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"This people which I made"

The Character of King Arthur as a Mechanism of Unification in Medieval Arthuriana
and the *Idylls of the King*

An Honors Paper for the Department of English

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Bowdoin College, 2016

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Introduction

It is impossible for any analysis of the Arthurian legend to address every facet of either the legend itself or its many iterations, but the impossibility of such a task is in part what makes the story of Arthur so compelling. Layers upon layers of symbolism stemming from scores of various entangled narratives sometimes possess deeper meaning in the aggregate than any single strand could. And yet a literary analysis necessarily examines single texts, so that these deeper meanings are either obscured by or elided with more surface-level readings. In the following chapters I will attempt to trace the connection between the figure of King Arthur and the creation of national boundaries in four different texts, three from around the twelfth century and one, the influential *Idylls of the King*, from the nineteenth. I have endeavored to acknowledge these texts both at surface level and as part of a larger tradition of Arthuriana. In this sense, I have worked to define the boundaries of individual texts while situating them in a larger, unified (though not homogenous) collection of narratives, just as the legend of Arthur and, in particular, its titular character, works to designate and unify the boundaries of the British nation and its people.

My first chapter addresses Arthur's role as a symbol of unity in three medieval texts: *Historia Regum Britanniae* (1136) by Geoffrey of Monmouth, *Roman de Brut* (c. 1150-55) by the poet Wace, and *Brut* (c. 1189-1216) by a priest named Laȝamon. These three texts, all published within a century of one another, offer examples of three different linguistic traditions, but all tell essentially the same story: a history of the island of Britain and its kings, beginning with its founding and ending with the last British king before the Anglo-Saxons came into power. Arthur is only one of the many kings in the

account, but his story takes up a disproportionately large part of the narrative, and it is clear that the authors consider him one of the greatest British kings. Although these authors are not necessarily “British” in a narrower sense, the very creation of these texts reveals that each somehow identify with the earlier inhabitants of the island and deems the history of Britain a worthy subject.

The British Isles, like any nation, has a rich and varied history, marked by conquest and conflict. In the early years of the first century CE, the southern half of Great Britain was a Roman colony, though all of Britain was inhabited primarily by tribal groups that had lived there since long before Roman occupation. In the fifth century, Rome withdrew from the island, and the Germanic Anglo-Saxons seized power and remained largely in control until 1066, when the William the Conqueror, Duke of Normandy, claimed sovereignty over England. The medieval texts in my analysis all date to within a century and a half of the Norman takeover, and their treatment of the island of Britain reflects this. It is important to remember, however, that such shifts in leadership would have had far less effect on individual inhabitants of the island than the historical record might suggest. While a history of Britain necessarily divides the past into discrete time periods, the Norman takeover did not correlate with a sudden displacement of every member of the former Anglo-Saxon kingdom. Nor were the inhabitants of Great Britain necessarily divided into clear-cut regional and ethnolinguistic identities.

Nevertheless, for simplicity’s sake, I will in this work use specific terminology to refer to different groups and spaces. In the medieval period, “British” and “English,” which we today consider largely overlapping identities, were highly differentiated and often placed in opposition to one another. In my discussion of the medieval texts, I will

try to retain the ambiguity of “British” identity, for although “British” in many contexts refers to the native inhabitants of the island of Great Britain—groups that we would now call “Celtic”—it can also be used to denote any inhabitant of “Britain,” that is, Great Britain. Likewise, I use “Britain,” “Great Britain,” and “the island” interchangeably to refer to the island that includes modern-day Wales, Scotland, and England.

Each of these countries has experienced British identity differently, but for the purposes of this text I largely elide these identities into the single “British.” In my first chapter, I use “English” exclusively to refer to Anglo-Saxon descendants as differentiated from the native Britons.¹ While the vague, often overlapping nature of these identities may be confusing for the reader, such confusion is in fact vital to the idea that these medieval texts ultimately promote *unity* between the different groups. Boundaries between the different designations are ultimately permeable, so that any history of the British can be reframed as a history of whatever ethnic group is nominally in power over the island; the important component in each text is connection to Great Britain as a space of human occupation.

Arthur in the medieval sources appears as a uniting force, the greatest king of the Britons, who succeeds in repelling the heathens while conquering a multitude of other kingdoms and converting them into tributaries. Though Arthur ultimately fails in his goal of conquering Rome (and therefore the world), he manages to unite the British and expand his kingdom’s boundaries far beyond that of any of his predecessors. As in the *Idylls of the King*, the construction of some national identity is achieved in these twelfth century texts through two separate steps: first, the identification of an Other against

¹ I will still refer to these indigenous Britons as “British” in order to retain a sense of ambiguity regarding *Lazamon’s* identification with that identity (a concept I will explore later).

which Arthur's kingdom (and therefore the people who inhabit that kingdom) can be defined; second, the fabrication of some national mythology around which those peoples might rally in the form of the mythic figure of Arthur. In the medieval sources, these are undertaken through two separate though linked narratives: the incompetence and sedition of Arthur's predecessor, King Vortigern, and the dramatic expansion and conquest that marks Arthur's own reign. While Vortigern never appears in the *Idylls*, his acceptance of the Saxons into his kingdom offers a warning of the perils of potential invasion, reconceptualized in the *Idylls of the King* as the physical and spiritual peril of the ever-present heathen hordes. Arthur's own success is, of course, short-lived, but the fall of his empire differs dramatically from the degeneracy of previous kings, simply given the fact that he succeeds in creating, for however short a time, a unified nation. The story of Vortigern establishes the ideological boundaries of Britain and the consequences of disconnecting those ideological boundaries from the island's physical boundaries, while the story of Arthur reconnects the two and expands ideological boundaries to include various other kingdoms as tributaries.

In my discussion of the original Arthurian text, Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae*, I will explore Arthur's connection to the island of Britain in a material sense. The theme of connection to place appears frequently throughout my analysis: time and again, Arthur's ability to lead is intimately entwined with his ability to physically protect the island and its people, to expel invaders and guard the borders. In the *Historia*, Geoffrey juxtaposes Arthur's reign with that of Vortigern, who not only fails to stop the Saxons from entering the kingdom but actually *invites* them in. Britain cannot thrive while these corrupt, heathen forces exist within her borders, and when Arthur finally

ascends to the throne, his first act is to banish the Saxons from the island. He thus realigns Britain's spatial borders, at the island's coasts, with its ideological borders, so that the only people still living within the kingdom are those loyal to Arthur, the British king. After achieving a consonance between the mental and physical bounds of Britain, Arthur can finally turn his gaze outward, to the extension of these boundaries beyond the island's insular shores. He conquers kingdom after kingdom, but his strength always derives from the health of his *own* kingdom. When that health is threatened by Mordred's treachery, Arthur must immediately return home. His failure to defeat Mordred signifies weakness in the very foundation of his empire.

Wace retains the connection between the health of the land and the health of kingdom as a concept while adding his own gloss to the tale. Where Geoffrey's text was aimed at a community of scholars, Wace's is meant for a courtly audience, and he extensively embellishes the story to reflect this. Such additions may seem frivolous but are in fact of vital importance, as Wace's descriptions of Arthur's court at Camelot intentionally reflect the pomp and glory of the court of Eleanor of Aquitaine (for whom he writes) so that his patroness and her courtiers might easily imagine themselves at Arthur's court. This imaginative exercise creates a sense of continuity between the world of Arthur and other British kings and the world of mid-twelfth-century Norman royalty. Continuity between history and present likely granted non-British lords and ladies of Henry II and Eleanor's court a sense of pride in and belonging to the island of Britain and its history, even if their own ancestral homes were in France.

The Round Table, a symbol now inextricable from Arthur himself, first appeared in Wace's account as well. He grants it very little attention, but future accounts would

endue the Table with extensive symbolic value. Speculation about Wace's sources for the Round Table does expose an interesting connection between Christianity and Celtic paganism, a connection that would become vitally important in the Lazamon's *Brut*. It may seem odd that Lazamon, an English-speaker living in Norman-ruled Britain, might choose to write about *British* kings, but the tangle of identities centered around Lazamon's experience of Britain actually proves beneficial to a project of unification. The *Brut* pushes the idea of "British" further than either of the other texts, so that it becomes an identity that *transcends* historic regional allegiances and encompasses all those who live in Britain. Lazamon's text is far more visceral and bloody than that of Wace and focuses on human emotion and corporeality rather than on the trappings of courtly manner and dress. In the *Brut*, Arthur appears as a British version of Christ, a vengeful savior of the people whose blood and body will provide sustenance for poets and warriors. Yet Lazamon also inserts fairies into the legend, adding an explicitly supernatural detail to a nominally historical and primarily Christian text. These additions locate Arthur in a place between Christianity and paganism, so that Arthur becomes a sort of regional British deity as well as a human king. The idea that Arthur as a character inhabits liminal spaces becomes particularly important for the *Idylls of the King*, the subject of my second and third chapters.

The Idylls of the King was published over the span of sixteen years by Alfred, Lord Tennyson, Queen Victoria's poet laureate. In Tennyson's work, Arthur becomes a figure of unification, a means of healing the internal power struggle quietly (or not so quietly) raging within the British nation during the Victorian era. England and Wales had joined with Scotland in 1707 to become "Great Britain," and in 1800 Great Britain was

joined with Ireland, but legal union did not translate to social unity, and in many ways the different spaces remained culturally distinct. In 1815, the British defeated Napoleon's army at the Battle of Waterloo, and the destruction of Napoleon's empire left Britain without a serious international rival. Britain took on the role of "global policeman," wielding their immense naval power to uphold a century of relative peace, called the Pax Britannica.² The nineteenth century saw dramatic imperial expansion of a number of European states as they began to invade and exploit large portions of Africa and Asia. Britain was at the forefront of this expansion effort, adding approximately ten million square miles of territory and four hundred million people to what was now known as the British Empire.³

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the western world at large also witnessed a dramatic shift in what it meant to be a sovereign state. Benedict Anderson points to the eighteenth century as the "dawn of the age of nationalism" in western Europe.⁴ Religious belief faded in the face of focus on reason in the Enlightenment, necessitating the construction of new beliefs that would lend meaning to "the suffering which belief in part composed."⁵ Anderson continues:

What then was required was a secular transformation of fatality into continuity, contingency into meaning. As we shall see, few things were (are) better suited to this end than an idea of nation. If nation-states are widely conceded to be "new" and "historical," the nations to which they give political expression always loom out of an immemorial past, and, still more important, glide into a limitless future.⁶

² Regardless of the accuracy of "pax," it is worth noting that such a term is directly related to the "Pax Romana" of the first century CE.

³ Timothy H. Parsons, introduction to *(The British Imperial Century, 1815–1914: A World History Perspective)* (Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1999), 3.

⁴ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, revised ed. (New York: Verso, 2006), 11.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 11-12.

That is, religion provides continuity and meaning to life and its losses; religion allows us to believe that we are part of something bigger than ourselves. As religion becomes subordinated to scientific and philosophical efforts, humans require a new way to understand themselves as part of a larger whole: hence, the nation. Yet in the face of dramatic expansion, the boundaries of Britain as a nation appear dangerously in flux. British Victorians—in particular, rich and enfranchised English Victorians—must therefore seek out other national fictions that confirm their superiority over those they deem different, and therefore inferior, to themselves.⁷

Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* presents one such fiction, as it provides these readers with a uniquely British history and affirms British Victorians' connection to a superior, more civilized kingdom of the past. The *Idylls of the King* is necessarily nostalgic because of its focus on Arthur, and nostalgia offers a way for specific demographics to differentiate themselves from others. In a discussion of medieval romance, literary scholar Geraldine Heng explains:

Romances like Tennyson's Arthurian *Idylls of the King* [...] show how a medieval genre embedded within an older empire of culture can be reanimated to produce a flexible structure of ideological support and literary-theoretical justification to satisfy the needs of a new imperium—the British Empire of Victorian England—that would inherit the mantle of older civilizational culture through appropriable variables of literature.⁸

⁷ Linda K. Hughes frames this desire as desire for a national epic along the lines of the *Aeneid*. She writes: “growing pride in a British empire that seemed to rival Augustan Rome fueled desire for a Victorian epic that would confirm the cultural prestige of Victoria's realm.” The *Idylls* seemed perfectly suited to this purpose, and “After 1869, Tennyson took comparisons of the *Idylls* to classical epic seriously enough to write three more episodes and split ‘Geraint and Enid’ in two so as to have the epic's requisite ‘twelve books.’” (Hughes, *The Cambridge Introduction to Victorian Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 61-2). For further discussion of the *Idylls* as an epic, see Robert Pattison, “The Sources of Tennyson's Idyll” in *Tennyson and Tradition* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979).

⁸ Geraldine Heng, *Empire of Magic: Medieval Romance and the Politics of Cultural Fantasy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 11.

The *Idylls of the King* confirms the superiority of the British over other nations *and* their colonies, thus legitimating Britain's claim over its own colonies. Britain's connection to an older, seemingly more refined culture confirms its status as a civilizing force on "uncivilized" spaces and creates a cohesive, continuous British identity that excludes "lesser" inhabitants of the empire.

An analysis of the *Idylls* reveals two main themes that speak to two different methods of creating and maintaining a unified British national identity: the first, defining 'Britain,' both the physical space and the "imagined community," per Anderson, as a cohesive, insular unit; the second, defining "British" against some cultural Other. The former is done on the social level by emphasizing a nebulous "British" mythos surrounding King Arthur and the land over which he presides, and in a more material (though still mythic and cultural) sense by focusing on water, the substance that simultaneously confirms British isolation and British dominance over other spaces. Arthur is inextricably connected to the physical space of Great Britain, and in the *Idylls* this connection becomes clearest through the mythos cultivated around the king even within the poems and through the importance of water as a symbolic force. The latter—the creation of divisions—is done through emphasizing differences in religion, race, and class between British Victorians (especially politically active, enfranchised British Victorians) and their counterparts on the continent, in the colonies, or even in the slums of their own cities. As an explicitly *political* concept, "British" identity could be limited to specific groups within Britain without negatively impacting the goal of ideological unity.

