearlessness, might, and virtue do not set him apart from the Anglo-Saxon heroes who have come before; what does is his shrewdly calculating mind. In both texts, when leaving for his campaign, Arthur makes provisions for the event of his death, which illustrates a sophisticated view of the realities of war. Here, we see the ideal hero expanded from the Old English archetypes addressed in chapter one. Where Beowulf is implicitly criticized for leaving his people leaderless and at the mercy of Franks, Frisians, Swedes and others, Arthur prepares for every possibility (Beowulf 2912-23).

In the *AMA*, Arthur acknowledges that his fate is not guaranteed when he departs to fight Lucius, declaring “I am in purpose to pass perilous ways, / To kaire with my keen men to conquer yon lands, / To outraye mine enmy, yif advanture it shew” (640-42). The choice of “perilous” in addition to Arthur’s description of his intended actions makes clear that he is aware of the dangerous nature of his quest. It is therefore a wise decision that he guards his kingdom against the possibility of his mortality by appointing Mordred his regent. Further, Arthur meticulously delineates exactly what Mordred should do in the king’s absence. Arthur catalogues,

Look my kidd casteles be clenlich arrayed,

There sho may sojourn [Guenevere] with seemlich bernes;

Fonde my forestes be frithed, of friendship for ever,

Chaunceller and chamberlain change as thee likes,

Auditours and officers, ordain them thyselven,

---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------
Both jurees and judges, and justices of landes;
Look thou justify them well that injury workes.
If me be destained to die at Drightens will,
I charge thee my sektour, chef of all other,
To minister my mobles for meed of my soul
To mendinauntes and misese in mischef fallen. (AMA 654-56, 660-67)

Here, Arthur shrewdly provides Mordred explicit instructions on the care and running of his kingdom ensuring England’s stability, continuity, and prosperity against all foreseeable outcomes.

Arthur’s choice of Mordred as regent in the AMA has been a bone of contention for scholars who see this decision as evidence of Arthur’s poor strategy, especially given that Mordred pleads to be relieved of the duty. Peter Korrel insists it is Arthur himself who puts his ambitious and war-loving nephew on the path to treason. Arthur, in his impatience to have his revenge on Lucius, brushes aside all protestations of Modred and Guinevere in his imperious self-confidence, throwing all caution to the wind and leaving England in the hands of a reluctant but belligerent relative, with the naïve and grotesque idea that, because Modred is of his own blood, ‘neuewe fulle nere’ (l. 689), he must be the right man and the right place. (215)

While it is true that Mordred objects to being left behind because he worries that he will lose out on the glory of battle, there is no hint in the AMA up to this point that Mordred will be treasonous. Instead, Arthur provides an explanation as to Mordred’s competence when he chooses Mordred as his regent, citing that Mordred is a “childe of [Arthur’s] chamber” whom he
has “chastised and chosen” (AMA 690). Mordred’s familial ties to the throne identify him as appropriate for the station and Arthur’s diligent instruction deem him qualified. Further, Arthur demonstrates wise judgement by leaving in place a power structure and an heir should he not return from his war against Lucius.

Though Malory does not include a scene of Arthur’s instructions to Mordred, he does portray Arthur as cognizant of his mortality and depicts Arthur’s strategic moves to ensure the preservation of his kingdom. In the Morte Darthur, Arthur illustrates his acumen by soliciting his noblemen for their advice as to who he should name his successor. He entreats them, “I pray you, couseyle me that may be beste and moste worship” (Malory 119.16-17). The narrator then describes “the Kynges and knyghtes gadirde hem unto counsayle and were condescended for to make two chyfftaynes – that was Sir Baudwen of Bretayne” and “Sir Cadore son of Cornuayle, that was at that tyme called Sir Constantyne” (Malory 119.18-20, 22-23). Arthur consents to this advice and “resyned all the rule unto thes two lordis and Quene Gwenyvere” and names Constantine his heir should he die (Malory 119. 23-24). By inviting and accepting the guidance of his noblemen, Arthur gains support for the continuation of his kingdom by investing them in the men who will ensure its future and establishing that they will support Arthur’s heir as they have supported him.

Arthur’s ability to obtain the endorsement of his men in order achieve his goals is also evident in the scene where he decides on war with Lucius. In the AMA, Arthur announces to the Roman senator,

\[
\ldots \text{I shall take counsel at kings anointed}
\]

\[
\text{Of dukes and douspeeres and doctours noble,}
\]

\[
\text{Of peeres of parlement, prelates and other}
\]
Of the richest renkes of the Round Table;

Thus shall I take avisement of valiant bernes,

Work after the wit of my wise knightes. (*AMA* 144-49)

In this passage, Arthur may be addressing the Senator, but he is also subtly laying the foundation for his men’s support by praising them as “anointed” kings, “noble” doctors, “valiant” men, “wise” knights, and, most flattering, “the richest renkes of the Round Table” (*AMA* 144, 145, 148, 149, 147). Arthur heaps praise on his council before sequestering himself to hear their advice and, in so doing, guarantees that whatever their recommendations, he will have their support. Evidence of Arthur’s success at this strategy can be seen in the exaggerated displays of approval that follow. Having honored them with seats at his council, his men spend the next one-hundred and sixty lines lauding their king and pledging their assistance to his endeavor (*AMA* 243-400).

In Malory, Arthur is again depicted as “passyng sore” at Lucius’s messengers; yet here, too, he argues that he “woll nat be to overhasty” in his response, and chooses take counsel from his “moste trusty knyghtes and deukes, and regeaunte kynges, and erlys and barowns, and of my moste wyse doctours” (Malory 114.6, 31, 33-34). Though Malory’s version of this scene is abridged, he does include the most important aspects: Arthur’s compliments and his men’s endorsement, demonstrating Arthur’s clever capacity for cunning. Arthur’s genius is his expertise in making his men feel included and invested in his cause. By polling his loyal men for their opinions instead of acting “overhasty,” he secures both their loyalty and their dedication to his campaign.

In this episode, “the knights are shown here as a group involved in the team’s executive decisions, and the passage provides a contrast to Malory’s source, where King Arthur merely
informs his knights about his decision to fight the Emperor. This change … reveals that Malory’s views of kingship are consistent with those expressed in contemporary chronicles and documents” (Radulescu, “Malory and Fifteenth-Century Political Ideas” 42). Whereas Richard II’s rule was marked by infighting and favoritism, Arthur elicits “the beliefs and interests of his nobles in order to govern them sympathetically” (Chism, *Alliterative Revivals* 198-9). Thus, in his relationship to his nobles Arthur epitomizes the ideal to which the authors would hold their monarchs, and, far from indicting Arthur as weak-willed and easily led, this evidence extols the hero’s willingness to seek the best course of action for his country. “In this respect, the *Morte Darthur* seems to express an ideal image of England and of its king for which contemporary fifteenth-century chroniclers longed” (Radulescu, “Malory and Fifteenth-Century Political Ideas” 45). Reflecting this desire and ideal, the texts heap praise on Arthur’s inclusion of the nobles in the decision to make war.

In these episodes both the *AMA*-poet and Malory depict Arthur as a leader with the foresight to acknowledge his own eventual death and the cunning to manipulate events to ensure the preservation and prosperity of his country. By crafting their hero with these qualities, the authors both reflect a desire for continuity and stability while at the same time measuring examples of contemporary rulers against these criteria. Ultimately, as he does in so many other categories, Arthur epitomizes prudent and canny command.

**Arthur’s Strategic Courtesy**

Another distinct example of Arthur’s use of strategy, a feature that distinguishes him from the heroes heretofore discussed, is his use of courtesy. Larry Benson explains that for fourteenth and fifteenth-century audiences, “courtesy is as important as prowess,” and Arthur at
all times follows the rules of what is noble, seemly, and becoming (Benson, *Malory’s Morte Darthur* 152). The authors of the *AMA* and *Morte Darthur* celebrate Arthur as an English hero who embodies the kind of hybridity that Bhabha and Memmi discuss, a concept in which the native forms an identity not wholly separate yet not entirely part of the colonizer’s culture. As a courtly conqueror, a blend of the Anglo-Saxon and Anglo-Norman cultures of the authors and that of their distinctly French rivals, Arthur defies definitions as *either* an Old English hero *or* Romance hero. Rather, by drawing on the Celtic, Anglo-Saxon, and French traditions, the authors create a champion comfortable as both “the royallyst Kynge that lyvyth on erthe” and “a lyon” (Malory 118.3, 22.22). Malory “locates his own text ‘between’ French and English treatments of the subject,” and his work acts as a “locus of productivity” and “cultural questioning” due to this hybridity (Batt xx). For the Arthur of these English texts, the courtesy required by French romance is tempered by the martial elements of his Anglo-Saxon roots, thus limiting the extent to which courtesy will be employed. Examination of Arthur’s strategic use of the courtly tradition for military gains, then, highlights the *AMA* and *Morte Darthur*’s awareness of their contexts and dexterity for navigating them.

The feasts Arthur holds are an example of using elements from the courtly tradition but for militaristic purposes. Arthur uses the feasts with precision as a tool for intimidating and dazzling his ‘guests’. Though he is insulted by the Roman Senator’s message, Arthur still “engages in diplomatic protocols, … [with] a feast of which the lavish and cosmopolitan fare expresses his mastery of vast and diverse territories … The sheer variety of exotic animals trussed up and exhibited to the ambassadors further bespeaks the wide range of Arthur’s power” (Chism, *Alliterative Revivals* 215). Arthur’s largess is replete with “borehevedes that were

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40 For more on the Celtic origins of Arthur, see Ashe.
bright,” “pacockes and plovers in platters of gold,” “herons in hedoyne heled full fair,” “tartes of Turkey,” “darielles endorded and dainties ynow,” “Osay and Algarve wines and others ynow,” and much more (177, 182, 186, 199, 202). Arthur demonstrates through this feast his cunning method of intimidation by obeying the principles of chivalric hospitality, a code which dictates that “honourable conduct was held to lie in such gestures as generosity, hospitality, and open-handedness, and in the lavish display of wealth,” but also using those same principles as tools for discouraging his enemies (Saul 187). Importantly, Arthur’s strategy of courtesy and intimidation works. In the *AMA*, the ambassador reports back to Lucius:

I wolde forsake all my suite of seignoury of Rome
Ere I eft to that soveraign were sent on such needes!
He may be chosen cheftain, chef of all other

He may be spoken in dispense despiser of silver,
That no more of gold gives that of grete stones,
No more of wine than of water that of the well runnes,
Ne of welth of this world but worship alone.
Such countenance was never knowen in no kith riche

As was with this conquerour in his court holden (*AMA* 528-30, 538-43)

The ambassador recounts Arthur’s generosity as above reproach and the hallmark of a superior king. This supremacy translates into a disinclination to war against Arthur and his kingdom, with the Roman emissary preferring instead to lose his prestige than go against the “wisest and worthyest and wightests of handes” (*AMA* 532). The hero’s strategic use of courtesy here turns
even his enemies to enthusiasts, though Lucius, of course, is not swayed by his senator’s recitation.

Similarly in the *Morte Darthur*, the author reports Arthur as being “angred at the messsyngers passing sore,” yet he still commands “that thes men be steeled and served with the beste, that there be no deyntés spared uppon them, that nother chylde nor horse faught nothynge – for they ar full royall peple; and though they have greved me and my courte, yet we must remembir on oure worship” (Malory 114.6, 114.42-115.3). Arthur’s adherence to the rules of chivalry even while greatly aggrieved, as well as his awareness that how he treats outsiders at his court reflects on his own honor, illustrates the importance courtly behavior has for the author, and Arthur’s obedience to those principles demonstrates yet another way he excels as a hero. Again, just as it does in the *AMA*, Arthur’s courteous behavior benefits his court. Upon returning to Lucius, the senators report that they saw the king “and the fayryst felyship of knyghtes … with hym that durys on lyve – and thereto of wysedome and of fayre speche and all royalté and rychesse they fayle of none” revealing their respect and admiration for Arthur’s court (Malory 118.5-7). While Malory’s senators stop short of advising against war with Arthur, they do report that his campaign of courtesy has won them as his admirers, saying “of all the soveraynes that we sawe ever, he is the royallyst Kynge that lyvyth on erthe” (Malory 118.2-3). Notably, it is to their own sovereign that they make this report as if Arthur’s great courtesy makes diplomacy impossible and they forget that it is impolitic to announce to your own king that another ruler is the best king whoever existed.