For medieval authors, Arthur's fall is a function of the cyclical nature of a

kingdom's success and failure, which mirrors the rise and fall of Britain's various tribal regimes, from the native Britons to the Anglo-Saxons to the Normans in a short few centuries. Tennyson's Arthur is necessarily charged with more symbolic import, given the layers of meaning the legendary king accrues over the centuries between *Historia Regum Britanniae* and *The Idylls of the King*. Yet, as Arthur states in both "The Coming" and "The Passing of Arthur," the theme remains that "The old order changeth, yielding place to new" (CA 508, PA 408), reemphasizing the circularity birth and death or empire.⁹ Of course, *The Idylls of the King* acts also as a cautionary tale against the factors that lead to such death, as do, to an extent, the medieval texts. I will not attempt to analyze the wide variety of such factors but rather will focus on the unifying force Arthur wields at the beginning of his reign, often up to the point of Mordred's betrayal. It is this push toward unification that makes Arthur such a potent figure, and texts produced at moments where Britain seems dispossessed of a sense of unification highlight the efficacy of Arthur as a mechanism of such unification.

⁹ Because of their frequency, citations for lines from the *Idylls of the King* will appear as short parentheticals with an abbreviation in the place of the idyll title followed by the line number (a more universal referent than page number) within that idyll. Acronyms will appear as follows:

CA	"The Coming of Arthur"
GL	"Gareth and Lynette"
LT	"The Last Tournament"
PA	"The Passing of Arthur"

All quotations are drawn from the Penguin edition (2004), ed. J. Gray.

Chapter 1 Methods of Cohesion in Twelfth Century Texts

Tennyson's construction of Arthur as a semi-mythic being relies on a rich literary history. A brief survey of Arthur's presence in pre-twelfth century literature reveals that Arthur was endued with a similar (though not identical) aura of otherworldliness for medieval readers. Though sparse, references to Arthur in the earliest historical documents available reveal that he exists already as a mythic, pseudo-historical figure in the twelfth century, a denizen of cultural memory rather than a living present. The veracity of Arthur's potential historical existence is not of interest to this work; rather, it is the idea of Arthur that matters alongside the ways in which various authors wield this idea.

The name *Arthur* first appears in the seventh century *Y Gododdin*, a collection of Welsh elegies ascribed to the poet Aneirin, a stanza of which details the feats of the hero Gwawrddur, who, though great, cannot compare to Arthur. The convenience of the end rhyme does not diminish the importance of the name, as it establishes that Arthur at least existed as a heroic referent, a figure that the *Y Gododdin*'s audience would have known well enough to understand the comparison.¹⁰ Arthur's name is first attached to actual deeds in the 830 work *Historia Brittonum*, which recounts twelve campaigns in which Arthur acted as the *dux-bellorum*, "battle-leader."¹¹ The *Historia Brittonum*, like many similar texts, had a particularly nationalist agenda: the work was commissioned by the monarch Merfyn as a record that would "represent the Welsh as the natural and rightful

¹⁰ There are other possible explanations for the name: it could be a later addition to the text or reference to some other heroic Arthur, but "later" here is relative, and the growing legend of a famed King Arthur would undoubtedly have subsumed any other Arthur existing around the same time and place. The key point is that there exists an Arthur in the British literary landscape who already seems to belong to some psychic space outside of the immediate context.

¹¹ Judith Weiss, trans., introduction to *Wace's Roman de Brut: A History of the British* (Exeter, UK: University of Exeter Press, 1999), xv.

owners of all Britain” who had lost control of the island through the Anglo-Saxons’ unbeatable numbers rather than through any fault of their own.¹² The text furthermore provided its audience with a foundation myth that traced the Britons back to Troy through Britto (Brutus), a descendant of Aeneas. Theoretically, such a lineage could either unite the various tribes of Britain through the assertion that all were descended from the Trojans or divide them, depending on the number of peoples included in this gesture. Furthermore, the invocation of Troy suggests the possibility of expansion: reference to such a vast, if ended, empire suggests that a single tribe or the Britons as a whole might grow their influence to reach the status of the Trojan empire before its fall.¹³

The first text to address Arthur’s exploits in a more than cursory manner is the *Historia Regum Britanniae* (c. 1136). Its author, Geoffrey of Monmouth (c. 1100-1155), was a cleric and scholar born around a century after the Norman Conquest. Immensely popular, the *Historia Regum Britanniae* spans nearly two millennia of British history, from the mythic colonization of Albion (Britain) by Aeneas’s descendant, Brutus, to the reign of Cadwallader, the last British king before the Anglo-Saxon takeover. It draws extensively from the *Historia Brittonum* and other similar texts but adds a significant amount of invented detail, so that it acts as a relatively linear chronicle rather than a compendium of events.

The early twelfth century was a culturally as well as politically turbulent time: the French-speaking Normans had conquered the Germanic Anglo-Saxons in 1066, but Britain was far from homogenous, made up, as it was, of a combination of Norman,

¹² Ronald Hutton, “The Early Arthur” in *The Cambridge Companion to the Arthurian Legend*, ed. Elizabeth Archibald and Ad Putter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 21.

¹³ Weiss, introduction, xv.

Anglo-Saxon, and British (Welsh and Cornish) peoples, all of whom retained remnants of their original cultures despite the Norman influence.¹⁴ Geoffrey himself may or may not have been Welsh, but he was certainly at least fluent in Breton and Norman French, and learned Latin through his ecclesiastical education.¹⁵ In general, language is the most significant marker of conquest and tribal distinction in the twelfth century texts: Wace's Old Norman incarnation of Geoffrey's tale appeals to the recently victorious Norman aristocracy, while the clerk Lazamon's Anglo-Saxon version assumes a lower class audience of the conquered. Even the Latin of Geoffrey's work has specific implications, for although Latin at this point was aligned more closely with scholarly interests than with the Roman empire, we cannot ignore its connection to the former colonizing power and its connotations of class status. Lazamon's perspective is particularly interesting given the status of the Anglo-Saxons as both conqueror (of the Welsh) and conquered (by the Normans), and his addition of the supernatural element of fairies looms large in Tennyson's work.

The immediate political climate in which Geoffrey wrote was one of intense instability due to issues of succession. King Henry I died in 1135, leaving his daughter Matilda as his named heir, but his nephew, Stephen of Blois, seized the throne. The *Historia Regum Britanniae* was most likely written immediately after the old king's death, at a time when the Anglo-Norman aristocracy was divided between the two royal candidates. Geoffrey's disproportionate focus on Arthur, whose reign is marred by anxiety over succession and childlessness, in part serves as a warning of the dangers of

¹⁴ Michael Faletra, ed. and trans., introduction to *The History of the Kings of Britain* (Peterborough, Ont.: Broadview, 2008), 9.

¹⁵ Faletra, introduction, 10.

internal strife, a reminder to both the monarchy and the aristocracy that they must preserve the realm at all costs.¹⁶ The dispute was dissolved approximately twenty years later when Matilda's son, the Duke of Anjou and Normandy, ascended to the throne in 1154 as King Henry II.

Much of the criticism surrounding the *Historia Regum Britanniae* concerns the text's historicity and genre. Is it, as the title suggests, a true history of the British? According to most historians and most historians, the answer is decidedly "no," although the *Historia* still offers an interesting example of a shift in historiographic practices following the Norman conquest. While early Christian historical writing focused on God as the supreme guiding force in a historical narrative, Anglo-Norman historians displayed "an interest in new, wider realms of human experience and possibilities," and in human agency rather than in the role of God.¹⁷ This new vision of the way history could be written, combined with a renewed fascination with the Classical in the twelfth century, contributed to the largely secular path of history in the *Historia*. While Christianity is represented as the "right" religion, the Christian god is no longer the dominant driving force of the narrative. Instead there appears to be a sort of narrative consciousness (that may be called, perhaps, the "historian") that drives the plot.¹⁸ Such a framework allows this secularized narrator to structure the narrative around specific guiding principles outside of Christianity. In Geoffrey's *Historia*, the island of Britain acts as one of these

¹⁶ Faletra, introduction, 13.

¹⁷ Robert W. Hanning, *The Vision of History in Early Britain* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1966), 130. For more on this new historiography see Hanning, *The Vision of History in Early Britain*, 123-38.

¹⁸ The idea of a secularized "historian" as the narrative consciousness is inspired by Hanning's more complex proposal that Geoffrey may conceptualize Merlin as some amalgamation of the author/historian and the tides of history itself (Hanning, *The Vision of History in Early Britain*, 154).

guiding principles, as every king is evaluated in terms of his relationship with the physical space of the island as well as with the people that occupy it. Thus, while Christianity remains an important aspect of leadership, the island supplants God as an arbiter of royal virtue.

Fittingly, then, the text begins with the straightforward declaration: “Brittania insularum optima” [Britain is the best of isles], thus establishing the physical limits of the narrative and focusing attention on the island of Britain itself rather than on any given individual or even set of inhabitants.¹⁹ As the passage continues, Geoffrey introduces the five different peoples who have ruled the island: the Normans, the Britons, the Saxons, the Picts, and the Scots. According to the historical record, such designations would have referred to the inhabitants around the modern-day spaces of Northern France, England, Denmark and Germany, Scotland, and Ireland, respectively. The multiplicity of these resident groups underscores Geoffrey’s focus on the physical presence of the island, the borders of which are, for all intents and purposes, constant.

The passage continues: “Of these, Britons first settled the island from sea to sea, until divine vengeance, on account of their overweening pride, sent the Picts and Saxons to drive them out.”²⁰ While the island itself possesses material permanence, group identity seems ephemeral: power changes hands quickly, from the native Britons to the Picts in the north and the Saxons in the east, over the North Sea. The description of Britain as an island and reference to settlement from “sea to sea” emphasizes Britain’s

¹⁹ Geoffrey of Monmouth. *Historia Regum Britannie*, ed. Neil Wright. (Dover, N.H.: D. S. Brewer, 1985), translated by Michael Faletra as *The History of the Kings of Britain* (Peterborough, Ont.: Broadview, 2008); see Wright p.2 for Latin text, Faletra 43 for translation.

²⁰ “Ex quibus Britones olim ante ceteros a mari usque ad mare insederunt donec ultione diuina propter ipsorum superueniente superbiam Pictis et Saxonibus cesserunt” (Wright 2, Faletra 43).

insularity; while the “borders” of a people are malleable and permeable, such borders may or may not match up with the fixed borders of the physical space of the island. The reference to “divine vengeance” recalls to the role of (divine) pride and divine vengeance in the fall of Troy links the Anglo-Saxon takeover to divine justice. The certainty of these statements and the invocation of religion represent such shifts in power as inevitable and therefore indisputable.²¹

Geoffrey explicitly links the founding of Britain with the fall of Troy, as if to highlight the importance of these shifts in power and geographically relocate such shifts from the Mediterranean to within the physical boundaries of Britain. According to the narrative, Brutus, the great-grandson of Aeneas, has been exiled from Italy for accidental patricide. He amasses a following of fellow Trojan exiles and together they settle Britain, at that point uninhabited except for a few giants. Reference to giants emphasizes Britain’s place on the fringes of society: medieval maps were often constructed so that the point of highest civilization (usually Jerusalem) was at the center and the wild and monstrous at the edges. Britain was almost invariably placed in this monstrous space at the edge of the known world. Although most of Britain was under Roman control for centuries, the *Historia Regum Britanniae* largely ignores the Roman occupation and represents Britain’s growth as parallel to (if frequently entangled with) that of the Roman empire.

It is important here to understand the distinction between the British perception of Roman and Trojan conquest. Geoffrey traces British lineage back to Troy, and later

²¹ The Britons, Picts, and Saxons likely were not as clearly differentiated as Geoffrey represents them to be. Among these tribal societies, loyalty to kin group would have been far more important than loyalty to some overarching leader or to an ethnically homogenous community. Thus Geoffrey’s assertion that the Picts and Saxons “drove the Britons out” is perhaps true in terms of leadership but would have meant little to individual inhabitants.

Arthur will wield this lineage against the Lords of Rome who ask him to pay tribute. Troy is an older empire that belongs to legend, while Rome, at least in Geoffrey's narrative, poses an external threat. This distinction becomes difficult to uphold, however, in any more than name. Rome, more so than Troy, represents both a model of Britain's aspirations of empire and a key Christianizing influence. By representing the island of Britain as the true heir to the power held by the Trojan empire, Geoffrey both endues the island itself with inherent political power and legitimates the extension of the island's symbolic borders far outside its physical borders to all of the provinces of the former Trojan empire. That the physical space of the island holds power (rather than single group within that space) allows for transfers of power without admitting weakness; regardless of whether Britons, Saxons, or Normans control the space, *Britain* remains strong, so long as the people within it remain united.

The problems that plague Arthur's predecessors are all linked to internal strife, beginning with the death of Arthur's grandfather, Constantine II.²² To establish context: Britain is beset with pagans, so the King of Brittany sends his brother, Constantine II, to liberate the country and regain the crown for the Christian Britons. He does so successfully, but ten years later a Pict in his service stabs him to death.²³ The internal

²² It is worth noting that although this Constantine II evidently has no connection to the historical Roman emperor of the same name, the Constantine I in the *Historia* can actually be identified with Constantine the Great (c. 272-337), the first Roman emperor to convert to Christianity

²³ The Picts, a perennial threat from Northern Britain, appear in dichotomous relation to the Romans. Though both threaten British liberty, Picts and Romans stand on opposite sides of such binaries as pagan/Christian (uncivilized/civilized) and tribe/empire. Britain, even in Geoffrey's day, exists in the strange, liminal space within these binaries: it is a nominally Christian space that idealizes its mortal monarchs in folklore and chronicle (of which Arthur might be an obvious example) to a potentially heretical extent, a Roman conquest built on tribal loyalty that nevertheless harbors its own imperialist ambitions. The Britons differentiate themselves from both Picts and Romans yet seem to share crucial characteristics with each identity. Indeed, the Britons might be characterized as a midpoint between the two temporally as well as ideologically, though this statement requires that we acknowledge the Britons as having been a tribal, pagan

origins of Constantine II's murder foreshadow the internal chaos that will doom Arthur's reign, while the murder itself engenders a crisis of lost leadership that will not fully be resolved until Arthur reigns.

Unrest follows Constantine II's death, a struggle over succession similar to that which followed the death of King Henry I in 1135. The eldest of Constantine II's three sons is a monk and therefore ineligible for the throne, so the country is divided between the two younger brothers: Aurelius Ambrosius and Uther Pendragon, King Arthur's father.²⁴ Both of these younger sons seem etymologically perfectly suited to the throne. Aurelius Ambrosius is clearly linked with the apparently historical Roman hero, Ambrosius Aurelianus, though his name likely also has roots in *aurum*, the Latin word for gold, and *ambrosius*, meaning immortal or divine. Pendragon, conversely, is associated with the Welsh.²⁵ In Merlin's prophecies, Britain is symbolized by a Red Dragon that will eventually defeat the White Dragon of the Saxons, thus Uther's surname, "chief dragon," foreshadows his eventual kingship of the Britons and defeat of the Saxons. Yet the country seems unable to choose between the two, a perhaps fitting dilemma given Britain's liminal position between Roman and native tribal identities.