Despite the examples provided of Arthur’s courtly behavior, even toward his enemies, some critics continue to argue that he is, in fact, *discourteous*. Korrel argues that though Arthur feeds the Roman ambassadors well, “one should not forget his lack of self-control on hearing
their message, causing them to be terrified” (Korrel 259). What Korrel fails to acknowledge, though, is that Arthur is not strictly a product of the French romances and therefore is not entirely bound to abide by their protocols. Arthur is a hybrid of the bellicose heroes of England’s literary past and the gallant knights of contemporary romances. No harm comes to the ambassadors; instead, his fierceness works as he intends it, to instill a sense of fear in Arthur’s enemies while he maintains his status as the “knightliest creature in Crisdendom” (AMA 534). Thus, his largess is used as tool, not as a guiding principle of life, that when required, will be tempered by force. As demonstrated in the examples above, Arthur is exceedingly aware of what behavior is expected and appropriate for a king and abides by those protocols, but this does not stop him from acting every inch the fearsome warrior king. Criticism of this dichotomy is noticeably absent from the texts; Arthur is described by the authors – even by the senators he terrifies – to be “‘generous’ and ‘courteous’ in the manner of a great prince and gentle knight,” but he “is also a practical, and even at times a ruthless king” who adroitly adapts those codes to suit his purposes (Finlayson 263-4). Arthur’s ability to walk a fine line between courtesy and clout also invites comparisons to contemporary criticisms by the nobility of Richard II, many of whom “believed that excessive courtliness actually weakened the ruler, diminishing his inclination and ability to wage war” and denounced the king “for his unusually dramatic cultivation of the formal, historical, and legal prerogatives of kinship, for his retinue building, and for his extravagant ennoblements” (Chism, Alliterative Revivals 197-8). Here, then, the texts act as vehicles to interrogate and indict the behavior of a contemporary historical royal figure and envision a fictional king who would embody an ideal of powerful courtliness.

Arthur uses courtesy modulated by strength strategically in the return of Lucius and his fallen allies to Rome as well. In one of his most ferocious performances, Arthur tells the Roman
senators to take the bodies of his slain enemies back to Rome. He orders, “kaire over the mountes, / Mette full of monee that ye have mikel yerned, / the tax and the tribute of ten score winters” (AMA 2342-44). In this scene Benson argues “Arthur is undeniably cruel. … he is not only paying homage to a worthy opponent; he is creating the occasion for a grim jest, sending the body instead of the taxes demanded” (Benson, “The Alliterative Morte Arthure” 77). Korrel, too, sees Arthur’s actions as “another example of Arthur employing a show of cruelty to intimidate messengers” (Korrel 210). Undeniably, Arthur uses intimidation and fear here; however, he does so for the benefit of his kingdom. This choice does not make him a monster, far from it, but it does highlight the complexity of this hero who is at once courteous and cruel, regal and ruthless. Contemporary audiences could have read this scene positively as, perhaps, an allusion to Edward the Black Prince who “won the admiration of all Europe” by behaving the same way, ordering that the body of his enemy’s champion be sent back as his “token” (Benson, “The Alliterative Morte Arthure” 78, emphasis added). The fact that Edward was admired, in spite of or because of his actions demonstrates the sense of permissiveness that surrounded acts of war in this time, especially since the consequences of being fearsome are less than those of war. Though we can agree that Arthur’s actions are cruel, using the bodies of his fallen enemies as props in a show of force, ruthlessness as a “quality was necessary, as was a touch of cruelty in its bloodier sense, for the king’s duty, as John of Salisbury tells us in Polycraticus, was to wield the ‘bloody sword; of the state” (Benson n. 9, “The Alliterative Morte Arthure” 78). Arthur’s dark show of humor establishes the severity of his following threat:

    bid them never be so bold, whiles my blood regnes
    Eft for to brawl them for my brode landes,
    Ne to ask tribute ne tax by nokin title,
But such tresure as this, whiles my time lastes (AMA 2342-51)

and ensures that Rome will take his message seriously. In this way, his reputation for ruthlessness, cultivated through his seemingly cruel and discourteous acts, works as yet another means by which he can advance his aims to the betterment of his people.

Malory modifies this scene, eliminating the grim joke, and reframes Arthur’s message to the senators as an unequivocal threat. Arthur commands that they “presente thes corses unto the proude Potestate and aftir [shew] hym my lettyrs and my hole entente. And telle hem in haste they shall se me – and I trow they woll beware how they bourde with me and my knyghtes” (Malory 138. 34-37). Malory’s version strips something of the Anglo-Saxon bravado away, but it does nothing to diminish the seriousness and strength of Arthur’s salvo to Rome.

Yet critics misinterpret Arthur’s fierceness and strategy for discourtesy and brutality in his treatment of bodies of Lucius and his allies. In terms of courtesy, though the message is a show of force and Arthur uses the bodies of his foes as props to intimidate, he does not actually disrespect the bodies of his enemies. Rather than examine only Arthur’s words, one must also look at his actions to glean a full picture of Arthur’s treatment of the enemy dead.

In the AMA, the poet describes how

Sir Arthur anon ayeres thereafter

Even to the emperor with honourable kings,

Laght him up full lovelyly with lordlich knightes,

And led him to the layer there the king ligges. (AMA 2290-293)

Arthur himself goes directly to the body of the fallen emperor, bypassing a great deal of treasure and war-winnings left by the conquered army, with a retinue of honorable and lordly knights demonstrating the worth he places on his adversary. Further, Arthur has Lucius lifted up lovingly
and brought to his own quarters, again indicating the respect with which he holds Lucius. Arthur then has all the prestigious war-dead searched out and orders that

they buskes and bawmed thir burlich kings,
Sewed them in sendell sixty-fold after,
Lapped them in lede, less that they sholde
Change or chauffe yif they might escheve
Closed in kestes clene unto Rome. (*AMA* 2298-302)

The considerable effort and expense Arthur expends for the preparation of the enemy dead, embalming them, wrapping them in sixty layers of linen, and enclosing them in lead chests to preserve their bodies, highlights Arthur’s commitment to treat his opponents courteously. One final piece of evidence that the *AMA*-poet provides as to Arthur’s intentions is his insistence that “their banners aboven their badges there-under, / In what countree they kaire, that knightes might know / Ech king by his colours, in kith where he lenged” (*AMA* -305). With this last instruction, Arthur assures that, not only will the bodies of his fallen rivals be preserved, but so will their honor and prestige.

Malory also describes the details of Arthur’s instructions regarding the care of his slain enemies, writing

The Kynge let bawme all thses with many good gummys and sethen lette lappe
hem in syxtyfolde of sendell large, and than lete lappe hem in lede that for
chauffynge other chongyng they sholde never savoure – and sytthen lete close
them in chestys full cleny arayed, and their baners abovyn on their bodyes, and
their shyldys turned upwarde, that eviry man myght knowe of what contray they
were… The Emperour hymself was dressed in a chariot, and every two knyghteys in a chariot cewed aftir other. (Malory 138.23-29, 38-9)

Arthur’s efforts at great expense to preserve the bodies and honor them with their shields and colors can be viewed as evidence of his adherence to the rules of chivalry and courtliness. It is true, Arthur has sent dead bodies as ‘tribute’ to Rome, but, he has done so with all due respect.

What is more, once again, Arthur’s strategic use of courtesy, tempered by strength, produces his desired outcome. In both the *AMA* (3184) and *Morte Darthur* (150), Arthur is offered the crown of Rome by the Pope himself – presumably after the pontiff received Arthur’s grim dispatch. Thus, “the use of this harsh treatment [finds] its justification in” the results it secures, and his actions are understood to amount to a kind of “psychological warfare” that does not diminish Arthur’s show of courtesy even as it is emphatically cold-blooded (Korrel 210).

Arthur’s behavior toward his enemies, both living and dead, illustrates the kind of hybrid hero required by the authors and audiences of this time period. While he is cruel and fierce, Arthur is also generous and gracious and, as such, he epitomizes the coalescing of two unique cultures in the figure of one magnificent hero.

**The Death of Arthur**

Despite Arthur’s courteous behavior and successful campaigns against his enemies, some commentators see the dire end of the *AMA* and *Morte Darthur* as evidence that the “presentation of heroism is ultimately ironic or critical” (Whetter, “Genre as Context” 55). For these critics, the fact that the stories end with Arthur and his men dead signals that the moral must be that Arthur deserved punishment according to Aristotelian ideals of the tragic hero, that he must have a flaw – an ideal with which medieval authors and audiences would not have been familiar. Before the
1498 translation of Aristotle’s *Poetics*, “medieval tragedy … was conceived as a narrative in which the ‘wheel of fortune’ … was designed to discourage the coveting of worldly success … and the spectacle of the fall [was] a warning against covetousness” (Gassner 855). Yet these critics argue that in these texts “it is his pride or hubris which … prove[s] to be Arthur’s undoing” (Korrel 212). Though focus on Arthur’s flaw is anachronistic, scholars who read these texts as a cautionary tales are correct in observing the mournful and, perhaps, critical commentary the *AMA* and *Morte Darthur* offer on the decline of his great empire. This tone raises doubts “as to whether the [texts are] a glorification of the Edward’s wars, a condemnation of their cruelty, both, or neither” (Braswell 473). In this way, the tragic end of the *AMA* and *Morte Darthur* interrogates the consequences of divisive events like the Hundred Years War and the War of the Roses, “against which bloody backdrops Malory assembled and created his Arthuriad” (Whetter, “Genre as Context” 45-6). Thus, the texts examine not just the role of the hero, but also his fate. Just as in *Beowulf* and *The Battle of Maldon*, the disastrous ending corresponds to the foreboding and sense of vulnerability the authors and audiences of the texts felt. For them, the story must end in catastrophe to reflect that their reality is not completely triumphant.

Benson argues that inherent in the medieval understanding of fate stands the conviction that … that those who have the greatest share of human goods – those who stand in ‘heigh degree’ – will most painfully lose them. …The hero, like all men, will inevitably fall to death or wretchedness even though he be flawless, for the lesson of medieval tragedy is simply that man is not the master of his own destiny. (Benson, “The Alliterative *Morte Arthure*” 79-80)
Thus, Arthur succumbs to Fortune and his choices, both good and bad, have little impact on his destiny; it is assured by the singular fact that he is high so he must fall. Korrel and others see Arthur’s dream of the wheel of fortune as an implicit criticism by the authors, evidence of Arthur’s culpability in the destruction of his world through his excessive warmongering. But, as Korrel points out, this dream comes immediately after Arthur’s greatest victory where he has conquered “all that on erthe lenges!” (Korrel 213, *AMA* 3211). Rather than an indictment of his behavior, this dream serves as a warning that, as is the fate of all great men, now that he has reached a pinnacle, he has nowhere to go but down. Arthur dreams

> Upon the compass there cleved kinges on row,
> With crowns of clere gold that cracked in sonder;
> Six was of that settle full sodenlich fallen,
> Ilk a segge by himself (*AMA* 3268-71)

Here exists a central theme of these texts – the changeability of fortune. The move from security and power highlighted by each of the kings’ downturns demonstrates the authors’ and audiences’ feelings of vulnerability about England’s relatively new position of authority and the worry that this newfound power will be lost in conflicts like the Hundred Years War. Some critics, like Andrew Lynch, find evidence for a negative reading of Arthur’s conquest in contemporary texts that offer a critical view of war. Lych writes that John Gower wrote to Henry IV that “though the king may legitimately war for his ‘right,’ war is nevertheless a pernicious moral trap and he should ‘put awei the cruel werroiur’” (31). These are the worries of a person who, as Sartre says, “is constantly on his guard,” whose “muscles … are always tensed” as one who

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41 Lynch has also done a great deal of work arguing for a critical view of war in Malory’s *Morte Darthur*. For more on this subject, see his *Malory’s Book of Arms*, “‘Thou woll never have done’: Ideology, Context, and Excess in Malory’s War”, and “‘Peace is good after war’: The Narrative Seasons of English Arthurian Tradition”.

experienced repeated and prolonged engagement with aggressive foreign forces must be (16).

Fortune herself reiterates this theme, cautioning,

    Thou ought to worship my will, and thou well couthe,
    Of all the valiant men that ever was in erthe,
    For all thy worship in war by me has thou wonnen;
    I have been frendly, freke, and fremmed til other.
    That thou has founden, in faith, and fele of thy bernes,

For-thy the fruits of Fraunce are freely thine owen.