In the midst of this crisis, Vortigern arrives to convince the eldest son, Constans, to renege on his monastic vows and take the throne, then has Constans killed. The two

society. Given the origin myth of Brutus, Geoffrey might not be ready to do that. Perhaps it is sufficient to clarify that by this time (i.e. when Geoffrey's book is produced), the Picts were considered "backwards" or "other." Of course, by the nineteenth century Britain no longer grapples with the looming shadow of the Roman empire but in some sense has grown to *become* the Roman empire.

²⁴ Geoffrey of Monmouth, *Historia*: Faletra 107, 116, 151.

²⁵ "Pendragon" in *The Oxford Companion to English Literature*, ed. Dinah Birch (Oxford University Press, 2009).

younger sons, fearing for their lives, flee to Brittany, on the continent, and Vortigern treacherously crowns himself. He is a terrible leader whose actions persistently contribute to the dissolution and weakening of the country he is meant to protect. In part, he displays his dreadful leadership by surrounding himself with pagan groups, including the Picts, who have already murdered Constans and Constantine II, and the Saxons, whom Vortigern invites into Britain and his bed after becoming king. This invitation renders the boundaries of the island permeable, as heathen invaders enter the space of Britain in a physical sense. Soon, a number of Saxons occupy positions of power in Vortigern's court, thus entering the heart of Britain in an ideological sense as well. Permeable boundaries are vulnerable to external attack and influence, and the Saxons, once allowed into the court, utterly corrupt Vortigern's loyalties to his lords, his people, and his god.

Geoffrey emphasizes Vortigern's pagan leanings, eliding the designation of *not British* with *not Christian*. The Picts' and Saxons' bloody-minded brutality and anti-British sentiment derives as much from their lack of Christianity as their alien origins. Vortigern, by association, becomes marked as foreign, heathen, and (whether the relationship is causal or correlative) morally corrupt. His betrayal of British and Christian values is furthermore a betrayal of the British people, for he has allowed harm to befall the very people he is sworn, as king, to protect. Vortigern's reign creates a period of turmoil to which Arthur will bring order; his utter failure to lead brings Britain to the depths of darkness, so that Arthur's kingship appears as the coming of the dawn to a starless night.²⁶

²⁶ Indeed, Tennyson capitalizes on the metaphor of Arthur as the sun and frames his rise and fall as the cycle of the seasons, as Britain emerges from (and eventually returns to) the darkness of a morally dead winter. In the *Idylls*, Vortigern as a character becomes dispersed into "many a petty king" before Arthur who "wasted the land" alongside "the heathen host" from overseas, while the

Just as Constantine II was betrayed by a Pict in his service, Vortigern is eventually betrayed by his Saxon companions, who slaughter hundreds of Britons at a peace negotiation. Such an act displays the Saxons' fundamental wickedness and dishonesty, as violence at a *peace* negotiation goes against all rules of war. Fearing for his life, Vortigern surrenders the kingdom to the Saxons in exchange for his life, and the Saxons “[fall] upon the native Britons everywhere like wolves upon sheep whom the shepherd has deserted.”²⁷ The reference to “shepherd” again connects Vortigern’s inadequacy to his lack of Christianity; he has rejected the Lord, his own Shepherd, and in turn God has withdrawn any divine favor for Vortigern along with his protection of the British people.²⁸ On a more mortal level, Vortigern has failed in his duty to act as a shepherd to the people, guiding them and securing the boundaries between the people and the wild predators, and has instead allowed metaphorical wolves to run rampant among their communities. Only the coming of Arthur will fully reinstate these boundaries, and until then the Saxon force remains an internally-located threat.

The return of Constantine’s two younger sons from Brittany in the wake of Vortigern’s failure anticipates Arthur’s ascension to the throne and confirms the inevitability of future British sovereignty. Geoffrey characterizes Aurelius Ambrosius, the older of the two, as an ideal model of kingship: “he [is] generous in dealing out gifts,

bloody anarchy of his reign becomes, simply, a growing wilderness “Wherein the beast”—both animal and human—“was ever more and more” (CA 5-11). The characterization of Britain under Vortigern (or similar kings) as wilderness is fitting, as the peoples with whom he has allied himself are, first and foremost, *wild*—uncontrolled and unpredictable.

²⁷ “Inuadebant undique viues quemadmodum lupi oues quas pastores deseruerunt” (Geoffrey of Monmouth, *Historia*: Wright 71, Faletta 127).

²⁸ See Psalm 23:1.

diligent in his devotion to God, and modest in all endeavors.”²⁹ Most importantly, he is known across Britain for his strength and martial prowess, so much so that the Saxons retreat from fear before he even arrives in Britain. Aurelius’s status as a legendary figure even in his own time implicitly justifies his inclusion in Geoffrey’s chronicle and prepares the reader for the superlatives that will surround Arthur, who will appear as Aurelius writ large.

Aurelius’s combat skills and military leadership directly contrast with Vortigern’s cowardice, and he and his soldiers defeat the Saxon invaders after vengefully burning Vortigern’s castle down with the ex-king inside. Vortigern’s death by fire invokes the Christian Hell and acts as a ritualistic purification of the land from his influence, yet the attempted purification is unsuccessful: the Saxons are not fully eradicated, and a Saxon soon poisons Aurelius. The king’s death affirms that the boundaries are still broken, as the Saxons remain on the island and retain access to the court. Uther reigns after Aurelius, but he too is poisoned by the Saxons.³⁰ Poison is an *internal* killer, and Aurelius and Uther die because they are incapable of purging foreigners from the body politic of the kingdom.

Yet even before Uther’s death, the narrative’s focus is Arthur, the king who will truly succeed in eradicating the heathens and renewing Britain’s borders. As if to mark the transition from Aurelius’s (Roman) to Uther’s (Welsh) sovereignty, a light shaped like a dragon with beams emanating from its mouth appears in the sky at the moment of

²⁹ “largus in dandies, sedulous in diuinis obsequiis, modestus in cunctis et super omnia mendatium uitans, fortis pede, fortiori equo, et ad regendum exercitum doctus” (Geoffrey of Monmouth, *Historia*: Wright 85, Faletta 145).

³⁰ Tennyson ignores the majority of Aurelius’s and Uther’s reigns, but the sparse few lines dedicated to their efforts underscore their inability to completely eradicate the Saxon menace.

Aurelius's death. Merlin interprets the dragon as Uther, while the two beams emanating from it symbolize Uther's future progeny, including a son (that is, Arthur) who will be "a most powerful man, whose might shall hold sway over all the lands he will protect," so Uther's reign is, from its very nascence, overshadowed by his son's future exploits.³¹ Arthur's defining characteristics in this prophecy are his "might" and ability to protect his people, recalling the triumphant martial victories won by Uther and Aurelius. Arthur, however, will succeed where both Uther and Aurelius have failed: like them, he will exercise his might against the Saxons, but unlike his immediate predecessors, Arthur will eliminate the Saxon threat from within his kingdom's borders. Indeed, he will extend these impermeable boundaries beyond the island and into the rest of the world, lending his protection and influence to vast swathes of land beyond the seas that enclose Britain itself.

Arthur's own conception anticipates his future successes: in the *Historia Regum Britanniae*, King Uther wins the wife of the Duke of Cornwall in battle and begets Arthur upon her. Thus the processes of invasion and occupation become inextricable from the circumstances of Arthur's own biological beginnings, and Arthur's conception acts as a clear allegory of conquest. The tale begins at court: Uther has summoned all of his lords, including Gorlois, to a feast to celebrate a victory over the Saxons. Uther desires Gorlois's wife, Igera, as soon as he sees her and makes no attempt to hide his lust. Gorlois, angered by Uther's overt disrespect for marital borders, quits the court for Cornwall without taking his leave, thus greatly offending Uther. Gorlois refuses to return to the court, and in retaliation Uther brings an army against Cornwall. The feast, a

³¹ "potentissimum cuius potestas omnia regna que proteget habebit" (Geoffrey of Monmouth, *Historia*: Wright 94, Faletra 155).

celebration of British victory over the Saxons (and, implicitly, temporary peace from their attacks), ironically becomes an occasion for strife and violence. Uther's troops besiege the castle of Tintagel, but Uther's desire for Igerna—like, perhaps, a greedy king's desire for new territory—is so strong that he cannot wait for his impending victory and seeks out Merlin's help in sneaking into the castle of Tintagel, where Igerna has been safely stowed away.

Merlin disguises Uther as Gorlois so that he may easily enter the castle to make love to the unsuspecting woman, and “That very night they conceived Arthur, that renowned man who in later days won great repute for his extraordinary prowess.”³² Even at the scene of Uther's triumph the narrative remains focused on Arthur and the future. Where Arthur affirms the unity of the British, and turns his military strength outward, Uther turns his military strength inward and overthrows a part of his realm that already belongs to him, as far away from the actually troublesome threat of the Saxons as geographically possible, all for lust. Though Uther is a much better king than Vortigern, this endeavor highlights a major flaw that Arthur will correct. In Geoffrey's chronicle, martial strength is crucial for good leadership, yet Uther lacks the sense of community and loyalty required to properly deploy this strength. Arthur's decisions are always made for the good of his people; his military efforts are always (until the very end) focused outward, bent toward either defending or expanding his realm; he controls both his literal body (as Uther apparently cannot) and his body politic.

Arthur's much-anticipated reign begins at Uther's death. In Geoffrey, the transfer of power is swift and straightforward: when Uther dies, community leaders from across

³² “Conceptit quoque eadam nocte celiberrum uirum illum Arturum qui postmodum ut celebris foret mira probitate promeruit” (Geoffrey of Monmouth, *Historia*: Wright 98, Faletra 159).

Britain petition the archbishop of Caerleon in Wales to consecrate Arthur with all due haste so that he may ascend to the kingship before the Saxons return to wreak havoc on the land.³³ Though only fifteen, his youth matters little in the face of his intrinsic kingly qualities: “His innate goodness made him exhibit such grace that he was beloved by almost all the people.”³⁴ His generosity exemplifies this grace, and when crowned he gives gifts to everyone, in accordance with ancient traditions.

During this gift-giving ceremony, so many soldiers come to him for gifts that he runs out, so he decides to attack the Saxon camp in order to gain more riches to give to his men. Geoffrey adds that: “Justice spurred him on as well, since by right of his inheritance he ought to have had control over the entire island.”³⁵ Thus conquest becomes inextricable from “kingly” graces, like generosity and justice. Furthermore, Arthur is motivated by the idea that he has a right to the *entire* island, and he bends his energy entirely toward regaining the island and incorporating it into a single kingdom.

Arthur subdues the Saxons to such an extent that they begin to pay tribute to him. At this point in the *Historia*, the narrative is essentially supplanted by a catalogue of Arthur’s military successes. He subjugates kingdom after kingdom, bringing them all under British sovereignty, thus extending the bounds of his kingdom to include tributary kingdoms across Europe. Britain becomes a center of sophistication, filled with powerful

³³ In later sources, like Malory’s *Morte Darthur*, the realm descends into chaos after Uther’s death until Arthur, at this point a toddler, is old enough to lead. The period between the death of one king and the rise of another offers ample time for conflict to brew over who should reign after Uther. In the *Idylls*, Arthur is born *after* Uther’s death, allowing for even more time to pass before he rescues the nation from pagans and chaos.

³⁴ “In quo tantam gratiam innata bonitas prestiterat ut a cunctis fere populis amaretur” (Geoffrey of Monmouth, *Historia*: Wright 101, Faletta 163).

³⁵ “Commonebat etiam id rectitude, cum totius insule monarchium deuerat hereditario iure obtinere” (ibid.).

warriors and beautiful women, a cultural hub to rival the Roman empire. Eventually, the Lords of Rome appear in Arthur's court to exact tribute, threatening to invade Britain if he refuses. Arthur, confident in the might of his military and the strength of his empire rejects this reprimand and claims that the Britons have the right to exact tribute from *Rome*. Regardless of the historical legitimacy, the mere fact that Arthur has the audacity (and, implicitly, the resources) to make such an assertion speaks to the great power of Arthur's kingdom.

Thus ensues a grand battle between the Romans and Britons, which the latter, it is intimated, would have won were it not for Mordred's treachery: Mordred, Arthur's nephew, has usurped the British throne and taken Arthur's wife Guinevere for his queen. Arthur cancels his assault on the Roman emperor and returns to Britain, where Mordred has amassed a great army of Saxons to meet Arthur and the Britons. Mordred's alliance with the Britons' age-old enemy displays his deadly disregard for marital and tribal boundaries and for the bonds of blood and nation. He has undone Arthur's first and perhaps greatest achievement: the removal of the Saxon presence in Britain. Mordred simultaneously defies the sacred bond of the uncle/nephew relationship and the basic dictates of kingship, as he allies himself with the Saxons, the mortal enemy of both Arthur and the kingdom at large. Later accounts heighten the drama of Arthur's final battle by framing it around the dualistic battle between Mordred and Arthur, in which each dies by the other's hand. The *Historia* instead downplays Mordred's death; he is one of the many thousands who die when the two armies first meet, not worth the glory of a death in battle. By contrast, Arthur's mortal wound merits extended attention. He does

not die but is instead spirited away to the Isle of Avalon so that his wounds may be healed, and the crown passes his cousin, another Constantine.

The Arthurian section of the *Historia* ends abruptly here, leaving the reader with specific spatial and temporal coordinates (Cornwall, by the river Camlann; Anno Domini 542) but without any ideological bearings. Though halted before reaching Rome, Arthur has still accumulated a vast empire of tributaries, but their allegiance to Britain seems to rapidly evaporate on Arthur's death. A series of mildly successful kings follow until the Britons descend again into chaos and the Saxons finally overpower the island and become its leaders. Arthur's significance derives not only from the vast territory he amasses but also from his position as the *last* great British king. He is born in scandal and his death is shrouded in mystery. Yet he succeeds in uniting the Britons, securing the boundaries of their island, and finally, leading them on the greatest campaign in the history of the British people. Even Arthur's failures offer lessons in the importance of unity: it is clear that his reign failed because of internal dissent, despite his ability to keep the Saxons at bay.

What, then, are the implications of this perpetual push toward unity for Geoffrey's Britain, which is no longer under control of Romans, Britons, or even Saxons, but Normans? Though mentioned in the narrative, the Normans never seem to come up as a powerful force until the British have fully fallen into ruin. The message may be that *Britons* were never meant to rule the island in perpetuity, while their successes and failures do offer models and cautionary tales for Norman leaders. Framing the Saxons as pagan interlopers substantiates Norman claim to the throne as well, vilifying the previous

leaders while glorifying the ancient feats of native British heroes and affirming Norman connection to these heroes.

In the early 1150s, ten to fifteen years after Geoffrey of Monmouth published his *Historia*, a Jersey-born author named Wace (c. 1100-1175) produced a heavily revised “translation” of Geoffrey’s text in rhymed couplets of Anglo-Norman French. At the time, the island of Jersey was a part of the Duchy of Normandy, and Wace wrote mainly for the court of Eleanor of Aquitaine, queen consort to Henry II. Many of Wace’s additions to the story reflect his own interests, but more often his embellishments appear to reflect the interests of his audience, which had shifted from Geoffrey’s ecclesiastically educated male reader to the more feminine literati in Eleanor’s court. Throughout, Wace minimizes the import of battles and emphasizes instead episodes displaying courtesy and romance, dwelling on court-based intrigue rather than the mechanics of conquest. Lurid descriptions of clothing styles and battlefields alike abound, as though catering to an audience primarily composed of courtiers.

Where Geoffrey’s *Historia* begins with a description of the Isle of Britain, foregrounding the land and its people as a whole rather than as individuals, Wace emphasizes individuals and interpersonal relationships. His *Roman de Brut* begins: “Whoever wishes to hear and to know about the successive kings and their heirs who once upon a time were the rulers of England...Master Wace has translated it and tells it truthfully.”³⁶ His text is, from the start, focused on the court and its inhabitants, first

³⁶ Ki vult oïr e vult saveir
De rei en rei e d’eir en eir
Ki cil furent e dunt il vindrent
Ki Engleterre primes tindrent,
[...]
Maistre Wace l’ad translaté

implicitly in his identification of the aristocratic audience *ki vult oïr*, and then in the progression of royalty, the kings and heirs, whose exploits and intrigues Wace promises to reveal.

Despite Wace's focus on the power of individual kings rather than Britain itself, he introduces a crucial element to tale in the form of the round table. Wace's treatment of the round table and his often faithful reproduction of Geoffrey's text reveal political undertones in an often superficial-seeming text. The late French medievalist Rupert T. Pickens characterized the *Brut* as a "transitional text, one which is rooted in the two worlds of epic and romance" with a narrative built on "tensions between refined courtesy...and warfare and statecraft."³⁷ Though often seemingly frivolous, courtesy and romance were deadly serious and deeply political issues, especially given the importance of marriage as a diplomatic tool. The *Brut* overlays such values atop a Geoffrey's core narrative of conquest and military action.³⁸

Beyond these embellishments, the *Roman de Brut* essentially tells the same story as the *Historia Regum Britanniae*. Vortigern brings the country to ruin because he refuses to disentangle himself from the Saxons: "The king, out of love for his wife, kept the Saxons close to him and did not want to forsake them."³⁹ Uther and Aurelius attempt to

Ki en conte la verité.

(Wace, *Roman de Brut: A History of the British*, trans. Judith Weiss (Exeter, UK: University of Exeter Press, 1999), lines 1-4, 7-8; p. 3).

³⁷ Rupert T. Pickens, "Arthur's Channel Crossing," *Arthuriana* 7, no. 3 (1997): 4.

³⁸ In fact, some sections of the *Brut* actually place greater stress on conquest than the *Historia* does: although the text is titled *Roman de Brut*—roughly, "story of Britain"—Wace refers to the land as *Engleterre*, England. Perhaps reference to "England" was preferable in a Norman court as it draws attention to Norman conquest of the Anglo-Saxons rather than potential rebellion from discontented Britons.

³⁹ "Li reis, pur amur sa muillier, / Se tint a els, nes vult laisser" (Wace trans. Weiss, *Roman de Brut*, 7083-84; 179).

reclaim the country, but ultimately fail to expel the Saxons entirely. Finally, Arthur restores balance to the kingdom and safety to the people by entirely ridding the island of the Saxon threat.⁴⁰ A great knight already, the fifteen-year-old Arthur quickly sets himself against the pagan interlopers: “Arthur had not long been king when, of his own free will, he swore an oath that as long as the Saxons were in the land they would have no peace.”⁴¹ Arthur possesses an inborn desire to rid the land of Saxons at any cost, a desire linked both to his sense of duty to the people and, perhaps more pressingly, his determination to avenge Uther and Aurelius.

Wace also adds the first recorded description of the Round Table, a symbol that quickly became synonymous with Arthur’s court. Though Wace focuses less on the importance of the physical space of Britain than Geoffrey does, the addition of the Round Table highlights a different but no less important concept of unity, focused more on equality and connection between lords than the union of people and land that undergirds

⁴⁰ Wace’s description of the king expands on Geoffrey’s dramatically, endowing Arthur with not only virtue and strength but also with an appreciation for the arts and a lust for fame:

Mult ama preis, mult ama gloire,
 Mult volt ses faiz mettre en memoire,
 Servir se fist curteisement
 Si se cuntint mult noblement.

[He greatly loved renown and glory, he greatly wished his deeds to be remembered. He behaved most nobly and saw to it that he was served with courtesy.] (Wace trans. Weiss, *Roman de Brut*, 9025-28; 227)

Arthur’s desire to be remembered is connected with the *curteisie* of his servants, among whom would presumably have been bards, so that one of Arthur’s qualities becomes his capacity for patronage. This indirectly reflects well on Wace’s real-life patron, the queen. Kingship is no longer simply a matter of might and generosity, but now includes a sense of decorum specific to the court, and this emphasis on *curteisie* would reappear in full force in the later romances of Chrétien de Troyes and Marie de France.

⁴¹ Quant Artur fu reis nuvelment,
 De sun gré fist un serement
 Que ja Saisne pais nen avrunt
 Tant cum el regne od li serunt.
 (Wace trans. Weiss, *Roman de Brut*, 9033-36; 227).

the narrative of the *Historia*. In fact, Arthur commissions the Round Table specifically to reduce conflict between his lords. Each of Arthur's barons considers himself superior to the others, but at the Round Table they sit "all equal, all leaders; they were placed equally round the table and equally served."⁴² Emphasis on equality highlights the resolution of this conflict, bringing the lords together in a common space for a common cause.

Wace further lends the table's presence historical relevance by referring to it as the Round Table "about which the British tell many a tale," although it appears nowhere in his source material.⁴³ Twentieth century Arthurian scholar Richard Sherman Loomis suggests that the addition of the Round Table was likely inspired by the belief that the table at the Last Supper was round, common at the time, though he also adds that the concept itself probably originated from "a Celtic tradition of chiefs or kings seated at banquets with twelve warriors in a circle around them."⁴⁴ The Round Table thus reflects Christian beliefs while retaining a connection to myths associated with the island and its early inhabitants.

At a superficial level the apparent correlation of Arthur's Round Table with that of Last Supper cements Arthur's status as a legitimate, Christian leader; yet the specific identification of Arthur with Christ, along with the clarifier "about which the British tell many a tale," might, on another level, allude to the British belief that Arthur, like Christ, will rise again. Medievalist Patricia Ingham refers to this duality of King Arthur as both

⁴² Tuit chevalment e tuit egal
A la table egalment seeient
E egalment servi esteient
(Wace trans. Weiss, *Roman de Brut*, 9754-56; 245).

⁴³ Wace trans. Weiss, *Roman de Brut*, 245.

⁴⁴ Roger Sherman Loomis, *The Development of Arthurian Romance* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2000), 40.

past and future as an example “sovereign sempiternity,” a concept that “stabilizes the sovereign’s right to rule by imagining his place in an unbroken train of rulers stretching out of a distant [and here, specifically British] past.”⁴⁵ Such a claim would legitimate the current monarch, Henry II, by situating him in a long line of “rightful” rulers of Britain.⁴⁶ In a broader sense, this idea connects every “British” monarch—that is, every monarch that holds sway over Britain—with Arthur and with each other. Despite shifting power dynamics and a history of conflict and conquest, the Britons, Saxons, and Normans are all linked through their connection to the island of Britain and its former and future leaders.

Though in future texts the Round Table holds significant symbolic value, Wace grants the subject only a few lines. Most of his elaborations on Geoffrey’s original text offer fanciful descriptions of events or objects of interest to his readers. The revelry in the *Brut* gains a sort of timelessness as Wace attempts to bring the reader into the story, illustrating the bustle of the city with specific images and exclaiming that “[the reader] would have thought it just like a fair.”⁴⁷ The implied conditional of “if you had been there” asks the reader to really imagine that he or she is there in the scene. In a discussion of the domestic in Victorian iterations of the Arthurian legend, Inga Bryden writes:

As a figure perceived as having direct social relevance for contemporary society, Arthur could be assimilated in narrative concerned with the narrative and lifespan of social and political structures. Arthur’s social relevance had its national

⁴⁵ Patricia Clare Ingham, *Sovereign Fantasies: Arthurian Romance and the Making of Britain*. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 2001), 4.

⁴⁶ The image of the resurrected Arthur, however, also provides a symbol around which potentially rebellious Britons might rally. While the Normans did conquer the historical British enemy, the Saxons, they are also conquerors, by proxy, of the British and may need to be wary of rebellious British sentiment.

⁴⁷ “Feire semblast, ço vus fust vis” (Wace, trans. Weiss, *Roman de Brut*, 10358; 263).

dimensions, but social history [...] peopled the past with attention to domestic detail.⁴⁸

Although her analysis is exclusively concerned with Victorian texts, it is impossible to ignore the parallels between “social relevance” retroactively applied to Arthur in Victorian tales and the way that Wace overlays the “domestic details” of Eleanor’s court onto Arthur’s court in the *Roman de Brut*. Wace constantly inserts sensory details in an attempt to replicate the experience for the reader, from the queen’s jewels and furs to the handsome nature of the pages at the feast to the fine gold of the drinking vessels. Geoffrey’s assumed audience of scholars presumably would have had no interest in these details and would not have found a description of golden bowls relatable even if they did, but Wace’s audience was intimately familiar with these references and might find themselves and the court they inhabit mirrored in that of the legendary King Arthur. That Arthur’s court ultimately implodes matters little as long as its ideals and images live on in the courts of future kings.

Approximately a half century after Wace wrote for the court of Eleanor of Aquitaine, a priest at Areley Kings in modern-day Worcestershire rewrote the *Roman de Brut* for a very different audience. Little is known about Laȝamon except for that which he tells his readers in the prologue to his *Brut*: he was a priest sometime in the late twelfth to early thirteenth century; his father’s name was Leovenath; and he lived in Areley on the banks of the Severn and found it pleasant there. Laȝamon’s *Brut* is generally dated to between 1189 and the late 1210’s: reference to King Henry II in the past tense suggests it was written after 1189, but scholars generally agree that the

⁴⁸ Inga Bryden, *Reinventing King Arthur: The Arthurian Legends in Victorian Culture* (Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2005), 139-40.

language establishes an upper range of the first few decades of the thirteenth century. Where Wace wrote in rhyming couplets, Lazamon writes in Middle English using an alliterative poetic structure, occasionally imitating stylistic features of older verse epics. At a time when most poetry was written in the Anglo-Norman French of the court, the decision to write in the more rural vernacular of Middle English could be considered a political one. Lazamon's *Brut* is a document of heterogeneous allegiances: it is the story of a series of British kings written in the language of the Britons' ancient enemies and eventual conquerors, the Anglo-Saxons, in a period when most literature was produced for the entertainment of an aristocracy of Normans.

In the *Brut*, Lazamon replicates the basic trajectory of Arthur's storyline and retains Wace's addition of the round table, but he also makes major stylistic changes to the narrative (just as Wace does with the *Historia*). Notably, the *Brut* moves the narrative's focus away from the court of the *Roman de Brut* and back to the physical island of Britain that looms so large in Geoffrey's *Historia*. Unlike the *Historia*, however, the *Brut* promises to tell the story of the *English* and "what they were called and whence they came / who first possessed the land of England."⁴⁹ Translators W. R. J. Barron and S. C. Weinberg characterize this focus on the English rather than the British as an intentional choice that "announc[es] his subject as the land and his starting point as the coming of its first inhabitants," regardless of the nominal identity of such inhabitants.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ "wat heo ihoten weoren / and wonene heo comen // þa Englene londe / ærest ahten" (Lazamon, *Brut* in introduction to *Lazamon's Arthur: The Arthurian Section of Lazamon's Brut*, trans. and ed. W. R. J. Barron and S. C. Weinberg (Austin: University of Texas Press: 1989), lines 8-9; p. ix).

⁵⁰ W. R. J. Barron and S. C. Weinberg, trans. and eds., introduction to *Lazamon's Arthur: The Arthurian Section of Lazamon's Brut*, (Austin: University of Texas Press: 1989), lii.

Intentional or not, such a gesture elides the two identities. English and British (and perhaps Norman) are no longer presented as different cultural affiliations; rather, they are simply different names for the same group of people, a people who has inhabited the island since its first founding and presumably will continue to do so forever. Barron and Weinberg continue:

[Lazamon's] lively and inventive version of Geoffrey's unified history of the island made it a more vivid and effective focus for patriotism in which all races could associate themselves with the victorious British and identify the foreign invader, whatever his nationality, as the perennial enemy.⁵¹

Lazamon's decision to write in a vernacular language using certain outmoded stylistic structures already positions the *Brut* as a political document, an assertion of the cultural value of a conquered people. It implicitly claims that any and all cultural groups that inhabit Britain have equal claim over the space, regardless of the current power structure.⁵² Though Normans technically "rule" the island, the British and English belong there just as much as the Normans do, if not more so.

Lazamon's focus on universally accessible aspects of his subjects, in particular their intense emotional lives and connection to their bodies, lends credence to the idea that all races belong equally to the island (and vice versa). Emphasis falls on the essential humanity of the *Brut*'s characters rather than their regional affiliations. At the same time, Lazamon's text frames Arthur as a superhuman, almost divine, being. While other texts frame King Arthur's deeds in hyperbolic language, the *Brut* is the first text to explicitly

⁵¹ Barron and Weinberg, introduction to *Lazamon's Arthur*, liv.