Thou shall the chair escheve, I chese thee myselven,

Before all the cheftaines chosen in this erthe. (AMA 3340-44, 46-48)

In this scene the personification of Fortune makes clear that all honor and prestige is bestowed upon man at her discretion, and she chooses Arthur. Yet also implied in this choice and in Arthur’s experience of seeing the other kings turn downward on the wheel is that Fortune can be fickle and turn from a man at any moment. But there is no criticism implied in this change of fortune; the AMA-poet’s Fortune does not censure Arthur as prideful. Rather, she says “For thou shall lose this laik and thy life after; / Thou has lived in delite and lordshippes ynow!” (3386-7). Arthur, therefore, is not being punished by Fortune but experiencing the fate of all great men.

Here, Arthur’s fall is not cast as punishment, but as the inevitable turn of a successful king; after all, even if one rules for a long time, mortality comes for us all.

    It is also telling that France is particularly mentioned by Fortune as the spoils of war won by her grace. Arthur’s later disfavor with Fortune, demonstrated when she spins the wheel downward with him on it “till all [his] quarters that while were quasht all to peces, / And with
that chair [his] chin was chopped in sonder” echoes a timely concern that all (including England’s holdings in France) may be lost (*AMA* 3389-90). Fortune’s wheel thus acts “as a device of meaning-making” to offer the audience of the *AMA* a metaphorical tool to express their anxiety about the ephemerality of power and victory and works symbolically “for organizing a description of historical processes that otherwise seem fearfully incoherent and uncontrollable: an organization that reassures by invoking the simulation of control and coherency effected by literary narration itself” (Heng 158). Just as postcolonial literature reflects the struggle of people who “have had their lives shaped by the experience of colonialism,” this text creates a safe place in which to address the distress inherent in the feeling of vulnerability caused by war (Ashcroft 1).

Fate also has a role in beginning the battle between Arthur and Mordred. Far from the prideful and war-hungry character Matthews and his camp would name him, Arthur rides out to parlay with Mordred in an attempt to preserve peace through negotiation. The role of the adder highlights Fate’s role in the tragic turn of events with even Arthur lamenting, “Alas, this unhappy day!” (Malory 685.5). For medieval audiences, this cry would have signaled Arthur’s awareness of the role Fate has played in his downfall as “‘Unhappy’ has the meaning ‘ill fortune,’ … a more ambiguous and less exact term than ‘Fortune’” (Benson, *Malory’s Morte Darthur* 240). This latest turn marks another in a series of events outside the realm of Arthur’s influence, reinforcing the sense that Arthur cannot be held accountable for the fall as he “is helplessly and innocently caught in forces beyond his or anyone’s control of” (Benson, *Malory’s Morte Darthur* 240). In addition to Fate, the authors’ disdain and disparagement of Mordred casts the blame for the fall of Arthur’s illustrious court on the disloyal traitor. Instead of portraying Mordred’s betrayal as the just comeuppance for an oppressive conqueror, the authors
represent Arthur as shamefully defrauded; as such, “readers would not … rejoice in Arthur’s fall” at the hands of the “scourge of God” (Whetter, “Genre as Context” 58).

Malory also attempts to distance Arthur from blame for his court’s end by closing with a portrayal that further glorifies Arthur by imagining a prophecy where he will return triumphant. Benson writes, “Malory’s point” in including this promise “is …that his death is marked by divine approval for the good deeds of his life” illustrated by the author’s choice to cast Arthur as a potential risen hero returning to the glory of his people (Benson, *Malory’s Morte Darthur* 240-1). This characterization by the author does not bear out the idea that Arthur and his men deserve their tragic fate because they are responsible for the destruction of their society. Instead, they are forgiven for the mistakes they have made and showcased as model heroes; “we see each for the last time not as a sinful and flawed tragic figure but as an exemplar of virtue finally rewarded for faithfulness to love or chivalry” (Benson, *Malory’s Morte Darthur* 235). Though the ending of the tale is undeniably tragic, this does not diminish the praise given to the pursuit of glory.

The bloody consequences of warfare and combat are everywhere apparent in the *Morte*—but this is in fact a defining feature of the epic-heroic genre and cannot, in itself, be taken as a criticism of violence. Instead, the poet repeatedly illustrates the potentially tragic consequences of heroism in order all the more fully to valorize it. (Whetter, “Genre as Context” 53)

The deaths of Arthur and his men, therefore, cannot be taken as implicit criticisms of warfare and warring when, in fact, they represent the values inherent in the epic heroic genre. Instead, they signify the author’s acknowledgment of the great sacrifice warriors make in order to be heroic for “death is the paradox of heroism” an inevitable result of successful heroes (Whetter, “Genre as Context” 58). Though it is true that Arthur has qualities that are questionable and that he
sometimes behaves in a way that modern audiences may not approve, in the closing prophesy Malory makes explicit the quality and worth of his hero.

In Ingham’s view, the “tragic end of an illustrious insular king constitutes a historiographic counterpoint to accounts of Britain’s triumphant greatness” (78). In other words, though the English represent Arthur as a powerful king in an attempt to appropriate some of that power for themselves, their preoccupation with the tragic end parallels literarily the loss and subjugation the English people feel in terms of their colonial past. Yet these stories were held to be true because they showed … the real world—a world in which you hold onto what you had because it might at any moment be taken away and which your ultimate hopes were fixed upon the mysterious and somewhat frightening authority figure who would fight on your side and, for a while at least, bar the door a little more firmly and chase the forces of disruption a little farther from the gate. (Ramsey 87)

In this way, Arthur and his knights, however tragic their end, allow the authors and audiences to imagine a hero who might keep at bay the perils of their reality – at least for a little while before meeting their inescapable fate.

As a tool in the hands of masterful writers, the French romance and English chronicle traditions of Arthur provide a rich foundation on which to ground their ideal hero: a backdrop where, in the opaque setting of the distant past, the writers can evoke the greatness of a warrior-king and reshape him to answer contemporary anxieties and reflect their aspirations for the role of their monarch. By reviving the past and reinventing it, these texts open a space to interrogate the kings, wars, genres, and values that make up the context of these works. Arthur responds
admirably; as a warrior, he echoes the superhuman strength and prowess of Anglo-Saxon heroes
before him; as a leader of men, he inspires them to reach beyond their limits to achieve
incredible feats of valor; in his defense of his people he is ferocious and unwavering; last,
building on the Anglo-Saxon tradition of muscular dreams, he epitomizes the shrewdly political,
courtly, and inclusive king exalted in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, qualities that make
him an exemplar of the heroic tradition of any age. It is true that Arthur is flawed: he is
sometimes boorish in his manners, inappropriate in his humor, and even brutal in his tactics.
Though the authors may criticize his choices, in the end they admire his epic achievements and
celebrate him as an ideal archetype of heroism. However, the endurance of these texts is owed, at
least in part, to the authors’ refusal to whitewash Arthur’s failings, presenting instead a fully
round hero with virtues and vices, talents and flaws (Whetter, “Characterization in Malory and
Bonnie” 131). The *AMA* and *Morte Darthur* may end in the deterioration of the Round Table and
the deaths of Arthur and his most prized knights, but they are not entirely tragic; rather, within
the genre of epic-heroic literature, Arthur the conqueror and his men are celebrated for their feats
and remembered as paragons even today.
CHAPTER FOUR:
HENRY V: THE EARLY MODERN VICTOR

To read fiction means to play a game by which we give sense to the immensity of things that happened, are happening, or will happen in the actual world. By reading narrative, we escape the anxiety that attacks us when we try to say something true about the world. This is the consoling function of narrative — the reason people tell stories, and have told stories from the beginning of time.

― Umberto Eco 87

The position of late sixteenth-century England was a tenuous one. The latter part of the sixteenth century was spent “in a state of acute anxiety waiting for the threatened invasion” of the Spanish Armada as England faced repeated attempts to overthrow Queen Elizabeth and secure England as part of the Catholic Church and Spanish purse (Deats 85). Though in 1588 Spanish forces were unsuccessful in their bid to overtake the outgunned English fleet, it was unknown if, or when, Spain might return with an even greater contingent, and, in fact, return they did. From 1595 to 1599 England was under constant threat of imminent invasion by a reinvigorated Spanish Armada as evidenced not only by the considerable contingents of Spanish forces who captured Picardy and Brittany, but also by the three separate landings by the Spaniards during this time (Taunton, “Camp Scenes and Generals” 41).42 “Though easily repulsed, these landings produced waves of invasion paranoia which engulfed [the] civilian

42 For further grounding in the political and historical context during the time of Henry V, see Carole Weiner, “The Beleagured Isle”; Robert Ornstein, A Kingdom for a Stage; the many works of J. R. Hale; Wallace MacCaffrey, Elizabeth I: War and Politics; and Nick de Somogyi, Shakespeare’s Theater of War.
body. English people no longer felt themselves to be safely enclosed by natural or national boundaries, and were thus prey to rumour and panic” (Taunton “Camp Scenes and Generals” 41).

First published in 1600 and republished in 1623, Shakespeare’s *Henry V* is uniquely positioned to act as a mirror both to reflect the events concerning English audiences during a time of great social and political turmoil and to instruct as the popular genre of manuals on princely conduct, or *Speculum principis*, endeavored to do. Given the publication date of the first Quarto in 1600, critics generally agree that *Henry V* was probably written and performed in 1599, a year when “the overpowering fear of invasion [by Spain] reached its apogee” (Deats 85). This experience of insecurity is the breeding ground of *Henry V*: a well-polished mirror of the audience’s desire for stability and dominance. As a result, it is no surprise that its hero reflects a desire for military strength, the ability to humble foreign forces, and definitive proof of English superiority.

Not only did England face border insecurity, a vulnerability which permeated culture, but also a sense of cultural invisibility. Discussing this feeling of inferiority, Richard Helgerson contends that the English were “acutely aware of themselves as having been colonized” first by the Roman Catholic Church, then by the Normans, a fact that had continued effects on the cultural conscious (291). Helgerson further argues that for some English people, “colonial subjection had not yet ended” as their language still bore the unmistakable marks of foreign occupation with Latin remaining the mark of the enlightened, and French “dominating proceedings of the courts of the common law” until the mid-sixteenth century (291). This feeling of cultural suppression was further intensified by the threat “that a Spanish yoke would be piled on the others and that the English would join the natives of the New World as subjects of a
universal Spanish Empire,” a feeling that was certainly not unfamiliar to a nation who had already experienced the Norman Conquest (Helgerson 291). The context of the 1590s sheds a great deal of light on the character of Henry. English audiences desired a hero who incorporated qualities that would speak to their experience of insecurity and inferiority. In response to this disquiet at home, Shakespeare creates in Henry V a hero who navigates the multitude of requirements with dexterity: he succeeds militarily, commands his troops cunningly, interacts with other powers shrewdly, dominates the European powers of his day, acts as a symbol of national pride and dominance, and makes explicit the fact that those who threaten England do so at their peril. Henry is a hero who is battle-hardened like Beowulf and Byrhtnoth, willing to take the fight to distant shores like Arthur, and most importantly, able to cleverly navigate the life of a king and embody the various duties that role requires. He is, in turns and all at once, an ideal monarch, a calculating strategist, a skilled rhetorician, and he consistently puts his royal responsibility before his personal desires.

As outlined in the introduction, many Postcolonial theorists have claimed that literature provides an avenue for expressing mental strain; *Henry V* offers a unique medium for exploring those fears since it was written, performed, and printed during this very unsettling time. As a mirror and ideal, *Henry V* represents a sense of apprehension regarding interaction with a large continental power – in reality, Spain; in the text, France – while also providing a fictional feeling of power and strength. The contemporary anxieties and fantasies of power required new elements in the creation of a hero trope; the English people no longer needed a hero just to defend them

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43 See Wilson Harris; Michael Dash, “Psychology, Creolization, and Hybridization”; and “Marvelous Realism: The Way Out of Negritude”; Homi Bhabha; and Edward Said as examples of Postcolonial theorists discussing literature and cultural anxiety.
but also one to advance them to dominance. Whereas Beowulf and Byrhtnoth fought for survival and Arthur for recognition, Henry V exhibits all the laudable virtues of his predecessors, but brings the aggression to French shores, rather than responding to violence from invaders. The figure of Henry V was ripe for fictional harvesting, and his achievements proved fertile ground to create the hero who takes the English people to a position of prominence. He becomes the hero who has wild military success culminating with the Battle of Agincourt, ruthlessly routs the French in a way that foreigners had overpowered English people for centuries, and shrewdly negotiates peace for his people through a series of political alliances. Although the Epilogue to Shakespeare’s *Henry V* must deal with the realities of history, that all Henry won will soon be lost, Henry’s own heroic status remains undimmed.