⁵² As Martin B. Schictman and James P. Carley claim in the introduction to *Culture and the King*, "the vitality of the Arthurian legend is not to be found in some obscure and still unrecovered past but rather in its ability to be transformed and to transform, *in its nearly protean potential to promote the imperatives of widely divergent social groups*" (Martin B. Schictman and James P. Carley, eds., introduction to *Culture and the King: The Social Implications of the Arthurian Legend* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), 4-5, emphasis mine).

connect Arthur to some supernatural element other than Avalon. Lazamon's work prefigures Tennyson's own construction of Arthur as a liminal being located somewhere in the space between man and god; he becomes tantamount to some spirit, as though he were an embodiment of the island itself.

Indeed, the body is a crucial aspect of Lazamon's sense of Arthur as an otherworldly being. Like Christ, the Word made flesh, Arthur will be a savior to his people, rescuing them from the threat of Saxon invasion, and his body will provide nourishment to his followers. As in the *Historia*, Merlin uses the moment of Uther's ascendance to make a prediction about Arthur, whose successes will far surpass those of his father. In Lazamon's text, this prophecy sets the stage for a pseudo-divine Arthur: "As long as time lasts, he shall never die; while this world lasts, his fame shall endure; and he shall rule the princes in Rome. All who dwell in Britain shall obey him."⁵³ The idea that Arthur is eternal prefigures Tennyson's creation of a strangely mythic temporality in the *Idylls*, in which the tale of Arthur is dually never and forever occurring. The connection between Arthur's existence to the existence of time itself parallels the connection between Christ and the Gregorian calendar, in which the birth of Christ acts as both a pivotal moment and a pivot point in Christian history. Events occurring before this moment are "Before Christ," while years after are labeled "anno Domini"—in the year of our Lord. Christian history literally begins with Christ's birth, and all of history can be categorized as either before or after this moment. Likewise, British history seems to

⁵³ Longe beoð æuere, dæd ne bið he næuere;
 þe wile þe þis world stænt, ilæsten scal is worðmunt;
 and scal inne Rome walden ða ðæines.
 Al him scal abuþe þat wuneð inne Bruttene.
 (Lazamon trans. Barron and Weinberg, *Lazamon's Arthur*, 9406-9; 11).

begin with Arthur, who himself exists in the space between the ancient, mythic temporality of legend and the chronicled history of the nation. Although Arthur never actually rules Rome, his legend eclipses that of Roman heroes, particularly in Britain, where his reign is absolute.⁵⁴ The assertion that “All who dwell in Britain shall obey him” reemphasizes the link between *Lazamon’s* Arthur and the island—Arthur will reign over all who physically exist within the space of his domination, not just those who call him king.

The parallel between Arthur and Christ grows stronger as the prophecy continues. Merlin declares: “Of him shall minstrels splendidly sing; of his breast noble bards shall eat; heroes shall be drunk upon his blood.”⁵⁵ This excerpt is striking for its visceral imagery of the consumption of Arthur’s *breosten* and *blode*; its much milder precedent in the second of Merlin’s prophecies in the *Historia* reads: “He will be celebrated by the voice of his people and his deeds will be food for poets.”⁵⁶ In the *Brut*, however, it is no longer the deeds that feed poets but the king himself, as though a muse cannot inspire true expression unless it is incorporated into the body through the somatic process of digestion. Furthermore, heroes will now be included in this feast with the poets, not only to drink but to *become drunk* off of Arthur’s blood as though it were some elixir, and *ambrosia*, perhaps, that could grant might and fame to the drinker.⁵⁷ Like Christ, the

⁵⁴ Ironically, *if* an Arthur actually existed, he likely would have been a Roman general fighting on the side of the Britons against Germanic invaders.

⁵⁵ Of him scullen gelomen godliche singen’
of his breosten scullen æten iaðele scopes;
scullen of his blode beornes beon drunke.

(*Lazamon* trans. Barron and Weinberg, *Lazamon’s Arthur*, 9410-12; 11).

⁵⁶ “In ore populorum celebrabitur et actus eius cibus erit narrantibus” (Geoffrey of Monmouth, *Historia*: Wright 145, Faletra 131).

⁵⁷ Though “ambrosia” is not mentioned in prophecy, the idea of Arthur’s blood as ambrosia should recall the characterization of Aurelius *Ambrosius* as a great warrior.

Word made flesh, Arthur will be a savior to his people, rescuing them from the threat of Saxon invasion, and his body will provide nourishment to his people. As Christ's followers feast upon His flesh and blood in communion, bards and heroes consume Arthur's corpse metaphorically in order to forge a connection to the great king.

Though Merlin's prophecy portrays Arthur as a Christ-figure, the king is also linked to a pagan supernatural element: as soon as the child is born, he is placed in the care of fairies.⁵⁸ No sign of these fairies appear in either *Lazamon's* sources or at any point earlier in the narrative, yet in the *Brut* their arrival is marked with minimal fanfare. They are simply presented as an integral part of Arthur's story. The fairies "[enchant] the child [Arthur] with magic most potent," granting him the "strength to be the best of all knights," the promise that he will be "a mighty king" and finally the gift of a long life.⁵⁹ Although these gifts imply that Arthur's might is acquired rather than innate, they acts as an external validation of internal merit: the fairies enable Arthur to become a great king, but their gifts mark him as already deserving of greatness. Thus it appears that Arthur's great might is at once a consequence of his intrinsic qualities and the work of some mystical outside force. Arthur's greatness, therefore, does not belong to him alone, but to his own merit *and* the fairies' generosity.

The origins of the fairy folk in *Lazamon's Brut* are much debated. Medievalist

⁵⁸ "aluen" (*Lazamon, Lazamon's Arthur*, 9608b); Barron and Weinberg translate *aluen* as "fairies," though it appears more accurately translated as "elf" or "elves." See William Cooke, "Aluen Swiðe Sceone": How Long Did OE *Ælfen/Elfen* Survive in ME?" *English Language Notes* 41.1 (2003) for a more detailed exploration of the term and its Middle English and Old English variants.

⁵⁹ "bigolen þat child / id galdere swiðe stronge" (*Lazamon trans. Barron and Weinberg, Lazamon's Arthur*, 9609; 21); "mihte / to beon bezst alre cnihten" (*ibid.* 9610; 21); "anoðer þing, / þat he scolde beon riche king" (*ibid.* 9611; 21); "anoðer þing, / þat he scolde beon riche king" (*ibid.* 9612b; 21).

Cyril Edwards credits Laȝamon's general inclusion of the elves as an example of his "grafting onto the *Historia* some motifs which by the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries had become common in European literature" including the fairy godmother, who grants gifts at birth, and the isle of Avalon.⁶⁰ Alternatively, the fairies and Avalon may derive from Celtic mythology, in which case their presence in the *Brut* could be another example of Arthur's connection to both Christian and pagan religions. In either case, Laȝamon's inclusion of this supernatural element suggests a desire to refigure Arthur's reign as somehow magical and otherworldly. Arthur, both a prototype of Christ and the recipient of gifts from pagan sources, is linked to the spiritual life of his people and to the spiritual life of the land, in the form of fairies. These two affiliations—Christianity and fairies—transcend regional affiliations, so that, as Barron and Weinberg suggest, Arthur is no longer the symbol of a specific people but of all who live in Britain and seek to defend it.

⁶⁰ Cyril Edwards, "Laȝamon's Elves" in *Laȝamon: Contexts, Language, and Interpretation*, ed. Rosamund Allen et al. (London: King's College London, Centre for Late Antique & Medieval Studies, 2002), 94-95.

Chapter 2 Liminality and Tennyson's Constructed National Mythologies

Alfred, Lord Tennyson (1809 – 1892) published the fourteen poems of *Idylls of the King* over the course of sixteen years, between 1859 and 1885. The poems were not collected into a single document (or placed in a single order) until very late in Tennyson's life, and many of them underwent multiple revisions of the course of that time.⁶¹ Altogether, the *Idylls* consists of twelve poems drawn from various Arthurian traditions, each with a different focus within the legend. These twelve poems are bookended by "Dedication" and "To the Queen," written for the deceased prince consort and his bereaved wife, respectively, which shift focus from the Arthurian to the contemporary court.⁶² The twelve poems that make up the body of the narrative loosely track the fall of Arthur's court due to sinful conduct on the part of his knights and his queen. The first four poems glorify Arthur's court and its constituents; the middle four begin to acknowledge potential cracks in the Round Table's construction; and the last four narrate the court's destruction.

In keeping with the romantic tradition of Chrétien de Troyes and Marie de France, individual idylls generally begin and end at Arthur's court while the central action often takes place elsewhere. Arthur's presence can be felt throughout the idylls, but he is the central character in only two of them: the first, "The Coming of Arthur" (1869), in which he liberates King Leodegran's kingdom from the ravages of beasts and wins Guinevere;

⁶¹ For a brief publication history of the *Idylls*, please see appendix (p. 85).

⁶² As Bryden comments, by using the explicitly contemporary "Dedication" and "To the Queen" to frame his *Idylls*, "Tennyson famously heightened nineteenth-century readers' awareness of the contemporaneity of Arthur and his own reworking of the legend, explicitly a 'New-old tale'. King Arthur returns as Prince Albert and simultaneously, 'Albert the Good' is remodeled as 'my king's ideal knight'" (Bryden, *Reinventing King Arthur*, 73; quoting Tennyson, "Dedication," line 5).

and the last, “The Passing of Arthur” (1869, based on Tennyson’s 1842 poem “Morte d’Arthur”) in which the fellowship crumbles and Arthur is forced to meet Mordred on the battlefield, ostensibly facing his death. The other idylls follow the adventures, both comic and tragic, of various knights, and Arthur appears primarily as a symbol of the empire.

Superficially, the narrative focus shifts from one knight to the next, but the symbolic Arthur actually remains the primary concern of the text. Arthur is *Britain*, and Tennyson’s intentionally vexed characterization of the king is a crucial component of his idea of what Britain—that is, the newly United Kingdom—is and should be. Just like the medieval texts, Tennyson’s *Idylls* seek to create a sense of national identity, focalized through the physical space of Britain and the legends inextricable from that space.

Though nominally unconnected to his role as poet laureate, Tennyson’s work on the *Idylls* is perhaps his most important contribution to the country and its crown, as it seeks to create a timelessly cohesive concept of what it means to be a citizen of the British empire.

In Barron and Weinberg’s discussion of whether or not *Lazamon’s Brut* can be considered a national epic, they assert that “[i]f *Lazamon’s* work is a national epic, its subject is Britain—with all the ambivalence the name has acquired across the centuries” and furthermore that “Arthur has become the symbol of that ambivalent national identity, embodying the land, its racial fusions, its traditions of law and justice, its Christian faith and its resistance to foreign invasion.”⁶³ By the nineteenth century United Kingdom was not subject to the same threats of invasion or issues of leadership that plagued twelfth century Britain, but it did suffer a similar crisis of identity. The boundaries of “Britain,”

⁶³ Barron and Weinberg, introduction to *Lazamon’s Arthur*, liv-lv.

in the form of the empire, stretched far beyond the limits of the island of Great Britain. The island was differentiated from its colonies in a legal sense, but the English (British) needed an origin myth that would establish the space of the island and allow those who inhabited it to assert their superiority over people elsewhere in the empire. The story of Arthur, fine-tuned by Tennyson to match with Victorian sensibilities and values, offered such a myth, creating a “British” identity that theoretically transcended various regionalisms and drew the island’s people together.

Tennyson uses the character of Arthur both as an internal and external mechanism of unification. By “internal mechanism” I mean a method of creating a national identity that relies on an examination of the *internal* “self” of the people of Great Britain; “external mechanism,” refers then to analysis turned “outward,” methods that create national identity by defining Great Britain against other cultures and kingdoms. I approach this organization under the assumption that national identity is necessarily dependent on some dichotomy of self and Other, as it seems logical that an ideology specifically meant to unite a single people (that is, national identity) must originate from a delineation between those in the nation and those outside it. Therefore, constructing an enduring concept of Britain demands an acknowledgement of what the “self” is and the identification of some “Other” that is the antithesis of the “self.”

Mechanisms of unification in the *Idylls of the King* rely on both of these frameworks. In this chapter, I focus on internally-motivated mechanisms: the construction of a generically “British” cultural mythology that subsumes regional (Welsh, Irish, Scottish) mythologies; the characterization of Arthur as existing in the liminal space between human and inhuman (much like *Lazamon’s Brut*); and the emphasis on the

spiritual importance of water. All of these concepts are somehow internal to Britain or to the reader's psyche; none rely on creating divisions between "British" identity and some "Other." Broadly speaking, Tennyson's internal mechanisms work to create a universally accessible myth of the British that transcends cultural and temporal boundaries within the United Kingdom, while reestablishing boundaries at the edges of the island of Great Britain that would exclude the "lesser" spaces of the colonies.⁶⁴

Some critics have characterized the Arthurian legend broadly as "ahistorical," but in fact this designation is misleading: no facet of the legend is "unrelated to or unconcerned with history or historical events."⁶⁵ Rather, the layered and polygenetic nature of the Arthurian corpus makes the legend a repository of historical awareness, saturated with the concerns of past societies. It may seem ahistorical because the detritus of centuries of retelling has made individual elements difficult to trace, but, as I have shown in my first chapter, the story has always been written with an eye to the author's historical moment. Although the legend itself is not ahistorical, however, Tennyson capitalizes the *perception* of ahistoricism and increases the scope of his work to include texts and sources outside the Arthurian legend. As John Philip Eggers explains:

Although the *Idylls* is in part a hypothetical portrait of Victorian England with its high idealism, strict morality, and warring extremisms, Tennyson deliberately

⁶⁴ I use "United Kingdom" sparingly, because it is difficult to say whether or not Ireland was included in the construction of a unified "British" consciousness. While theoretically included in the United Kingdom, Ireland was still viewed as a cultural "Other" by many English Victorians. I use "British" rather than "English," however, because Tennyson's project is aimed at creating a "British" identity that incorporates the Celtic paganism historically linked with Wales and Scotland (even though the poem itself is aimed primarily at an aristocratic English audience).