*Henry the Rabbuck*

In his seminal article asserting a rabbit/duck reading of *Henry V* based on the eponymous optical illusion (see fig. 1).

![Duck-Rabbit Illusion](image.jpg)


Norman Rabkin claims
that in *Henry V* Shakespeare creates a work whose ultimate power is precisely the fact that it points in two opposite directions, virtually daring us to choose one of the two opposed interpretations it requires of us. In this deceptively simple play Shakespeare experiments, perhaps more shockingly than elsewhere, with a structure like the gestaltist’s familiar drawing of a rare beast [- the rabbit/duck].

(279-80)

To this end, scholars who adhere to Rabkin’s view see Henry as *either* an ideal monarch with the play’s “tone approach[ing] that of an epic lauding his military virtues,” *or* “a Machiavellian militarist … whose deeds reveal both hypocrisy and ruthlessness,” in which case “the tone is predominantly one of mordant satire” (Karl Wintersdorf 264; see also Deats). Yet there is a third option for Henry’s character – what I would term the *rabbuck*, a creature that is at once a rabbit *and* a duck (see fig. 2).

Instead of offering two diametrically opposed options, I would contend, as more recent scholarship does, that *Henry V* can and should be read with the lens of *both/and* rather than *either/or*. Rabkin himself addresses this third option, acknowledging that “a third response has been suggested by some writers of late: *Henry V* is a subtle and complex study of a king who curiously combines strengths and weaknesses, virtues and vices,” but he dismisses this claim arguing that a *both/and* or *rabbuck* reading of *Henry V* sees “complication and subtlety” while the Henriad encouraged readers to “expect stark answers to simple and urgent questions” (294-5). Further, he argues that “no real compromise is possible between the extreme readings” (Rabkin 294-5). To say so is to strip Shakespeare of his capacity for complexity and level his characters to flat caricatures. Surely the creator of such dynamic and round characters as Iago, Othello, Cleopatra, and Hamlet can be seen as capable of forging a character who is at once just and ruthless, noble and self-serving. Critics Paola Pugliatti and E.A.J. Honigmann agree that Rabkin’s reading divests the play of a long history of complexity to which “great writers, from Homer to the present day, and also physicists who try to explain the post-Newtonian understanding of the physical world, have all subscribed” (Honigmann 193). By allowing *Henry V* this flexibility, the reader is able to see a complex character who is *both* commendable and cunning. The answer, then, to Rabkin’s question “can the manipulative qualities that guarantee political success be combined in one man with the spiritual qualities that make one fully open and responsive to life and therefore fully human?” is a resounding yes (281).

**Henry and the Chorus**

The Chorus in *Henry V* particularly highlights Henry’s capacity to inhabit the role of ideal monarch that Rabkin identifies in his discussion of the rabbit/duck. The Chorus,
undoubtedly, provides the most positive portrayal of Henry in the play, lauding him as “the mirror of all Christian kings” and “[the] star of England.” among other things (2.Pro.469, 5.2.3365). In the opening prologue, the Chorus depicts Henry as “assum[ing] the port of Mars, and at his heels, / Leashed in like hounds should famine, sword, and fire / Crouch for employment” (1.Pro.6-8). Here the Chorus draws on the classical past by marrying Henry to the warlike Mars and alludes to the four horsemen of the apocalypse as mere dogs on Henry’s leash.

This hyperbole spotlighting Henry’s greatness is but one example of their veneration. The Chorus also labors to articulate Henry’s distinction in their exaggerated admiration of his behavior with the troops in the camp scene. In this prologue, the Chorus remarks Henry

freshly looks and overbears attaint

With cheerful semblance and sweet majesty,
That every wretch, pining and pale before,
Beholding him, plucks comfort from his looks.
A largess universal, like the sun,
His liberal eye doth give to everyone,
Thawing cold fear. (4.Pro. 39-45)

Once again, the Chorus grants Henry almost divine stature by equating him with the sun and, much like Arthur in the *AMA* and *Morte Darthur*, editorializes that his gaze has the power to change the very disposition of the men before him.

For the Chorus, then, Henry is all things powerful and benevolent and without criticism. Therefore, the Chorus acts as the agent of fantasy reflecting the audience’s desires of Henry as the ideal king. As Fanon explains, it is through storytelling that the public invokes “a new type of man” one who epitomizes the ideals of their culture and represents their greatest desires in the
figure of a hero (174). The Chorus of *Henry V* employs a rich history of heroic representation in literature to accomplish the goal of lauding Henry’s diverse functions, culminating in “a synthesis of imagery and bombastic rhetoric derived from a variety of sources . . . grounded on the panegyrical accounts of Tudor historians” to ordain Henry as a model hero-king (Ross 173).

The Chorus’s cheerleading for Henry is not without incongruity, however. Some critics insist that “as the play proceeds, the audience begins to realize that the Chorus’s vision is myopic,” offering only a positive narrative that is, at times, at odds with the action of the play (Ross 179). The Chorus does not, for instance, acknowledge the hero’s desertion of Falstaff when Henry fails to visit his dying friend in act two nor his punishment of Bardolph or his ruthless threats to the Governor of Harfleur in act three (a scene examined in detail below). Therefore, it is fair to deem the Chorus “a response-regulator whose function is to magnify and glamorise Henry and all he stands for . . . [having] an effect on us like propaganda” (Honigmann 204). Yet, from the beginning of the play, the Chorus meta-theatrically highlights its own limitations by reminding the audience that this is, in fact, a work of fiction. This exhortation thus brings the audience’s attention to the fact that the Chorus is a character performing a role and, therefore, cannot be implicitly trusted to display a complete portrait (Deats 86).

While it is true that the Chorus provides an idealized representation of the hero, he is not perfect, and the actions of the play illustrate this. The fact that Henry’s portrayal by the Chorus is so complementary while his own actions are more questionable, further illustrates Henry’s ability to simultaneously inhabit both the qualities of Machiavellian strategist and good king. By offering the Chorus’s enthusiastic portrayal of the hero contrasted at times with his own behavior
Shakespeare calls attention to Henry’s contradictory features – his inherent goodness and his deliberate cunning.

**Henry the Cunning Strategist**

The complicated nature of the function of the Chorus illustrates the complexity of Henry’s character as it is difficult to represent a hero who is both virtuous and vicious. Still, Henry accomplishes this task, simultaneously performing the many functions that are required of a successful king. One of those duties is ensuring the success of his nation by any means necessary. Henry does have his moments of goodness, but he is also often manipulative and sometimes cruel in his effort to achieve his ends. The presence of these Machiavellian qualities coupled with his empathy and protectiveness demonstrates that he is simultaneously the rabbit and the duck.

The three traitors plot in act two, scene two demonstrates Henry’s talent for manipulating events to ensure the best strategic outcome for himself and his people. In this scene, Henry seeks advice from Scroop, Cambridge, and Grey regarding the fate of a drunkard who accosted him, all while fully aware that they are behind a plot to have him assassinated – a fact made clear by Bedford’s assurance that “the king hath note of all they intend” (2.2.6). Henry asserts that since no real harm was done and the drunk man has recovered his senses, he deserves a royal pardon (2.2.42-3). Quite to the contrary, Scroop insists “let him be punished, sovereign, lest example / Breed, by his sufferance, more of such a kind” and Cambridge agrees, while Grey offers a particular punishment as fitting: that the drunkard may live, but only “after the taste of much correction” (2.2.45-6, 2.2.50). Henry reproaches them, saying he will act with more mercy than they would deem just. After this interlude Henry hands the men evidence of their own traitorous
actions against him, causing each man to beg mercy. In a cunning turn, Henry uses their own ruthlessness against them asserting,

    The mercy that was quick in us but late
    By your own counsel is suppressed and killed
    You must not dare, for shame, to talk of mercy,
    For your own reasons turn into your bosoms. (2.2.80-3)

Henry has deliberately manipulated the three traitors into unknowingly adjudicating their own fate and, in a particularly merciless twist, sets their words against them like “dogs upon their masters” (2.2.84). In a perfect example of his ability to straddle two seemingly antithetical dispositions, Henry is at once the cunning Machiavel, trapping conspirators into sentencing themselves, and the good king, willing to show mercy where it does not affect the state, as with the drunkard. “While Machiavelli likes to divide issues analytically, slicing with his either/or categories, Shakespeare dramatizes those conditions which are at once fair and foul,” and Shakespeare’s Henry V embodies a character who can negotiate these murky waters handily (D’Amico 33).

While critics of Henry’s character often point to his cunning maneuvering as evidence of his insincerity, to do so is to dismiss all the good Henry is able to accomplish by utilizing his calculating nature. One scholar who is particularly censorious of Henry’s actions is Vickie Sullivan who, in her essay “Princes to Act: Henry V as the Machiavellian Prince of Appearance,” posits that Henry’s chief talent is the ability to manipulate others into acting according to his intention while maintaining an air of innocence. In essence, she posits “Shakespeare's presentation of Henry's perfection in the art of guile … allows Henry V to be likened to a prince in another sense: Henry is Machiavelli's guileful prince of appearance”
(Sullivan 126). Though Sullivan identifies the three traitors’ scene as evidence of Henry’s duplicitousness, one could also describe it as evidence of his keen strategic mind; while she sees Machiavellian acts as unseemly, I would contend that Henry’s scheming ensures victory for the king and, by extension, the nation, which is the goal of any conquering king. This perspective is fitting for a conquest fantasy, whose audience would see Henry’s ability to accomplish his goals, while preserving his solemnity, as something to be commended. Evidence from contemporary military manuals by Onosander, Caeser, Vegetius, de Fourquevaux, and Sutcliffe, among others, illustrates the general warrant given for commanders to act in a way that best assures their victory. It is impossible to know definitively whether or not Shakespeare himself read Machiavelli’s *The Prince*, though his familiarity with its concepts is almost assured by the great discourse surrounding the text during the sixteenth century. Further evidence exists in the fact that Shakespeare himself explicitly references Machiavelli in act two, scene two when Cambridge claims “Never was a monarch better feared and loved / Than is your majesty” (2.2.25-26). Though Shakespeare takes liberties to adapt Machiavelli to suit his needs, the tenor of the principle remains.

Many critics have maintained that evidence of Henry’s Machiavellianism can also be observed in the *casus belli* debate in act one, scene two. Here, Henry warns the Archbishop of Canterbury that he

should [not] fashion, wrest, or bow, your reading,

Or nicely charge your understanding soul

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44 Mario Praz’s “‘The Politick Brain’” is among the first to definitively claim that Machiavelli was known amongst the Elizabethans followed later by Felix Rabb’s *The English Face of Machiavelli* and N.W. Bawcutt’s “Machiavelli and Marlowe’s *Jew of Malta*” – both seminal works in this area. Donald Wineke’s more recent work “The Relevance of Machiavelli to Shakespeare” is also notable though it deals specifically with *1 Henry VI*.
With opening titles miscreate, whose right

Suits not native colors with truth. (1.2.16-19)

Canterbury proceeds with an exhaustive explanation for Henry’s claim to France; however, even faced with seemingly impartial evidence, Henry again questions his right to rule, asking “May I with right and conscience make this claim?” (1.2.98). Not satisfied with the assurances offered by Canterbury, Henry inquires of the rest of his advisors and, in every response offered, they enthusiastically endorse action against France definitively as both justified (1.2.127) and the response expected by his royal peers (1.2.124-5). This intense interrogation of the evidence, lasting for two-hundred and thirty-five lines, seems to highlight Henry’s desire to avoid an illegitimate claim and his concern for the justness of his cause. If we credit Henry as saying what he means, he is looking for a true account of his claim to the throne of France, and he cautions his counselor to advise him honestly so that he may make a decision with a clear conscience.