⁶⁵ *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. "ahistorical, adj.," last modified March 2016, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/4284?redirectedFrom=ahistorical>. Furthermore, in his discussion of Tennyson's use of Latinate (rather than Germanic) words in the *Idylls*, Matthew Townend comments on "the ahistoricism of Arthurian legend" as something that provides an obstacle for "poets who wished to achieve a consonance between history and language." (Matthew Townend, "Victorian Medievalisms" in *The Oxford Handbook of Victorian Poetry*, ed. Matthew Bevis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 178-79.)

baffles any effort by the reader to localize the details of his poem [...] by drawing from an extremely large number of general materials—Anglo-Saxon social customs, bardic ideals, classic myths, Welsh myths, Victorian ethics, renaissance imagery, and many Arthurian legends.⁶⁶

The sheer number of sources mythic, historical, and literary blurs the lines between the various traditions and highlights the multivalence of the legend within some cohesive and integrative poetic whole. By removing the historical context of his sources, Tennyson renders the legend legitimately historic. The strands of different legends and traditions have become so tangled that it is impossible to link them to individual texts or time periods, so all seem to originate from a nebulous “somewhere” in the ancient past rather than specific temporal and regional spaces. The result is a unified folkloric tradition, its individual elements too tangled to trace in any meaningful way.

In combining all of these sources, Tennyson forces a multitude of external texts and narratives to coalesce into a single macro-narrative. This process both parallels and potentially furthers the political project of combining multiple regional identities, namely Wales, Scotland, and England, into a single “Britain” that, once unified, can turn its attention to those parts of its empire beyond Great Britain. Indeed, Tennyson’s entire project—in which he draws on a variety of mythic sources to create a single unit—can be seen as an allegory for the amalgamation of various regional identities within Britain. Tennyson’s work invokes—or perhaps even creates—a uniquely British mythos of Arthur that combines French, English, Welsh, and other traditions, theoretically without privileging one over the other. Though his reliance on Malory may lend a distinctly English (and therefore southern and royalist) atmosphere to certain moments in the text,

⁶⁶ John Philip Eggers, *King Arthur's Laureate: A Study of Tennyson's Idylls of the King* (New York, New York University Press, 1971), 7.

Malory's own insistence on combining as many sources as he could, regardless of regional or cultural origin, means that such a reliance does not compromise the thematic diversity of Tennyson's text, and perhaps even enhances it. Of course, the political project of unification is not easy. The "British" must contend with a shaky union with Ireland (made even shakier by Queen Victoria's extreme anti-Irish sentiment) and threats from other European nations while attempting to govern its myriad colonies across the wide expanses of the world. Arthur's Britain is not a model or mirror of Victorian Britain, but exists rather as an amorphous construct that seems to predate regional delineations and differences of the nineteenth century, rendering such differences transient and therefore easily eradicable in the face of a national push toward unification, in theory if not in practice.

The creation of a cohesive British cultural consciousness is intimately connected to the idea of Arthur as a liminal, ambiguously magical figure. Arthur exists in a strange temporal space: he is both nonexistent and eternal. Similarly, the nebulously British mythology Tennyson creates relies on a flattened temporal space in which everything is as accessible as everything else; individual strands of the Arthurian legend are both nonexistent, given the eradication of their historical context, and eternal in their incarnation as Great Britain's own cultural mythos. The tales of Chrétien de Troyes, for example, no longer exist as French medieval texts and are therefore effectively erased from the body of French Arthuriana, but their characters and basic plotlines live on in the generic British mythology Tennyson creates. Because such a mythology appears ancient and fixed, these tales become ancient as well, no longer limited by their connection to a specific region or time period. Thus Tennyson's conception of Arthur as a mythic figure

is vital to the larger project of consolidating regionally and temporally disparate narratives into a single unified legend.

As if to illustrate this unity, “The Coming of Arthur” begins not with Arthur but with Leodegran, the king of Cameliard and the father of Guinevere. Both Cameliard and Guinevere are spaces not immediately linked with Arthur that nevertheless comes to belong to Arthur through might and marriage. Beginning with Leodegran allows Tennyson to incorporate regional spaces and individual people into Arthur’s kingdom and court. Furthermore, though a narrative of Arthur’s conception might offer a more logical place to begin the tale, Tennyson begins instead with an episode that presents Arthur as a fully-formed figure with the power to unite and protect his realm. Tennyson’s focus on Cameliard at the start of the *Idylls* privileges Arthur’s martial might and ability to unify Britain—both through eradication of invaders, as in the *Historia*, and through the inherently connective act of marriage—over the circumstances of his birth.

Before Arthur’s arrival, Cameliard is in ruins:

many a petty king ere Arthur came
 Rule in this isle, and ever waging war
 Each upon other, wasted all the land
 And still from time to time the heathen host
 Swarm’d overseas, and harried what was left (CA 5-9).

Just like in the *Historia*, conflict within the island allows heathen invaders (Geoffrey’s Saxons) to overrun the land. Tennyson makes explicit the connection between internal strife and the physical health of the land. The island is laid to “waste” not by the morally corrupt heathens but by the wars themselves; invasion is a consequence of these wars and the ruination of the island, rather than their cause. The kings before Arthur are “petty,” a word that encapsulates their small-mindedness as well as their insignificance next to

Arthur. They reign over small sections of the island, making war upon one another. Only Arthur succeeds in uniting these smaller sections into a cohesive whole and utilizing the island's resources properly rather than laying them to waste.⁶⁷

The physicality of the land looms large in this section. In the aftermath of the wars of such petty kings, “great tracts of wilderness” have appeared, and Cameliard has grown “Thick with wet woods” (CA 10, 21). Arthur's ability to civilize and Christianize the island is explicitly connected to his ability to tame wilderness, to control the land *physically*. Both Aurelius and Uther have attempted to unite the isle, but only Arthur finally succeeds in bringing the kingdom out of chaos, thus “[making] a realm” (CA 19). The verb “to make” suggests that this island, implicitly Britain, is inextricable from Arthur, who has literally created it out of the scraps of formerly heathen territories. Arthur, in a sense, *is* Britain, as island and as identity; Britain does not exist without him. Similarly, the Acts of Union (1707 between Scotland and England, 1800 between Ireland and Great Britain) and subsequent legislation worked to weave together the political state of Britain from the various strands of distinctive regions. While not necessarily heathen (though Catholic Ireland was in a way viewed as such for a long time), local allegiances are certainly subordinated to the will of a larger sovereign space in the same way that the heathen hordes and patches of wilderness become tamed into civility by Arthur's military might.

After addressing Arthur's *coming* to Cameliard and into the poem, the story

⁶⁷ The idea that land belongs to those who can best *use* it was a crucial aspect of European expansion. I discuss it further in chapter two with reference to the heathen horde. See Andrew Fitzmaurice, *Sovereignty, Property and Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014) for a more detailed discussion of the concept of waste and its connection to the Roman legal practice of *occupatio*.

recenters on the king's narrative, beginning with his birth. Tennyson offers readers multiple versions of the story of Arthur's conception. He emphasizes the narrative ambiguity of his sources and provides an entirely new origin story that underscores Arthur's connection to the land. This new story supplants preexisting traditions without erasing them, in much the same way that the new nation of "Britain" and the accompanying idea of "Britishness" would theoretically supplant regional identities without eradicating them. (Whether or not this was successful is another question). Within the world of the *Idylls* all stories of Arthur's conception and birth are mediated through characters within the poem who are themselves only secondhand witnesses to the event. The layered multiplicity of sources makes it impossible to identify which is the most accurate.

King Leodegran seeks the truth of Arthur's birth because he wants to confirm that Arthur is the legitimate heir to the throne before giving him Guinevere to wed, but truth is difficult to come by. The "truth" of Arthur's conception theoretically exists in three places: the minds of Merlin and his chronicler Bleys, and in a "great annal-book, where after-years / Will learn the secret of our Arthur's birth" (CA 157-8). Of these, the book seems most promising, but it remains out of reach for Leodegran, and therefore the reader. Text acts as a compendium of cultural memory (and individual history), but the record of which text is the most accurate or where this "annal-book" might be found to inform us, in the "after-years," of the truth, has been lost. Merlin, the only primary witness living, refuses to credit or discredit any of these narratives, so it becomes impossible to locate a single authentic strain, and Leodegran, alongside the reader, is left to decipher Arthur's parentage for himself.

Despite the chamberlain's insistence that only Merlin and Bleys truly know the story, Leodegran consults some of the older knights. Bedivere assures Leodegran that Arthur is legitimate and tells him a similar story to that of the twelfth century texts, in which Uther defeats Gorlois and forces marriage on Ygerne. On the night of Uther's death, Ygerne gives birth to Arthur, and the baby is given immediately to Merlin, who in turn gives Arthur to the old knight Sir Anton (Tennyson's Ector). Like the story of his birth, Arthur passes through a number of mediating circumstances before reaching a final destination with Anton. This narrative is familiar, but relies on Merlin's testimony and—if Arthur is legitimate—Ygerne's faithfulness, neither of which is necessarily assured. Other voices support a similar narrative but claim Arthur is in fact the son of Gorlois or even Anton, rather than Uther.

Leodegran seeks a more definite answer and calls on Bellicent, the daughter of Gorlois and Ygerne, to offer her own testimony. Her account of Arthur's birth differs greatly from any other text and, like *Lazamon's Brut*, suggests that Arthur might be a supernatural being. Bellicent points to Arthur's ill resemblance of any of his supposed parents, explaining:

dark [Ygerne] was in eyes and hair,
 [...] and dark
 Was Gorlois, yea, and dark was Uther too,
 Wellnigh to blackness; but this king is fair
 Beyond the race of Britons and of men (CA 325-30).

The connotations of "fairness" reverberate across racial and colonialist dialogues, which I will address further in the next chapter, but at its most superficial the lines are clear in their implication: Arthur is somehow disconnected from any of his theoretical progenitors and belongs to some higher—the word is implicit in "beyond"—plane of being. Arthur is

an idealized, mystical king, strange even to the inhabitants of an idealistic, mystical text. Bellicent tells Leodegran a story she heard from Bleys, again displacing the responsibility for the narrative onto the shadowy figures of the wizard Merlin and his chronicler. The indirect nature of the narrative emphasizes the practice of telling, of the oral and textual traditions that generate cultural identity through shared lore. The creation of myths *within* the world of the poem allows Tennyson to create and control a sense of nationhood that ostensibly resides only in the literary pseudo-Britain of the *Idylls* but that bleeds out into the newly created Britain of the real world as the work became not “merely a poem, but an event, a cultural phenomenon” that the Victorian literati “read, memorized, and lived.”⁶⁸

Like Bedivere’s account, Bellicent’s story links Arthur’s birth to Uther’s death, but the resemblances end there. On the night of Uther’s passing, Bleys and Merlin go down to the ocean—the reason why, whether it is to mourn or for some ritual purpose, is unclear. They glimpse a ship somewhere in the amalgam of sky and sea created by the night’s darkness, but it immediately disappears. Waves beat against the shore, growing progressively larger,

Till last, a ninth one, gathering half the deep
 And full of voices, slowly rose and plunged
 Roaring, and all the wave was in a flame;
 And down the wave and in the flame was borne
 A naked babe, and rode to Merlin’s feet,
 Who stoopt and caught the babe, and cried, “The King!
 Here is an heir for Uther” (CA 379-85).

Arthur appears as a deity who is born from the elements and thus intrinsically connected to the land. The hyperbolic notion that this wave drew up half of the ocean creates the

⁶⁸ Eggers, *King Arthur’s Laureate*, 53

sense that Arthur can control the physical aspects of the island, which recalls his civilizing influence on the wilderness and “wet woods.” The miraculous union of fire and water in the scene furthers this idea of control over the elements and underscores Arthur’s capacity to unite even seemingly antithetical parts into a harmonious, if paradoxical, whole. Arthur as “naked babe” is delivered “*in the flame*,” magically unharmed by the fire that surrounds him. Merlin’s cry of ‘the King’ implies that Arthur was a king long before he was crowned. The capitalization thereof lends a religious aspect to the episode, locating Arthur, as in *Lazamon’s Brut*, in a liminal space between the magic of the land and the power of the religious (presumably Christian) faith. Furthermore, the infant Arthur arrives on “a night / In which the bounds of heaven and earth were lost” (CA 370-71). The sea, already an earthly liminal space between land-based human habitations, becomes a spiritually liminal space between heaven and earth, creating Arthur as a Christ figure caught between realms.

That Arthur arrives from the water rather than a somewhere on land marks him as a character who will transcend regional land-based allegiances, because he originates from the space of the sea, which delimits the island’s boundaries while also offering a means of expansion. In general, water is an important motif in the *Idylls*, as it has both symbolic and material importance to Britain as an empire. Naval power was crucial to British colonialism in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Thus Britain’s navy was a key component in the project of imperial expansion and, perhaps more importantly, to the nation’s perception of itself as a powerful state. Britons liked to believe themselves better than their continental neighbors as well as their numerous colonies, and the strength of their navy was integral to this belief. The British *army*, on the other hand, was largely

made up of volunteers (except in times of war). British resources were concentrated on the seagoing parts of the military, implicitly associating water with power in the national consciousness.⁶⁹

The connection between the sea and power may create an implicit link between Arthur's oceanic origins and his ability to rule. In any case, many characters seem confident in his right to rule regardless of his mysterious lineage, and Arthur displays extraordinary military prowess as well as spiritual legitimacy. As they fight the heathen soldiers, Lancelot likens Arthur's military might to "the fire of God" and declares to Arthur: "I know thee for my king!" (CA 127, 129). Lancelot's confidence in Arthur's kingship implies that actions on the battlefield matter more to Arthur's knights than the circumstances of his birth. If physical strength is not enough, Arthur also possesses the support of formidable magical and religious figures. Before telling Leodegranz of Arthur's ocean birth, Bellicent gives a detailed account of his coronation, where a number of spiritually significant figures were present, including three queens who descend on beams of colored light, seemingly from heaven; Merlin, the mage and craftsman; and the Lady of the Lake, the *Idylls'* primary symbol of Christianity. The endorsement of so many important figures seems to confirm Arthur's eligibility for the throne in a way no royal lineage ever could. These qualities—martial might and spiritual endorsement—in combination with the ambiguity of the birth narrative compel the king's subjects and the reader to focus attention on the king's ongoing exploits rather than his origins, which dissipate into the great depths of ocean and lore alike. The ambiguity

⁶⁹ For more on the importance of the navy to imperial expansion see Susie L. Steinbach, *Understanding the Victorians: Politics, Culture, and Society in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (New York: Routledge, 2012), p. 62-3.

surrounding Arthur's birth lends power to his dominion over the entire island: if Arthur comes from the sea, or even if his lineage cannot be accurately traced at all, it is impossible to cite any specific area as his birthplace and he belongs to "Britain" as a whole.