However, further evidence complicates the issue of Henry’s motivation. The very first scene of the play depicts the Canterbury and Ely scheming on how to avert a bill that will decrease their wealth. In this interchange, the two imply that Henry could be persuaded to their position on the bill in exchange for Canterbury’s ambiguous offer “touching France – to give a greater sum / Than ever at one time the clergy yet / Did to his predecessors part withal” (1.1.83-5). Canterbury proposes a kind of trade: that he will support Henry’s hereditary claim against France if Henry will endorse the Church’s position against the House of Commons. Sara Munson Deats points to the author’s choice in the sequence of events as proof that Henry’s agenda in the debate over the war with France is a foregone conclusion and Henry but feigns innocence, writing,
had he so desired, Shakespeare might have opened the play with Henry’s righteous indignation at the insults of the Dauphin or with his king delivering a patriotic stem-winder defending his right to the French throne. Instead, he begins the action of his drama with a scene of scheming between two duplicitous prelates. … thus, the very first scene of the play calls into question the legitimacy of Henry’s claim and the justness of his cause, showing the enthusiastic ecclesiastical endorsement to be tainted by self-interest, a self-interest that Hendry adroitly exploits for his own aggrandizement. (89)

The text never makes explicit that Henry actually agrees to such a proposal, relying instead on hearsay from Canterbury, who reports that he “perceived” that Henry was accepting of his proposal. If Henry did agree with Canterbury and bids an honest account from his advisors, while secretly manipulating them to arrive at his desired conclusion, this is textbook Machiavelli. In *The Prince*, Machiavelli explicitly dictates that those rulers who “have achieved great things … have known how to employ cunning to confuse and disorient other men,” a strategy he further encourages when he suggests that a ruler should make good use of the beastly qualities of the cunning fox (53 -54). In securing Canterbury’s backing before the debate, then repeatedly commanding him to relate the facts of the case without bias, Henry manipulates his court into supporting his supposed just cause, leading them to clamor for war with France, while he appears the impartial judge. This performance of impartiality is yet another tool Henry employs to achieve his ends.

Even so, the fact that Henry seeks to establish support for the outcome he desires without seeming to influence events or that he manipulates his men into enlisting in a war he desires does not detract from Henry’s worth as a hero. He employs this cunning to the advantage of his
country, transforming England from the conquered, beleaguered state of days past into a conquering force to be reckoned with. The attractiveness of this power would have, for an author and audience who had experienced years fraught with tension and an uncertain future with Spain, covered a multitude of sins.

Another example of Henry’s propensity for manipulation is Bardolph’s verdict. In this episode, Pistol entreats Captain Fluellen to intercede on behalf of Bardolph, who has been sentenced to be hanged for stealing from a church. Fluellen relates Bardolph’s fate to the king in passing, and wonders if Henry knows the man, providing a detailed description of Bardolph lest he be mistaken for another by the same name. Henry then replies, “we would have all such offenders so cut off,” effectively authorizing Bardolph’s execution (3.6.108). Though he shares a deep history with Bardolph outlined in Henry IV Parts One and Two, and “despite a personal appeal for mercy for Bardolph from Pistol,” another former personal friend, Henry does not hesitate to follow the law and order Bardolph hanged (Riccomini 56). Here Henry demonstrates his capacity for ruthlessness and sacrifices his friend on the altar of power. Henry is admittedly Machiavellian in his choice; he acknowledges his rule over the French people will be made easier if they feel he is a just king, rather than one who allows his men to harass them, remarking “when lenity and cruelty play for / a kingdom, the gentler gamester is the soonest winner” (3.6.100; Deats 92). That Henry reduces the conquest of a country to a game illustrates the inherent irony of his duplicitous nature.

Bardolph is not the only casualty of Henry’s strategic callousness; scores of French combatants also fall under his command. Act four, scene six opens in the midst of the battle of Agincourt where Henry and the English have had unexpected success but are still entrenched against the staggering “five to one” odds of their French foes (4.3.4). The stage directions of the
play indicate the immediacy of the action as Henry’s speech is interrupted by the sounds of battle. Upon hearing the “Alarum” Henry recognizes “the French have reinforced their scattered men” and orders that “every soldier kill his prisoners” (4.6.37, 38). This scene is often misattributed by critics as evidence of Henry’s rash nature. Encapsulating the argument made by many of Henry’s detractors, Deats writes

The battle of Agincourt offers Henry both his greatest victory and his greatest moral crisis. . . . Henry strategically uses the killing of the luggage boys by the French as justification for his decision to massacre the prisoners, although he has communicated to the audience his plan to perpetuate his atrocity (the slaughter of the French prisoners) before his discovery of a French atrocity (the butchery of the luggage boys). (92)

What Deats attributes to Henry’s bloodthirstiness here, pointing to his decision to kill the prisoners before he discovers the “French atrocity,” is purely a calculating response to French reinforcements. Henry does make a strategic move to order the killing of prisoners, clearly a cold-blooded Machiavellian choice, but this order is a direct response to the battle conditions. Being outnumbered five to one, and seeing that “The French have reinforced their scattered men,” Henry does not have the luxury of allowing prisoners to survive (4.6.36). Given the already strained nature of his resources, Henry must make a strategic decision not to waste time or manpower in securing what could easily turn into reinforcements for his enemy. Where for Arthur the order to kill all combatants and take no prisoners in his battle against Lucius is unequivocally a move for vengeance, for Henry, the decision is a tactical one, chosen for its practicality. It is only nearly a dozen lines later, at 4.7.48-58, that Henry displays an Old Testament kind of wrath, vowing that “not a man of them that we shall take / Shall taste our
mercy” in response to learning of the slaughter of the non-combatant, page-boys (4.7.57-8). In this scene Henry exhibits his Machiavellian tendencies by acting as judge and jury for the French prisoners of war. What each of these examples illustrates is that the author and audience were not merely seeking a perfect prince; rather, as the contentious contemporary reality would warrant, they required a hero who had the disposition and alacrity to make difficult and even damning choices in the service of his people. Much like Byrhtnoth and Beowulf represent Fanon’s theory of the muscular dreams of the native, so too does Henry (Fanon 15). Ultimately, he is a hero who demonstrates the type of cunning and ruthlessness an early modern monarch must exhibit in order to successfully navigate the fraught political and military arenas of the sixteenth century while simultaneously modeling the necessary affect to instruct contemporary leaders on the demands of command.

**Henry the Artful Orator**

Henry’s capacity to play both the cunning fox and puissant lion, discussed in Machiavelli’s *Prince*, is further evident in his use for rhetoric. In the first description of Henry in the play, Canterbury describes the king’s savvy in almost deific terms, elevating him beyond the capability of a mere mortal. He proclaims that Henry’s capacity for oratory enables him to render a fearful battle into music, unloose any Gordian knot of policy, reason divinity as well as a prelate, and debate the affairs of the commonwealth as a scholar of the subject (1.1.40-49). Canterbury continues his adulation by detailing how the very air, “a chartered libertine, is still, / And the mute wonder lurketh in men’s ears / To steal his sweet and honeyed sentences” (1.1.50-52). Henry’s talent for speech craft is, in fact, so magnificent, that it renders men mute and the
world itself stands still. Such high praise for Henry establishes him as an archetype who surpasses all others in his rhetorical efforts. Here Shakespeare crafts a figure of supreme excellence, demonstrating for his readers and the world the supremacy of England’s king and, as the king stands for the nation, the preeminence of England itself.

This talent is one that Henry calculatingly exploits to assure his objectives. Henry’s ability at rhetoric is especially important for “a complimentary form of discourse – what Henry calls ‘ceremony,’ language both verbal and visual – . . . [that] emerges as a means to dominate and compel” both his men and those he does battle with (Riccomini 48). In the tennis ball scene, for instance, “the king’s speech is carefully calculated to shame the Dauphin and to prove his own high seriousness” (Ross 185). Shakespeare depicts Henry’s deliberate speech here “as a tool of rebuke and chastisement,” a tool Henry uses shrewdly (Ross 185).

Perhaps the greatest illustration of Henry’s capacity to use his oratorical skill strategically is the gates of Harfleur scene where Henry dons a mask of mercilessness in order to force compliance from his enemy. During the battle of Harfleur, a parley sounds, signaling that the French town wishes to negotiate with Henry; to this end, Henry rides to the gate of Harfleur and announces his terms. Rather than a negotiation, Henry demands complete surrender lest he “begin the battery once again” for, he promises, if that happens “I will not leave the half-achieved Harfleur / Till in her ashes she lie buried / The gates of mercy shall be all shut up” (3.3.7-10). In order to be perfectly clear as to the consequences of not surrendering, Henry paints a vicious picture of his capture of the city where

The blind and bloody soldier with foul hand
Defile the locks of your shrill-shrieking daughters;
Your fathers taken by the silver beards,
And their most reverend heads dash'd to the walls,
Your naked infants spitted upon pikes,
Whiles the mad mothers with their howls confused
Do break the clouds, as did the wives of Jewry
At Herod's bloody-hunting slaughtermen. (3.3.34-41)

The depth of Henry’s brutality in this speech is shocking. He threatens not only to burn the city to the ground, but also painstakingly details what his occupation will mean for the inhabitants of Harfleur should he shut up the gates of mercy. The image he suggests is rife with suffering, dripping with barbarism, and horrifying to the listeners who are the very non-combatants Henry has so vehemently advocated for in the past. Yet, as with anything else he does, Henry’s brutality is deliberate. The admittedly cruel threat Henry levels against the citizens of Harfleur contradicts his demonstrations of concern for the lives of the innocent French people repeated throughout the text. At Harfleur, though Henry appears willing to “let slip the dogs of war,” his actions and words evident throughout the play do not bear out the argument that Henry has little regard for life; instead, the merciless tone of this speech is a Machiavellian tactic to avoid further bloodshed and secure his victory (Shakespeare, Julius Caesar 3.1.273).

Vickie Sullivan regards the distancing language Henry employs in the Harfleur speech – i.e. “What say you? will you yield, and this avoid? / Or, guilty in defence, be thus destroy'd?” (3.3.42-3) – as evidence of his hypocrisy, arguing

Henry’s strategy that blames others for his own transgressions borders on the absurd when he addresses the citizens of the besieged Harfleur. He proclaims before its walls that if the town continues to resist its attackers, its defenders will
themselves suffer not only the most dreadful consequences, but also the blame for the atrocities to which they are subjected. (Sullivan 139)

But, according to military manuals of the time, this behavior would be appropriate and acceptable, since cities that wasted time and resources of campaigning troops by lengthening a foregone victory were subject to sanctioned reprisals (Taunton, 1590s Drama and Militarism 64). Comparing Henry to Tamburlaine, another conquering early modern hero, Nina Taunton says that Shakespeare’s Henry ‘shut[s] up’ the ‘gates of mercy’ . . . using the same rhetoric of blood and cruelty and for the same reasons as Tamburlaine. And both Tamburlaine’s and Henry’s actions are sanctioned by manual precept. . . . Both have occasion to display the superior military strength to governors of cities unable for much longer to defend themselves, and both employ similar rhetorical modes to advertise the severe measures set out in the manuals that might be expected if the conquered town or citadel does not immediately surrender. (1590s Drama and Militarism 64)

Criticisms like Taunton’s insist that Henry’s words must be read as truth, that, should Harfleur refuse to surrender to his demands, he will unleash the horrors of war he has promised. What Taunton fails to acknowledge, however, is that while Tamburlaine performs these acts, Henry threatens. This scene demonstrates, once again, Henry’s capacity to use rhetoric to manipulate events to ensure his victory. Nowhere else in the play does Henry exhibit a capacity for cruel acts with the exception of subterfuge and manipulation. Furthermore, once the governor yields to Henry, the king orders his troops to rest at Harfleur before marching on the next day and tellingly

45 Rabkin, “Rabbits, Ducks and Henry V,” and Deats, “Henry V at War,” also argue that Henry’s speech at Harfleur is evidence of his duplicitousness.
commands “use mercy to them all for us” (3.3.55). The peril may seem very real and the threat Henry presents is terrible, but one can imagine that the citizens of Harfleur, if given a choice between listening to heinous acts be described and experiencing them first hand, would choose Henry’s oppression over that of Tamburlaine. “Here the threat of cruelty, as Machiavelli might say . . . proves effectively merciful when the town surrenders” with no further casualties on either side of the conflict (D’Amico 36). Those who argue that Henry is a bloodthirsty conqueror, ready to rape and pillage his way through Harfleur, miss the subtleties of his character. At Harfleur, Henry has realized his promise of concern for the civilians of France, preserving life wherever possible by employing Machiavellian means. In this scene, Henry masterfully illustrates that possibility that the two disparate roles of his rabbuck personality, compassion and cunning, can exist as complimentary aspects of the same man.