The sense that Arthur belongs to Britain *as a whole* is furthered by the aura of mysticism that Tennyson cultivates around the king. Arthur seems to reside in a liminal space between human and god, or human and fey, that associates him with Celtic and other legends. Though Malory, Tennyson's major source, dramatically reduces the sense of the supernatural that resides in his French sources, there was a persistent artistic focus on fairy elements in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. Arthurian scholar Roger Simpson explains: "In reaction against an eighteenth century ethos of neo-classical naiad and faun, the later interest in fairies suggests a desire to celebrate a national folklore."⁷⁰ That is, fairies were a nationalist symbol as well as a sign of otherworldliness, so that such otherworldliness would, for British readers, appear expressly related to Britain itself. While actual fairies are absent from Tennyson's narrative, his version of Arthur is connected, like *Lazamon's*, to the otherworldliness of fairy-filled British folklore.

Tennyson's description of Camelot heightens this sense of the supernatural. The first and most extensive description of Camelot appears in the second idyll, "Gareth and Lynette," in which, as elsewhere in the *Idylls*, the city is depicted as a sign of Arthur's greatness and a sign of the mysticism of his court. Camelot's gate is separate from Arthur's hall, though both have been built by Merlin and are somehow magical. Camelot

⁷⁰ Roger Simpson, *Camelot Regained: The Arthurian Revival and Tennyson, 1800-1849* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1990), 154.

itself is magical as well, but seems to have a different magic, older and more mysterious than that of Merlin.

Gareth and his men approach Camelot as the morning mist rises off the field, and the city spires flicker through the mist, until all of a sudden “the whole fair city [...] disappear[s]” (GL 193), leaving only the grand gate, which is lavishly decorated with figures that seem to move as the men watch. The Lady of Lake stands on the keystone, with a sword—Excalibur—in one hand and a censer in the other. Though in general the Lady of the Lake resembles goddesses of old, she also represents the Christian church here, her arms spread wide “like the cross” (GL 214) with “the sacred fish” (GL 219) over her breast. On either side of the statue

Were Arthur's wars in weird devices done,
New things and old co-twisted, as if Time
Were nothing, so inveterately, that men
Were giddy gazing there; and over all
High on the top were those three queens, the friends
Of Arthur, who should help him at his need (GL 221-26).

The climax of this specific idyll’s action comes later, when Gareth takes on the final knight before rescuing Lynette’s sister, but the description of this gate acts as the climactic moment in an untold story, the story of Arthur’s battles, which exists in the liminal space between “The Coming of Arthur” and the other idylls. Characters, particularly Lancelot and other knights, constantly allude to Arthur’s military prowess, and his twelve battles are often mentioned in passing, but any explication thereof is conspicuously absent from the *Idylls*. Though Tennyson frequently draws attention to twelve battles that Arthur and his men fight between “The Coming of Arthur” and “Gareth and Lynette,” he remains intentionally vague about the events and mechanisms of these battles. They seem to have been absorbed by the odd temporality of Arthur’s

reign, which appears perpetually bound to some ancient past even as it exists in some literary present.

In both of these spaces—past and present—Britain exists as an insular unit: in the past, it appears as a timeless fairyland outside the reach of regional affiliation; in the literary present of “Gareth and Lynette,” Britain, as represented by the Round Table, is united by a common belief in the ideals of knighthood and a desire to rid the realm of invaders. Furthermore, the past and present—“new things and old”—are “co-twisted,” so that it is impossible to extricate the “new” events of Arthur’s reign from the wide expanses of the past, contributing to the sense that Arthur’s Britain exists in some alternate, circular temporality. The line “as if Time / were nothing” strengthens this sense and contributes to the connection between Arthur and a strange timelessness, where “timeless” refers both to a lack of connection with time—literally time-less—and the quality of being eternal.

Tennyson’s deployment of the word “weird” reflects this connection as well. “Weird” appears nine times in the *Idylls*, four of which are directly connected to illustrations of Camelot’s gate, and elsewhere used to describe the legend of Arthur’s birth and the “last weird battle in the west” (PA 29), where Arthur finally falls. *Weird* as an adjective has a number of layered meanings. The most appropriate for Tennyson’s work is likely “Partaking of or suggestive of the supernatural; of a mysterious or unearthly character; unaccountably or uncomfortably strange,” but the first definition, “Having the power to control the fate or destiny of human beings” can perhaps also be applied to the last battle. The word’s inconclusive denotation makes *weird* itself a rather

“uncomfortably strange” descriptor, particularly for modern readers who might find it out of place.⁷¹

The noun form of *weird* descends etymologically from the Old English *wyrd*, which itself comes from the Old Saxon *wurd*, and is therefore deeply embedded in British history in a linguistic sense.⁷² That the adjectival form of the word gained popularity through the Weird Sisters of William Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* only adds to the sense of the term’s inherent “Englishness.”⁷³ Shakespeare’s Weird Sisters, of course, derive from a permutation of the noun form of *weird*, meaning something close to fate (or the power through which fate is determined), and used to refer both to fate and *the Fates* of classical mythology.⁷⁴ The sororal trios of the Fates and the Weird Sisters seem eerily similar to the three fair queens who appear at Arthur’s coronation, his “death,” and on this very gate, presiding over the images of his wars. The queens’ connection with light and with the afterlife, in the form of Avalon, suggest that they are related to Christianity, but the fact that they appear in triplicate and that Avalon may be a form of fairyland suggest that they are related to pagan religions. Whether fay or celestial, however, these queens are certainly intimately intertwined with the fate of the King. Their tangential connection to the Germanic-derived “weird” links them with Britain’s complex linguistic history, while on a symbolic level they connect the uniting force of Christianity with the uniting force of a pagan beliefs (whether classical or Celtic) to represent two major spiritual aspects of British identity.

⁷¹ *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “weird, adj.,” last modified March 2016, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/226916>.

⁷² *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “weird, n.,” last modified March 2016, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/226915>.

⁷³ *OED*, s.v. “weird, adj.”

⁷⁴ *OED*, s.v. “weird, n.”

Gareth's men are greatly alarmed by the city's disappearance and beg Gareth to return to Orkney, for they have heard from their "wise man at home" that "Here is a city of Enchanters, built / By fairy Kings" (GL 203-4). Though Arthur is not necessarily one of these "fairy Kings," the phrase reinforces his connection with magic. Orkney, a specific, identifiable site in Britain, contrasts with the fictional, imprecisely located Camelot, which appears in the eyes of Gareth's men as no earthly city but something otherworldly and threatening, built by strange, supernatural beings. Their desire to return home is analogous to a desire to return to a familiar, regional space, a desire which Gareth, the idyll's hero, rejects. To move forward requires an embrace of the unfamiliar, the mystical, and the ambiguously yet emphatically British. All of a sudden an "ancient man," the gatekeeper, appears from underneath the gate. He explains that "a Fairy King / And Fairy Queens [...] came from out a sacred mountain cleft" from the Celtic west and built the city "to the music of their harps" (GL 254-58). The foreign nature of these figures is mitigated by their benign, even angelic, bearing; they are "Fairy" yet their description implies an association with Christian angels.

The capitalization of "Fairy" and the old man's mention of a single Fairy King and multiple Fairy Queens lends an air of specificity to his explanation, and the allusion to any "Fairy Queen" should remind readers of Edmund Spenser's epic *The Faerie Queene*. Given this context, the concept of *fairy*, despite its pagan connotations, can easily coexist with and even reinforce religious allegory, and the union of *fairy* with vaguely Christian symbols seems a specific motif in the *Idylls* signifying loyalty to the Christian nation of the British Isles. Spenser's epic is, after all, a patriotic ode to Queen Elizabeth I, at least on the surface. The strange mingling of Christianity and the

supernatural furthermore recalls the alternative narrative of Arthur's birth, wherein the infant Arthur arrives on a wave from the sea, enveloped in flame, as an elemental being or Christ-figure might.

Though Arthur's potentially mythic origins serve as an affirmation of British unity through the vague, shared space of folklore, they also lend a sense of fragility to the king's existence: if Arthur indeed comes from some mystic place over the sea, then what is to say that he is human or even real? John Killham, noted for his work on Tennyson's *The Princess*, asserts that Arthur's resemblance of Christ and the fact "that the doubtfulness of his title should not diminish faith in his right to rule [both] suggest that Tennyson was not unwilling to surround the idea of nationhood with an aura of holiness."⁷⁵ While I would characterize this layer of spirituality and unreality as "otherworldliness" rather than "holiness," Killham's concept of this supernatural atmosphere and its connection to Arthur's resemblance to Christ and his perceived unreality is accurate. Indeed, doubt—whether on the part of other characters or the reader—in Arthur's existence may confirm the king's authority further, as it requires a special kind of faith. (We might recall here the parable of doubting Thomas.) Arthur, like Christ, is king regardless of our belief in his existence.

Tennyson makes an effort to humanize Arthur, particularly later in the *Idylls*, but there remains a sense of uncertainty surrounding this question of existence, a question that was of vital concern not only to readers of the *Idylls* but also to nineteenth-century society at large, which had become critically invested in the issue of Arthur's historicity. The discovery of a real, historical Arthur might legitimate the goals of Romantic

⁷⁵ John Killham, "Tennyson (and Fitzgerald)," *The Victorians* vol. 6, ed. Arthur Pollard (New York: Penguin Books, 1993), 377-78.

nationalism, which sought to revive an image of the court present in the medieval romances; but such a discovery could also destabilize such movements, based as they were on a concept of Arthur that derived from legend rather than fact. New ideas about what it meant to be a “gentleman” in the nineteenth century were also based on a specific vision of medieval chivalry that was more nostalgic than historically accurate.

The gatekeeper claims of the vanishing Camelot that “there is nothing in it as it seems / Saving the King; though some there be that hold / The King a shadow, and the city real” (GL 260-62). The idea that nothing is “as it seems” foreshadows the duplicitous sin(s) and petty squabbles that will bring down the court, though such a phrase might also apply to the grandiose and inaccurate vision of the Middle Ages held by Victorian aristocracy. Victorian scholar E.D.H. Johnson calls Camelot “a kind of Palace of Art,” noting that “the poet deliberately leaves in question whether it is real or existent only in the enchanted realm of the imagination.” Such an interpretation is certainly accurate in that Tennyson’s Camelot appears to be a repository of Victorian nostalgia surrounding Arthur (especially as a symbol of some fabricated sense of the medieval). However according to Johnson, this sense of unreality allows “The very legitimacy of Arthur’s title to the kingship [to be] shrouded in dubiety.”⁷⁶ But this interpretation fails to take into account the *power* of ambiguity, which in some ways actually confirms Arthur’s legitimacy, as in the example of his hazy birth narrative, which places his origins in the nonspecific ocean rather than a given regional space.

Furthermore, the entirety of the *Idylls* is mediated through the lens of a poetic historical imagination—the disconnect between a reader’s present and the present of the

⁷⁶ E.D.H. Johnson, *The Alien Vision of Victorian Poetry: Sources of the Poetic Imagination in Tennyson, Browning, and Arnold* (Hamdon, Conn.: Archon Books, 1963), 44.

poem is signaled by the framing poems and the persistently strange temporality of Arthur's Britain. The final lines of the gatekeeper's soliloquy address the oxymoronic ability for Arthur (like the British empire) to exist simultaneously as a powerful, enduring king and a transient, potentially unreal figure: he explains that the fairy King and Queens are "building still, seeing the city is built / To music, therefore never built at all, / And therefore built for ever" (GL 272-74). The duality of "never built" and "built for ever" mirrors the status of the Arthurian legend as a whole, which is constantly in flux and can never be fully encapsulated by a single text.

Despite the gatekeeper's warning, Gareth and his men enter the contradictory "city of shadowy palaces" (GL 296) and find a space that resembles nothing so much as a paradise of nostalgia for the medieval era, a Victorian aristocrat's fantasy, built by "ancient kings" (GL 298) and "Merlin's hand" (GL 299) that "spire[s] up to heaven" (GL 302). Its inhabitants are practically angelic, from the "pure women, wholesome stars of love" who peer out of their windows at the men, to the "tall knights, that ranged about the throne," paradigms of honor and faith in the King, glowing with "the light of victory, / And glory gained, and evermore to gain" (GL 320-25). The word "evermore" recalls the implication of endlessness inherent in "built for ever" and when paired with the past tense "gained" furthers a sense that Arthur's court exists simultaneously in the past and in the future, or some mythic temporality that incorporates both.

The sense that Arthur's court will somehow last "for ever" (despite its impending destruction) is matched by the sense that Arthur himself is immortal. A key aspect of Arthur's otherworldliness is his apparent inability to die; he instead goes to the strange, magical island of Avilion (Avalon) to heal and to bide his time until Britain again needs

him. Immortality seems incontrovertible evidence for Arthur's inhumanity, but Avilion's inscrutability destabilizes this argument. It could, within the text, function as an actual physical island, but its description implies something closer to the timeless Otherworlds of Celtic myth, or even to some kind of post-mortem paradise—a Heaven or Elysium. It is a place

Where falls not hail, or rain, or any snow,
Nor ever wind blows loudly; but it lies
Deep-meadowed, happy, fair with orchard lawns
And bowery hollows crowned with summer sea,
Where [Arthur] will [be healed] of [his] grievous wound (PA 428-32).

The perpetually perfect weather of Avilion, which prohibits precipitation or rough winds, implies an Edenic space, free of pain and ugliness. Avilion is also a space of absolute healing, but healing could refer either to magical remedies or to the soul's release from the body (and therefore bodily wounds) that accompanies death.

Avilion's ambiguous function mirrors the ambiguous origins of the three queens, who initially appeared at Arthur's coronation on beams of light and at his death arrive on a fantastical "dusky barge" (PA 362). The heavens and the deep ocean are both mystical, spiritually charged spaces, but where the former implies a connection with Christianity, the latter connects to the vaguely pagan spirituality that saturates Arthur's own birth. Indeed, the image of the barge approaching the shore echoes that of the winged dragon ship that heralded Arthur's miraculous arrival to the island, and even the syntax of the passage describing the barge mimics that of the passage about Arthur's birth. The striking similarities between the two passages make their differences even more significant, though both display a connection to the liminal space of the sea and the strange temporality in which Arthur exists.