Language is not a tool Henry uses only against the French; he also uses it to conquer the hearts and minds of his own men. In his interaction with a common soldier, Williams, for instance, a disguised Henry argues that the king is not responsible for the souls of the men he leads to battle because

.... Every

subject’s duty is the king’s, but every subject’s soul is his own. Therefore should every soldier in the wars do as every sick man in his bed: wash every mote out of his conscience. (4.1.164-7)

Though a seemingly simple argument, “render … unto God the things that are God’s,” Henry uses this argument to convince Williams of his point of view (King James Bible, Matt. 22.21). Having eloquently asserted that the king is responsible for the sin of an unjust war just before Henry’s speech, Williams changes his mind after it stating, “Tis certain, every man that dies ill,
the ill upon his own / head. The king is not to answer it” (4.1.174-5). Again, Henry demonstrates his ability to “unloose the Gordian knot” of any reasoning that does not serve his purpose (1.1.48).

Where the Harfleur scene displays Henry’s capacity to use language to manipulate and the Williams scene his ability to persuade, his speeches to his men at Harfleur and Agincourt illustrate his talent for engaging language to inspire. In the first speech at Harfleur, Henry’s goal it seems is practical: he instructs his men on their role, how they should act, and their capability while his grandiose language elevates what could have been a mere strategic directive into a stirring call to arms. He excites them “once more unto the breach” to either victory or to “close the wall up with our English dead” (3.1.1-2). This call to victory or death is well-grounded in the roots of medieval English war-literature and can be seen at work in many English texts, including Beowulf, The Battle of Maldon, and the Arthurian texts discussed in chapter two.

Henry further draws on the rich tradition by invoking the honor of their ancestors, another concept steeped in Anglo-Saxon and Middle English culture. Much like the authors of the other texts discussed repeatedly refer to characters as the son of a specific warrior, Henry calls upon his men to prove their noble blood, charging them to

Be a copy now of men of grosser blood,
And teach them how to war. And you, good yeoman,
Whose limbs were made in England, show us here
The mettle of your pasture. (3.1.22-7)

Having evoked their collective forbears, Henry makes clear that they must act in a way that warrants their illustrious heritage as sons of England as he does not doubt they will.
Henry continues his monologue with instruction on how to prepare themselves to honor the dead and their ancestors during “the blast of war,” advising that they should

… imitate the action of the tiger:

Stiffen the sinews, summon up the blood,

Disguise fair nature with hard-favored rage,

Then lend the eye a terrible aspect,

Let pry through the portage of the head

Like the brass cannon, let the brow o’erwhelm it

As fearfully doth the galled rock

O’erhang and jutty his confounded base,

Swilled with the wild and wasteful ocean.

Now set the teeth and stretch the nostril wide,

Hold hard the breath and bend up every spirit

To his full height. (3.1.6-17)

Here Henry “creates a catalogue of the senses and furnishes each item with a pictorial image meant to captivate the hearer in imitation of the image” (Ross 186). Henry’s rhetorical acumen is again displayed in this speech where, much like a sculptor, Henry uses his words to shape his men feature by feature until they resemble fierce champions who have the best chance to impel Harfleur into surrender.

At Agincourt, Henry again uses speechmaking to “inspire[e] his battlefield fraternity to extravagant feats of courage and the magnificent victory … by assuring them that the deeds they perform in this battle will be remembered until the ‘ending of the world’” (Deats 88). Faced with
a dispirited army who are painfully aware of their five to one odds, Henry again utilizes language
to inspire his men to fight on and even rejoice in their small numbers. He contends that

If we are marked to die, we are enough
To do our country loss; and if we are to live,
The fewer men, the greater share of honor.

By Jove, I am not covetous for gold

But if it be a sin to covet honor
I am the most offending soul alive.

God’s peace, I would not lose so great an honor

As one man more, methinks, would share from me (4.3.22-24, 26, 30-31, 33-34)

Henry’s speech is reminiscent of the great works of the Old and Middle English periods. Clearly,
“honor, kinship, and lasting memory through [earned through] shared participation in the battle”
are tenets entrenched in English culture, and Henry exploits these values in order to secure
English victory (Hunt 138). And it is successful, much like the Williams episode; where before
Henry’s speech Westmoreland despaired of their scant numbers, after Henry’s speech, he
declares, “God’s will, my liege, would you and I alone, / Without more help, could fight this
royal battle!” and the English go on to an unbelievable victory (4.3.76-7).

In addition to the practical aims of instruction and encouragement, Henry’s speeches at
Harfleur and Agincourt also function as a performance of equality, erasing the social
demarcations between the ruler and the ruled, casting the king as one of people, and elevating his
common soldiers to “dear friends” and, later, his “band of brothers” (3.1.2, 4.3.62). Henry’s deliberate use of rhetoric successfully excites “his men to be willing to sacrifice themselves for the sake of a greater purpose” by vowing that they can share glory (Hunt 138). Further, Henry proves his dedication to their joint cause by offering his blood to be shed alongside theirs, his life to be lost with theirs for their country (4.3.3-4, 63). His willingness to participate in this exchange, and potentially offer his life as sacrifice, legitimizes his oratory and raises his appeal beyond mere words to ritual which dissolves social and class differences and makes brothers of kings and soldiers (Riccomini 61). Henry clearly understands his audience and recognizes that the bonds of community forged by his efforts at moving rhetoric lead soldiers to fight on despite terror, doubt, and the near certainty of death. By strategically crafting his message, Henry draws his men closer to himself and invests them in his purpose, strengthening the bonds between soldier and state and assuring victory for England.

To that end, these speeches can be seen as moments of nation building as Henry is forging a unity between king and common man and, in so much as king stands for country, Henry ties the common man together with the nation. In his leading work on nation building, *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson defines a nation as

an imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign. … It is imagined as community, because, regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship. (6-7)

In *Henry V*, Henry himself levels the field. Shakespeare clearly illustrates the crucial role language has in producing a deep connection between men and their country – a bond for which they will forfeit their lives – and highlights Henry’s superior savvy in this terrain.
Finally, though these instances of rhetoric are wildly successful, they do not mark Henry as distinct among the heroes who have come before. Byrhtnoth, Beowulf, and Arthur are all skilled rhetoricians; however, Henry is the first example where that prowess is brilliantly applied to the *ars amatoria*. Act five, scene two presents Henry donning his most appealing guise as humble admirer, proclaiming, “I speak to thee plain soldier” (5.2.145) and then proceeds to speak hyperbole that is anything but plain, pleading

- take a fellow of plain and
- uncoined constancy, ...........
- ................................................
- fellows of infinite tongue, that can rhyme themselves into
- ladies’ favors, they do always reason themselves out again.
- What? A speaker is but a prater, a rhyme is but a ballad, a
- good leg will fall, a straight back will stoop, a black beard
- will turn white, a curled pate will grow bald, a fair face will
- wither, a full eye will wax hollow, but a good heart, Kate, is
- the sun and the moon, or rather the sun and not the moon,
- for it shines bright and never changes but keeps his course
- truly. If thou would have such a one, take me. And take me,
- take a soldier. Take a soldier, take a king. (5.2.148-49, 51-60)

In this passage, Henry employs alliteration, comparison, volta, metaphor, imagery, and a series of repetitions and elaborations that convey an overwhelming earnestness resulting in a speech that would beguile even the most aloof princess. Here, it seems, all the roughness and brutality is stripped away leaving behind a humble suitor. We are led, as Katherine is, to accept “Henry, who
has suborned churchman, commanded statesman, conquered cities, and rallied armies with his invincible oratory … as a plain, blunt soldier lacking the eloquence with which to woo a lady” (Deats 96). Yet, as in every other instance of his great command of language, Henry deliberately crafts an image that will secure his victory, in this case, tying the crown of France to his own both now and in the future. Once more, Henry cunningly exercises his “infinite tongue” to achieve his goal and advance his agenda (5.2.151).

Henry’s skill as a rhetorician is lavishly praised by those who know him well and abundantly evident throughout the play. In the scenes above, Henry demonstrates how his natural talent can be used as Machiavelli would advise, to advance one’s objectives. At Harfleur Henry employs oratory to terrify and compel his enemies to surrender, with Williams he crafts language to persuade and invest his soldier in the fight, in his speeches to his men before battle he delivers stirring messages to inspire them to victory and sacrifice in the name of king and country, and for Katherine he plays the part of humble admirer to secure her cooperation. The author’s choice to imbue Henry with this magnificent genius not only highlights Henry’s greatness, as many of the best of Shakespeare’s characters share this capacity for moving speech, it also reflects the importance of this trait to his role as an ideal hero. For an author and audience embroiled in an expensive war with Spain, the ability to accomplish the aims of a conquering champion with mere words offers immense advantages without expense. Ultimately, Henry capitalizes on language, employing it as another tool in his Machiavellian arsenal.

Henry’s Two Bodies

For all his Machiavellianism one very important note, which salvages Henry from being too much a villain, is that every manipulative move, every ruthless choice, every brutal tactic,
every cunning performance is all for the amelioration of England. When viewed through the lens of the English legal tradition of the king’s two bodies, Shakespeare develops the idea of a body politic and a body natural into a representation of an outer king and an inner man.\(^{46}\)

Evidence of Henry’s adherence to this principle is the considerable change in his behavior, which various characters remark upon. While Canterbury proclaims that, “though the courses of his youth promised it not,” Henry has developed into a king who could charm the angels from the skies, convince his enemies to support his cause, and answer the riddles of the sphinx (1.1.25, 40-61). Exeter, too, declares that Henry has learned well the lessons of his immaturity, much to the wonder and benefit of his people (2.4.138-41). These accounts affirm that Henry sublimated his rash and tempestuous nature to become the restrained and calculating king.

We also see evidence of Henry’s propensity to put the common good above his own personal interests in the three traitors scene; it is, in fact, outlined for us by Henry himself. Upon exposing Scroop, Cambridge, and Grey, Henry discloses

You would have sold your king to slaughter,

His princes and peers to servitude,

His subjects to oppression and contempt,

And his whole kingdom into desolation.

Touching on our person, seek we no revenge,

But we our kingdom’s safety must so tender

Whose ruin you have sought, that to her laws

We do deliver you. (2.2.171-8)

\(^{46}\) For further discussion of the concept of king’s two bodies, see Ernst Kantorowicz’s *The King’s Two Bodies: A Study in Mediaeval Political Theology.*
Listing four offenses before he ever touches upon his personal betrayal, Henry asserts that the crimes against his person he could forgive, but the consequences for England of assassinating the king are inexcusable. Henry demonstrates his commitment to the two body principle in the fact that he is more concerned with the impact the assassination would have had on his country, noblemen, subjects, and kingdom than his own life. This juxtaposition of the private self and the public self is one that is revisited again and again throughout the play as Henry demonstrates his willingness to put his duty before himself.

Henry’s abiding deference to the public good also leads him out into “the foul womb of night” to lend comfort and encouragement to his despairing men (4.Pro.4). While Taunton criticizes Henry for breaking the protocol outlined in contemporary military manuals by wandering the camp at night and breaking the chain of command, in this scene Henry affirms that his duty to the body politic outweighs any criticism he may receive for not obeying the conventions of protocol (“Camp Scenes and Generals”; 1590s Drama and Militarism 25-6). While Taunton sees Henry’s efforts to console his men as evidence of “doubleness,” by her own inclusion of Sir Roger Williams, there is a precedent for a commander to break protocol if the needs of his men warrant it. Henry may not be where the manuals say he should be, but he is where his people need him to be. His men are frightened and bleak

like sacrifices, by their watchful fires

Sit patiently and inly ruminate

The morning’s danger; and their gestures sad

. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .

Presenteth them unto the gazing moon

So many horrid ghosts. (4.Pro.23-5, 4.Pro.27-8)
The despair and dismay evoked by the imagery in this passage emphasizes the seriousness of the situation and the need of his people for Henry to draw on his majesty; they need a “little touch of Harry” (4.Pro.47).

The Chorus notes in act four that Henry, finding his men so dejected, assumes “a modest smile / And calls them brothers, friends and countrymen” (4.Pro.33-4). Here Henry adopts an affect of friendliness, camaraderie, and egalitarianism designed to buoy his men (4.3.62). The Chorus observes

Upon his royal face there is no note
How dread an army hath enrounded him;
Nor doth he dedicate one jot of colour
Unto the weary and all-watched night,
But freshly looks and over-bears attaint
With cheerful semblance and sweet majesty. (4.Pro.35-40)

But what lies under the surface of these lines is that Henry feels the dread, weariness, wariness, melancholy, and powerlessness but suppresses these feelings in order to become what his men need. The focus on Henry’s face and the deliberateness of his demeanor demonstrates Henry’s willingness to don a mask of confidence and cheerfulness in order to distract his army from their dire circumstances.

Machiavelli’s advice on performance is documented in his letter to Rafael Girolami in which he writes “it is undoubtedly necessary for the ambassador occasionally to mask his game,” and, in the camp scene, Henry purposefully embraces this mask (Machiavelli, “Instructions given” 505-6). Though the English are vastly outnumbered, sick, hungry, and frightened, Henry’s inspirational disposition reassures them so “that every wretch, pining and pale before,
Beholding him, plucks comfort from his looks” (4.Pro.41-2). It is clear Henry recognizes the value of putting on a brave face and uses it strategically to comfort and embolden his men. Drawing from a biblical tradition, Henry acts as if he has faith, and faithful men are granted to him. His performance shines on them like a benediction, granting them the courage to face the day ahead. The resultant “thawing cold fear” and plucking of comfort from his looks and, more tellingly, the ensuing victory serves as evidence that Henry was right to leave his appointed post and assume a cheerful temperament so that he might serve the greatest good (4.Pro.45, 4.Pro.42). Though the French may have been doing everything by the book as Taunton posits, this does not ensure their success. Instead, much like the impact of Byrhtnoth’s death on his men, Henry’s affect encourages his soldiers, discouraged, ill, starving, and outnumbered five to one; unlike Byrhtnoth, Henry is so effective that his men are able to rally and emerge victorious.

Henry’s second soliloquy is also a performance of his devotion to his men and readiness to privilege the public good over his private burden. In this prayer, Henry makes no mention of his own concerns; instead, he devotes his precious moment of solitude to a prayer for his men. He promises,

I Richard's body have interred anew;
And on it have bestow'd more contrite tears
Than from it issued forced drops of blood:
Five hundred poor I have in yearly pay,
Who twice a-day their wither'd hands hold up
Toward heaven, to pardon blood; and I have built
Two chantries, where the sad and solemn priests
Sing still for Richard's soul. More will I do;
Though all that I can do is nothing worth,
Since that my penitence comes after all,
Imploring pardon. (4.1.276-86)

All of this will he do in exchange for God’s grace upon his soldiers. Vickie Sullivan argues that this speech amounts to a transaction whereby Henry indexes all the things he has done in recompense for the role of his father, Henry IV, in Richard II’s death as collateral for what he will do if he’s granted victory. For Sullivan, Henry’s atonement and offer of penance is a cheap effort to barter for military success, presented against the background and knowledge that he would not be on the throne without his father’s coup.

Yet nowhere does he mention victory or personal glory, which Sullivan maintains is his price. Rather, one can see that Henry’s concern about the sins of his father has more to do with the impact they will have on his subjects. The context of the actions surrounding Henry’s prayer shed light on this motivation. Before praying, Henry briefly pauses to reflect on his experiences walking and interacting with his men both in the guise of kingly sun from which his men draw warmth. This experience colors Henry’s prayer and he pleads,

O God of battles, steel my soldiers’ hearts.
Possess them not with fear. Take from them now
The sense of reck’ning ere th’opposèd numbers
Pluck their hearts from them. (4.1.270-3)

Having just seen the dispirited state of his men, he prays for the relief of their fear and, having been accused of bearing the responsibility of his men’s judgement, he asks that the his father’s and his misdeeds not be tallied in the reckoning.
Henry’s concern for the common good and the comfort of his subjects, rather than his own glory and accumulation of power, differentiates him from other Machiavels. Where Machiavellian villains are more likely to reveal their true natures in soliloquy, exposing their deviousness, Henry’s speech makes no mention of his manipulation, brutality, or desire for power—all key characteristics of a stage Machiavel. Further, were the prayer itself a Machiavellian maneuver meant to manipulate the listener, it would be meaningless as there is no one, except an all-knowing God, to hear it; thus, there is no one to influence with pretense. Given this reality, Henry has nothing more to gain from seeking succor for his men than the very thing that he asks for. Far from the egotistical maneuvering of Machiavellian villain, Henry’s prayer, and his behavior throughout the play, illustrate characteristics more in line with Machiavelli’s *Prince* who is at all times concerned with the advancement of the State.

Even his marriage to Katherine, which some critics see as disingenuous “role playing,” because “whether or not Henry loves Katherine or Katherine loves Henry is of little consequence since both are engaged in state business that gives little or no recognition to love,” can be seen as Henry’s diligent attempt to put his kingly duty before the cares of the man (Deats 96). It is true that love matters little here, but, in an effort to bridge the gap between his private self, the man who must marry Katherine, and his public self, the king who must secure England’s control over France, Henry frames the business of dynasty building in a more personal light and acknowledges this in talking about their heirs as a selling point. “The wooing-scene becomes Henry’s final test, where his willingness to sacrifice everything—including his own sincerity, his own humanity—has to be demonstrated” and stands as evidence of his inclination to suffer for

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47 Examples in Shakespeare’s work of Machiavellian villains who explicitly acknowledge their transgressions in soliloquy are Iago in *Othello* 1.3, 2.1, 2.3, and 3.3; Macbeth in his eponymous play 1.7, 2.1, and 3.1; and Richard III in his, 5.3.
his public duty (Honigmann 201). In this test, Henry shows himself ready to offer everything, as he has offered his blood and bones elsewhere, in the service of England.

Henry’s immense concern for England and its future is a pervasive theme in his pursuit of Katherine where he promises,

> Shall not thou and I, between Saint Denis and Saint George, compound a boy, half French, half English, that shall go to Constantinople and take the Turk by the beard? (5.2.195-8)

The wooing scene is Henry’s final act of duty in the play and stands as evidence of his inclination to cede all to his regal responsibility (Honigmann 201). Henry exhibits no concern over the fact that he, himself, shall not be king of France; instead, he imagines a conquering future English king who will build upon his successes. Indeed, it does not seem to matter to this Machiavel that he will not sit on the throne of France; instead, he maneuvers for a long-term goal, bringing France under the rule of England. As he does in the prayer scene, Henry transfers the Machiavel’s desire for personal power to the State, illustrating that what is important for him is not an individual power but England’s dominance.

Henry’s impact on the future of England is, in fact, a pervasive theme throughout the play, and his inclination to put his public, kingly duty before his private, human ego illustrates the audience’s desire for a monarch who values the common good far above his own desires. Henry demonstrates that his greatest concern is a lasting legacy of power for his country. For the author and the audience, this sacrifice is essential to the function of the hero as “the survival of the state is ultimately more important than the survival of Henry himself” or any personal feeling Henry might have (Riccomini 46). This desire to do whatever it takes to achieve dominance is
common to Postcolonial literature since “sovereignty … can hardly be conceived without a sense of both liberation from the former subjection and a plan to subject others in turn. To achieve full national selfhood, the colonized must become a colonizer” (Helgerson 293). To this end, the prince must be willing to sustain the state at all costs (Riccomini 44-46). Above all else, Henry demonstrates that his greatest concern is a lasting legacy of power for his country and he is willing to secure this end by any means necessary, be it cunning or cruel, brutal or self-sacrificing.

Ultimately, Henry’s desire for England’s glory and his willingness to sacrifice any and all things, including himself, to accomplish that end makes him the perfect locus not only as the early modern concepts of what it means to be a hero, but also as a platform for forging the English nation. Through the character of Henry V, Shakespeare highlights “the site in and by which a utopian corporation was imagined” (McEachern 86). Much as Elizabeth often wrote herself as the mother of England, the monarch is a site for connection and even equation between the king and people.\(^4\) Henry’s qualities of ruthlessness, cunning, inspiration, oratory, and value for the public good are, thus, assumed by the English people through his capacity to stand as their proxy. This unity between the person of the king and the individual is what makes Henry V so ripe for literary identification which “evoke[s] corporate intimacy” – something Anderson and others have shown to be necessary for forging a nation (McEachern 83). Henry’s capacity to act

\(^4\) Two such instances are her answer to the Commons’ petition that she marry on January 28, 1563 where she wrote, “I assure you all that though after my death you may have many stepdames, yet shall you never have any a more mother than I mean to be unto you all” and her speech to the Commons in 1559 where she is said to have replied “‘Reproach me so no more … that I have no children: for every one of you, and as many as are English, are my children’”(72 and 59).
as this proxy, to evoke a feeling of communal bond between king and soldier, hero and audience, makes it possible for Shakespeare and his audience to invest themselves in the character of Henry and imbue him with all their desires and anxieties.

One must acknowledge that “the end of the play bleakly implies that … all that Harry has won will be lost within a generation” (Rabkin 288-9). Yet the Epilogue goes out of its way to absolve Henry from blame, noting,

Henry the Sixth, in infant bands crowned king
Of France and England, did this king succeed,
Whose state so many had the managing
That they lost France and made England bleed (5.Epi.9-12, emphasis added)

The Chorus, so much Henry’s cheerleader throughout the rest of the play, makes clear that Henry V was in no way responsible for the ruination that follows him. Far from the reading some critics endorse that sees the Epilogue as an implicit indictment of Henry, the narrator attempts to exonerate him, while still acknowledging the reality of history.

Though Shakespeare must work within the strictures of historical reality, Henry’s aptness as a fantasy for feelings of power and prominence is fully realized in this play in which “the mimesis of the greater, visible (and in a sense immovable) history is rendered more varied and complex by shedding light on the obscure zone of ‘invisible’ history” that is written by the audience about their experience (Pugliatti 241). By working with more than the historical timeline, the author is able to write onto history and create a figure on whom the audience can project; and Shakespeare crafts him beautifully. Thus, “the victory at Agincourt remains celebrated in the annals of British history less because of the deeds performed than because of the eloquent words that Shakespeare puts into the mouth of Henry. The speech provides a
striking example of the way the poetry constructs history and rhetoric creates reality” (Deats 88).

In this way, Henry remains relevant in our culture; often referenced today in television and movies and by politicians.49

This ability to ‘construct history’ also allows the author to create a space for the audience to experience a sense of power. Henry’s highly eloquent rhetoric is the vehicle by which the English audience is able to think of themselves and their language both as having been colonized and as potentially colonizing others. In England, this dynamic was largely notional – a matter of stories the English told themselves about their past and future rather than of actual experience … but the notional quality makes the English example all the more significant. The pattern itself – a pattern both dependent on and productive of national consolidation – summoned forth stories to fit its demands.

(Helgerson 289)

These stories, like Henry V, offer a snapshot of the prevailing atmosphere and sentiment around the time they were created and are particularly ripe grounds for cultural examination of the concerns English authors and audiences felt since the “we are not … dealing with texts written outside the institution and subsequently attached to it or with encysted productions staged in a

49 Some examples of the enduring quality of Henry V are Winston Churchill’s wartime speeches which reference heavily the St. Crispin’s day speech, the TV miniseries Band of Brothers, the speech by President Whitmore, played by Bill Pullman, in the movie Independence Day, references in both Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes and the TV series House to the game being “afoot,” the episode “Once More unto the Breach” from the series Star Trek: Deep Space Nine, the episode “The Defector” from the series Star Trek: Enterprise in which the characters perform the Williams scene at the opening of the episode, and scores of business books which offer managerial lessons to be learned from Henry’s style along the lines of Inspirational Leadership: Henry V and the Muse of Fire: Timeless Insights from Shakespeare’s Greatest Leader.
long-established and ideologically dormant setting but with literary creations designed in
intimate and living relation” to their culture (Greenblatt 13).

Fundamentally, Henry is a complex figure willing and able to perform any role necessary
to advance the state’s interests, putting England and her advancement before anything and
everything, including his own desires. What we find upon this examination is the creation of a
hero who is *both* savage *and* savior, at once merciless and merciful. To this end, the hero does
not have to be, should not be, cannot be either/or – he must be both/and. In as much as literature
can also function as “wish-fulfillment fantasies,” Shakespeare creates in Henry a hero who
navigates the multitude of requirements with dexterity, succeeding militarily, commanding his
troops cunningly, interacting with other powers shrewdly, dominating the Europeans powers of
his day, and making explicit England’s national power should not be tested. Building on the rich
heroic tradition that came before it, *Henry V* climaxes England’s response to a Postcolonial
experience, culminating with a work that frames the English as no longer under threat, no longer
inferior, but the supreme power in its region. As the preceding examples illustrate, Henry is the
best of both the rabbit and the duck that Rabkin identifies in his formative work and to focus too
myopically on one or the other is to lose the nuance of Henry’s character and see him as a two-
dimensional caricature of a king. By acknowledging both the benevolent and the ruthless aspects
of Henry, the reader sees him in his full measure: a noble Machiavel.
CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

It is the struggle for nationhood that unlocks culture and opens the doors of creation. Later on it is the nation that will provide culture with the conditions and framework for expression. The nation satisfies all those indispensable requirements for culture which alone can give it credibility, validity, dynamism, and creativity. It is also the national character that makes culture permeable to other cultures and enables it to influence and penetrate them. That which does not exist can hardly have an effect on reality or even influence it.

― Frantz Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth* 177

As Fanon says in this pivotal moment of reflection on national culture, the experiences of violent conflict, vulnerability, oppression, and cultural inferiority provide the framework on which a nation forms its literature. As “the colonized … are more often devoid of a public voice,” they “resort to dreaming, imagining … embedding the reactive vocabulary of violence and retributive justice in their bodies, their psyches,” and what is literature if not a vehicle for dreaming, imagining and giving a voice to the voiceless (Bhabha, “Foreword” xx)? In this way, text reflects context, and literature reacts to lived experience. Therefore, the literature of medieval and early modern England acts as a means by which the authors of *Beowulf*, *The Battle of Maldon*, the *Alliterative Morte Arthure*, *Le Morte Darthur*, and *Henry V* can come to terms with the psychic trauma of their experiences and interrogate those aspects of their culture which they deem suspect.
For *Beowulf* and *The Battle of Maldon*, the authors created stories that depict alien and overwhelming enemies as a corollary to the vast and repeated incursions by foreign forces on English shores. These encounters contributed to a pervasive feeling of powerlessness and vulnerability to which the authors responded by forging manifestations of what Fanon terms “muscular dreams”: fantasies of strength, victory, perseverance, and abiding loyalty (15). The characters of Byrhtnoth and Beowulf are thus representatives of an Old English warrior-hero, whose qualities demonstrate a fixation on the hero’s prowess and ability to rout the enemy. These heroes share an uncommon willingness to face seemingly insurmountable adversaries even at the cost of their own lives and a talent for inspiring those around them to act in the same way.

In the second era, the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, I consider a new aspect of the hero – his ability to prove England’s prestige to a disparaging France. The prevailing concern in this time period is not so much the physical threat of invasion on English shores, though France does posture to this effect; it is, instead, the desire for cultural and political prominence that faces the English people during the time of the Hundred Years War. Here, the authors and audiences of the *AMA* and *Morte Darthur* mirror the desire to secure England’s right to its ancestral Norman lands, to illustrate England’s cultural parity with contemporary courtly countries, and to establish, once and for all, that England’s rich history of powerful monarchs legitimizes its position as an international political powerhouse. Accordingly, the figures crafted by the authors of the *AMA* and *Morte Darthur* is one who expands the parameters of heroism chartered by his doughty forbearers. Arthur is a conqueror, a powerful fighter, a fearsome defender, a generous overlord, a warrior who is ruthless in his quest for victory but compassionate in the treatment of non-combatants, a source of inspiration for his men, a zealously protective commander, a
shrewdly political strategist, and, finally, a chevalier who strategically uses the ideals of courtesy to achieve his goals. This hero adapts and incorporates the Anglo-Saxon epic tradition and the Anglo-Norman romance tradition. Thus, Arthur provides an ideal representation of a fantasy of fourteenth and fifteenth-century power.

By the time *Henry V* was written and performed, England had proven its dominance against the Spanish with a series of decisive victories against the Spanish Armada, yet conclusive triumph was not assured. Against the backdrop of yet another conflict with a world power, Shakespeare constructs the character of Henry V, who exemplifies all the praiseworthy features of Beowulf, Byrhtnoth, and Arthur but does so while inhabiting the seemingly contradictory roles of a good king, concerned with the plight of the innocent; and the cunning Machiavel, willing to employ any means necessary to achieve his aims. While each of the other heroes has moments that are criticized and flaws which must be forgiven, Henry utilizes all aspects of his nature – both the virtuous and the vicious – to achieve his aim of securing a dominating place for England at the top of the international arena. Where the preceding texts depicted the enemy as instigating the conflict by attempting to oppress the natives in their own domain, Henry initiates the action by declaring war on France. As a figure of nationalist fantasy, Henry portrays unequivocal power and warns the Spanish, with whom many connections can be found to the fictionalized French, that England is not to be trifled with.

What one finds in tracing the figure of the hero across nearly one thousand years of English history is a surprising amount of harmony. In each of these texts we find: a hero with qualities that are easily identifiable, yet distinct from the normal man; a hero in action, facing off against a foe not of that land; a hero whose greatest concern is the defense of his people; a hero who is flawed but still lauded by the characters and author; and a hero who is ultimately
destroyed within the text as if to acknowledge that he is too perfect to exist in reality. In addition, each text provides situations that can be easily read as analogous to the current historical situation and attempt to interrogate some aspect of that reality within the bounds of fantasy – be it a reference to contemporary values or a criticism of figures who do not achieve the ideals of this imagined hero.

The study of these heroes, how we create them, how they respond to our anxieties, how we use them as the gauge by which to measure our real leaders, and how they can teach future generations about our experience of the world is important work that continues to be relevant and applicable even today. As I have demonstrated in the preceding chapters, the creation of heroes to embody our fantasies and respond to our concerns is not restricted to what is thought of traditionally as Postcolonial literature. Indeed, such efforts continue to be seen in contemporary popular culture like Marvel’s *Iron Man* movie franchise. This movie, produced in the decade following September 11 and released only one year after the U.S. surge of troops in Iraq, depicts a hero who finds the ability of a normal man to respond to terrorism and war lacking and thus recreates himself as a terrorist-destroying vigilante with cutting edge weaponry. Clearly, much like the champions of *Beowulf*, *The Battle of Maldon*, the *Alliterative Morte Arthure*, *Le Morte Darthur*, and *Henry V*, *Iron Man* is a hero to match our times and, as we do those English heroes, we root for him to succeed and triumph vicariously when he does. In this way, the hero is a figure rife with meaning and ripe for transference – a carefully crafted a chosen champion.
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APPENDIX: FAIR USE WORKSHEET FOR FIGURE 2
USF Fair Use Worksheet

The fair use exception was added to the Copyright Act of 1976 as section 107 and was based on a history of judicial decisions that recognized that unauthorized use of copyrighted materials were “fair uses.” The distinction between fair use and infringement may be unclear and not easily defined. There is no specific number of words, lines, or notes that may safely be taken without permission. This worksheet is offered as a tool to help you determine if your use of copyrighted content is likely to be considered to be a “fair use.”

Before you begin your fair use determination, ask yourself the following questions:

1. Is the work no longer protected by copyright?
   a. Is it in the public domain?
   b. Did I retain my copyright ownership over a work I created when signing my publication contract?

2. Is there a specific exception in copyright law that covers my use?
   a. Does my use fit within Section 108 of copyright law: ‘Reproduction by libraries and archives?’
   b. Does my use fit within Section 110 (1) of copyright law: ‘performance or display of works in face to face classrooms?’
   c. Does my use fit within Section 110 (2) of copyright law: ‘performance or display of works in online classrooms (also known as the TEACH Act)?’ see TEACH Act checklist

3. Is there a license that covers my use?
   a. Is the work issued under a Creative Commons license and can I comply with the license terms?
   b. Do I have access to the material through library licensed content? Ask your librarian

If your answer to the above questions was no, then you should proceed with your fair use evaluation. Section 107 also sets out four factors to be considered in determining whether or not a particular use is fair:

1. The purpose and character of the use, including whether such use is of commercial nature or is for nonprofit educational purposes
2. The nature of the copyrighted work
3. The amount and substantiality of the portion used in relation to the copyrighted work as a whole
4. The effect of the use upon the potential market for, or value of, the copyrighted work

None of these factors are independently determinative of whether or not a use is likely to be considered fair use. In evaluating your use, you should evaluate the totality of the circumstances and consider all of the factors together. The Fair Use Worksheet will help you balance these factors to determine if your use of copyrighted material weighs in favor of ‘fair use.’ While valuable for your own documentation the Worksheet is not intended as legal advice, which can be provided only by USF General Counsel.

LeEtta Schmidt, lmschmidt@usf.edu and Drew Smith dsmith@usf.edu
Reviewed by USF General Counsel 08/11/2015
INSTRUCTIONS

Check all boxes that apply, and keep a copy of this form for your records. If you have questions, please contact the USF General Counsel or your USF Tampa Library Copyright Librarian.

Name: Jessica Labossiere Date: 5/18/2016
Class or Project: ETD
Title of Copyrighted Work: Duckbunny

**PURPOSE AND CHARACTER OF THE USE**

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<tr>
<th>Likely Supports Fair Use</th>
<th>Likely Does Not Support Fair Use</th>
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<tbody>
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<td>[ ] Educational</td>
<td>[ ] Commercial</td>
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<tr>
<td>[ ] Teaching (including multiple copies for classroom use)</td>
<td>[ ] Entertainment</td>
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<tr>
<td>[ ] Research or Scholarship</td>
<td>[ ] Bad-faith behavior</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[ ] Criticism, Parody, News Reporting or Comment</td>
<td>[ ] Denying credit to original author</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[ ] Transformative Use (your new work relies on and adds new expression, meaning, or message to the original work)</td>
<td>[ ] Non-transformative or exact copy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[ ] Restricted Access (to students or other appropriate group)</td>
<td>[ ] Made accessible on Web or to public</td>
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<tr>
<td>[ ] Nonprofit</td>
<td>[ ] Profit-generating use</td>
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Overall, the purpose and character of your use [ ] supports fair use or [ ] does not support fair use.

**NATURE OF THE COPYRIGHTED MATERIAL**

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<th>Likely Does Not Support Fair Use</th>
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<tr>
<td>[ ] Factual or nonfiction</td>
<td>[ ] Creative or fiction</td>
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<tr>
<td>[ ] Important to favored educational objectives</td>
<td>[ ] Consumable (workbooks, tests)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[ ] Published work</td>
<td>[ ] Unpublished</td>
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Overall, the nature of the copyrighted material [ ] supports fair use or [ ] does not support fair use.

**AMOUNT AND SUBSTANTIABILITY OF MATERIAL USED IN RELATION TO WHOLE**

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<td>[ ] Small amount (using only the amount necessary to accomplish the purpose)</td>
<td>[ ] Large portion or whole work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[ ] Amount is important to favored socially beneficial objective (i.e. educational objectives)</td>
<td>[ ] Portion used is qualitatively substantial (i.e. it is the ‘heart of the work’)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[ ] Lower quality from original (ex. Lower resolution or bitrate photos, video, and audio)</td>
<td>[ ] Similar or exact quality of original work</td>
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LeEtta Schmidt, Lmschmidt@usf.edu and Drew Smith dsmith@usf.edu
Reviewed by USF General Counsel 08/11/2015
Overall, the amount and substantiality of material used in relation to the whole supports fair use or does not support fair use.

**EFFECT ON THE MARKET FOR ORIGINAL**

<table>
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<th>Likely Supports Fair Use</th>
<th>Likely Does Not Support Fair Use</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>☐ No significant effect on the market or potential market for the original</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>☐ No similar product marketed by the copyright holder</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>☐ You own a lawfully acquired copy of the material</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>☐ The copyright holder is unidentifiable</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>☐ Lack of licensing mechanism for the material</td>
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<tr>
<td>☐ Replaces sale of copyrighted work</td>
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<tr>
<td>☐ Significantly impairs market or potential market for the work</td>
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<tr>
<td>☐ Numerous copies or repeated, long-term use</td>
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<tr>
<td>☐ Made accessible on Web or to public</td>
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<tr>
<td>☐ Affordable and reasonably available permissions or licensing</td>
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Overall, the effect on the market for the original supports fair use or does not support fair use.

**CONCLUSION**

The combined purpose and character of the use, nature of the copyrighted material, amount and substantiality of material used in relation to the whole and the effect on the market for the original supports fair use or likely does not support fair use.

Note: Should your use of copyrighted material not support fair use, you may still be able to locate and request permissions from the copyright holder. For help on this, please feel free to contact your Copyright Librarian.

This worksheet has been adapted from:

Cornell University’s Checklist for Conducting A Fair use Analysis Before Using Copyrighted Materials:
https://copyright.cornell.edu/policies/docs/Fair_Use_Checklist.pdf


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