Where the dragon ship was “from stem to stern / Bright with a shining people on the decks” (CA 374-75), this barge is “Dark as a funeral scarf from stem to stern” (PA 363) and the “decks [are] dense with stately forms / Black-stoled [and] black-hooded” (PA 365-66) as though the light that marked Arthur’s coming is matched by the darkness of his passing. In both cases, the boat draws its light or lack thereof from its unidentifiable inhabitants. The “shining people” seem supernatural, as they either emanate light or reflect it from some otherworldly source inaccessible to Merlin and Bleys, yet they are explicitly referred to as “people,” a word that connects them to humanity. They are beings that straddle the mortal and spiritual realms. Likewise, the occupants of the dark barge straddle two realms: the words “funeral” and “stole” imply a connection to priests, human representatives of the Christian god, but the barge’s inhabitants are characterized as “stately forms.” The word “form” implies spirits rather than human or even corporeal entities, thus working against the sense of humanity implied by connection to the priesthood. Like Arthur, these figures are both supernatural and human, connected to Christianity as well as fairytales and folklore.

The arrival of Arthur generates a movement from chaos (the rising waves) to calm (a flat sea), while the arrival of the barge signifies movement from calm into chaos, emotional and otherwise. After Merlin captures the infant Arthur, a “calm” follows with “Free sky and stars” (CA 390-91). The queens on the barge, bright lights amidst black-clad beings, let out a wail that “shiver[s] to the tingling stars,” thus destabilizing even the untouchable night sky (PA 368). While it is possible to ascribe the cosmic effects of the queens’ anguish simply to hyperbole and florid language, their strange, pseudo-divinity makes it difficult to entirely discount a literal interpretation. Thus the queens’ apparent

ability to influence something intangible like the stars intensifies the reader's perception that the barge belongs somewhere outside the human realm, and consequently that it is meant to take Arthur away from this mortal world, to Heaven or to Fairyland.

Arthur's journey away from Britain, however magical, leaves the island an empty space. The queens' cry is characterized as:

an agony
Of lamentation, like a wind that shrills
All night in a waste land, where no one comes,
Or hath come, since the making of the world (PA 369-72).

This is the only reference to the "waste land" in the entirety of the *Idylls*, a significant omission given the importance of the concept to the Arthurian legend as whole. The waste land (or "wasteland") dates back to Celtic mythology, but its first appearance in connection with Arthur's court occurs in "Perceval" by Chrétien de Troyes. The waste land's sterility is usually linked to the wound of its ruler, the Fisher King, but in this instance, Britain becomes a waste land *after* losing its leader. As soon as Arthur leaves, the island is transformed into a place that has always been and always will be dead. These lines distort Arthur's own timelessness to frame Britain *without* Arthur as a barren desert that has *never* contained life, place where "no one [...] hath come" since the world began.

The fading of the queens' wail is distinguished by similar hyperbole, and the waste land left by Arthur becomes, if possible, even more dead:

But when that moan had past for evermore,
The stillness of the dead world's winter dawn
Amazed [Bedivere], and he groaned, "The King is gone."
And therewithal came on him the weird rhyme,
"From the great deep to the great deep he goes." (PA 441-45)

If the moan signifies Arthur's death, then the dwindling of the moan underscores its finality, leaving the "dead world" stiller even than the waste land left by Arthur's

departure: Bedivere's king is finally, absolutely, incontrovertibly gone (though the renewing power of Avalon, perhaps implicit in "dawn" might suggest otherwise). The most significant line in this passage in the last: "From the great deep to the great deep he goes." It appears for twice before this: once, sung by Merlin in "The Coming of Arthur" in response to Bellicent's inquiry as to whether or not Arthur actually came from the ocean (410); and in one of Guinevere's recollections in "The Last Tournament" as Arthur's empire begins to fall (125). This is the third time, the completion of a triad just like that of the queens. Bedivere calls the "rhyme" (which appears as a rhyme only in its first appearance), "weird," connecting the queens to the Fates and Arthur's "last weird battle in the west" (PA 29). Arthur comes "From the great deep" in that he is born from the great depths of the ocean, and he returns to the ocean on this barge, ostensibly headed to Avalon but reminiscent of a Norse ship burial. "Great deep" could also refer to the depths of collective mythic consciousness; Arthur derives from the legends of Tennyson's sources, and returns as Tennyson's own work gains the status of legend. The king is gone but poetry ("the weird rhyme") and a legacy remain.

The treatment of Excalibur reflects the sense that Arthur's birth and death are both part of a larger legend that belongs, as a whole, to the island of Britain. Excalibur, Arthur's sword, was created by the "lonely maiden of the Lake" over the span of nine years as she "[sat] in the deeps / Upon the hidden bases of the hills" (PA 272-74). The metaphorical virgin birth produces Excalibur, the symbol of Arthur's reign and power, from the "deeps." As Arthur lies dying, he asks Bedivere to throw the sword back into the lake, so that Excalibur, like Arthur, comes from the deep and returns to it. Tennyson also uses the pronoun "he" to refer to the sword, as though Excalibur were a king in his own

right. Bedivere tosses “the brand” (PA 310) Excalibur back into the lake and watches as the arm of the Lady of the Lake, “Clothed in white samite, mystic, wonderful” catches the sword “and brandishe[s] him / Three times, and drew him under in the mere” (PA 312-14). Excalibur is both a “brand” and “brandished,” as though it represents the light of Arthur’s reign, now extinguished in the dark depths of the lake.

The portentous number “three” links the magic of the Fates with that of the Lady of the Lake, suggesting that Excalibur’s return to the lake—a feature of the “body” of the island—is similar to Arthur’s departure to Avalon. The Lady of the Lake, furthermore, functions as a cross between the Virgin Mary and a patron goddess of Britain, so that returning the sword to her is like returning it to Britain as a whole. As Arthur arrives “from the great deep” of the sea *and* a broader mythic consciousness and returns to it, so, too, does Excalibur. The circularity of this gesture delimits the boundaries of the legend of Arthur (and the British national mythology Arthur represents) by explicitly establishing its starting and ending point as the island of Britain itself. Reference to Excalibur solidifies these boundaries by connecting them to a mythic artifact, which will last forever in the material world as King Arthur will in the conceptual.

Chapter 3 Uses and Misuses of Internal Divisions in the *Idylls*

In a discussion of the myriad ways Britain defines itself *against* some demonized or pathologized Other, it is important to keep in mind Benedict Anderson's assertion that "[t]he cultural products of nationalism—poetry, prose fiction, music, plastic arts—show [...] love very clearly in thousands of different forms and styles" while "*analogous* nationalist products expressing fear and loathing" are nearly impossible to find.⁷⁷ Anderson's discussion of the links between patriotism and racism lends itself to a discussion of the religious and cultural Others found in Tennyson's work, but as this statement suggests of most nationalistic efforts, Tennyson's *Idylls* is first and foremost a work of *love*, for his country, his queen and her late consort, and his own lost Arthur. The "Others" that we find in Tennyson are weak, nebulous reflections of the divisions of Victorian society, and emphasis often lands on how wonderful the "British" party in such divisions is rather than how terrible the other side might be.

In that sense, all expressions of nationalism in the *Idylls*, both implicit and explicit, are internally motivated. But because divisions of race, class, and culture are created by looking "outward" at an externalized Other, I refer to the constructions of national identity based on such divisions "external." Moreover, constructions of this type in the *Idylls* are also external to the poem itself: while the development of Tennyson's generically British mythologies detailed in chapter two exists almost entirely within the poem, the nationalist divisions he utilizes in the *Idylls* are preexistent in Victorian society and layered on top of the basic plot structures of Arthurian legend.

⁷⁷ Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 141-2.

The dominance of Britain is not just an artistic nationalist trope: “Great Britain” as a concept was invented and confirmed in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries by repeated conflicts against other nations. In *Britons*, historian Linda Colley writes of the formation of British identity (and the formation of Great Britain as a whole) in the Georgian era, but her explanation holds true for the Victorians as well. She explains:

Time and time again, war with France brought Britons, whether they hailed from Wales or Scotland or England, into confrontation with an obviously hostile Other and encouraged them to define themselves collectively against it. They defined themselves as Protestants struggling for survival against the world’s foremost Catholic power. They defined themselves against the French as they imagined them to be, superstitious, militarist, decadent and unfree. And, increasingly as the wars went on, many of them defined themselves in contrast to the colonial peoples they conquered, peoples who were manifestly alien in terms of culture, religion and colour.⁷⁸

Britain’s history of war underscores a history of understanding “us” by creating “them.”.

Britain’s Protestantism was crucial to self-definition in the eighteenth century, when the majority of their conflicts were with other European powers, particularly France.

Regardless of whether conflicts with France (and other forces in Europe) were religiously based, religion was an important aspect of Britain’s ability to differentiate itself from other states. In the *Idylls*, the Other is usually framed in terms of religion, which in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries acted as a unifying factor in the face of significant cultural differences between England, Scotland, and Wales. Yet in Tennyson’s work characterizations of the “Other” mimic imperialist dichotomies more often than religious divisions. That is, divisions are *framed* as religious but in fact enact preexistent colonialist *cultural* divisions, rather than straightforward religious divides.

⁷⁸ Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707-1837*. (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2009), 6.

In the post-Napoleonic era of the nineteenth century, Britain emerged as a global hegemonic power and Europe became, for the most part, relatively peaceful. The anxieties of Victorians became focused primarily on issues within the empire, especially with respect to class and race. In the *Idylls*, Tennyson manipulates these specifically Victorian ways of making the concept of “Other” to fit the Arthurian legend and in doing so constructs a myth of the island particularly accessible his audience of upper- and middle-class Victorians. With respect to class, the damning characterization of the “heathens” in the *Idylls* is strikingly similar to the characterization of the working poor and (to a lesser extent) colonized peoples in broader Victorian society. It is interesting that Tennyson uses the rhetoric of internal divisions, like class and race, to highlight the importance of creating a cohesive nation. Perhaps his use of these divisions facilitates the creation of an elite (rather than universal) sense of what it means to be British, creating a national identity that differentiates powerful, privileged Victorians from the poor and the colonized masses, thus confirming their superiority by connecting it the the island’s own history.

Both heathens and the poor are seen as lesser beings, on the level of beasts, and there is a need to eradicate both from polite society and the Christian kingdom. With respect to race, Tennyson implicitly utilizes the pervasive Victorian belief in “Anglo-Saxonism” to reassert Arthur’s position between man and god. Yet his focus on the “stainlessness” and “blamelessness” of whiteness is such that Arthur’s coloring seems almost a mockery of Victorian veneration of the Anglo-Saxons. While Tennyson uses class-based divisions to emphasize Arthur’s ability to protect the island, the race-based divisions he employs lead to the Round Table’s destruction. Nevertheless, creating

divisions and hierarchies establishes the right of the “British”—those people supported and validated by the national mythos discussed in chapter two—to drive out and dominate the “lesser” non-British from the space of the island. Arthur’s (and the British empire’s) desire to establish the boundaries of Great Britain physically and then expand those boundaries ideologically is framed as a moral imperative.

Upper- and middle-class Victorians harbored deep anxieties over the deterioration of civilization that only intensified as the colonial project gained scope. The growth of the British empire resulted in an increasing British presence in formerly “uncivilized” spaces and the increased presence of colonized peoples in major industrial centers of Great Britain. Furthermore, the expansion of working-class leisure time and mass-manufactured garments caused “traditional markers of class [...] to break down,” so that “Victorians were plagued by worries about authenticity and recognition, how to tell who was who on the crowded and anonymous city streets.”⁷⁹ These worries contributed to mounting “tension [...] between a city’s center and its slums,” which were often “described [...] as foreign lands, although, worryingly, they were foreign without being far-off.”⁸⁰ The conceptualization of slums as “foreign” yet familiar mirrors the characterization of heathens in the *Idylls*. Alarming yet amorphous, the “heathen horde” relentlessly threatens to occupy and overrun Arthur’s kingdom. Like the poor living in the slums, the heathens carry a risk of contamination, laying “waste” to everything they touch. The concept of “waste” in the *Idylls* refers to a broader Arthurian theme of the wasteland inhabited by the Fisher King, but it also carries implications of literal waste, just as slums were considered morally and physically unsanitary. Slums are furthermore

⁷⁹ Steinbach, *Understanding the Victorians*, 19.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.* 23.

associated with animal dwellings, just as heathens in the *Idylls* are explicitly associated with “beasts,” especially wolves.

This is not to say that Tennyson specifically had the slums or their inhabitants in mind when writing of the heathens. Nor should it imply that the working poor were any less Christian than other Victorians, although they were sometimes viewed as such by their upper- and middle-class counterparts. In his extensive work *London Labour and the London Poor* (1851), English writer Henry Mayhew refers to the “street folk” of London specifically as “the British heathen” and suggests that the Christianizing efforts in the colonies should be postponed until “we have Christianized all *our own* heathen.”⁸¹ The slums and their inhabitants are depicted as wicked and inscrutable, a mass of people “whose “consciences [...] are as little developed as their intellects” and “of whom the public has less knowledge than of the most distant tribes of the earth.”⁸² Mayhew, the middle-class researcher, becomes analogous to an explorer, a “traveller in the undiscovered country of the poor.”⁸³

Indeed, the connection between slums and colonies and other “uncivilized” spaces runs deep in the Victorian national consciousness. Matthew McKean writes:

urban writers appropriated the language of imperialism [to describe London’s poor], including derisive comparisons between “natives” in “darkened” colonies and the “undeserving poor” at home. As the imperial and racial dimensions of the East-West binary evolved, the image of London’s two parts doubling for England and empire became confirmed in the hearts and minds of Britons. [...] [T]he city’s debased citizens became equated with *colonial intruders* who many assumed were responsible for their own degenerate condition.⁸⁴

⁸¹ Henry Mayhew, *London Labour and the London Poor; a Cyclopedia of the Condition and Earnings of Those that Will Work, Those that Cannot Work, and Those that Will Not Work*, vol. 1 (London: Griffin, Bohn, and Company, 1851) 318, 101; emphasis in original.

⁸² Mayhew, *London Labour and the London Poor*, 101; iii.

⁸³ *Ibid.* iii.

⁸⁴ Matthew K. McKean, “Rethinking Late-Victorian Slum Fiction: The Crowd and Imperialism at Home,” *English Literature in Transition, 1880-1920* 54, no. 1 (2011): 24, emphasis mine.

The moral dimensions of the colonial project naturally lent themselves, in perhaps circuitous fashion, to moral issues at home. The belief that the poor had become so through their own choices and moral or spiritual failings—indeed, their own heathenism—mirrors the idea that the *Idylls*' heathens make the choice to reject the Christian God and wreak havoc on Christian land. Tennyson almost always refers to the heathens en masse, tapping into a pervasive fear of being “overrun.” This fear was understandable (if not particularly legitimate) on the part of wealthy Victorians, given the tendency for abandoned middle-class homes to decline quickly into tenement buildings—their size made them prohibitively expensive for any other class—and the persistent deterioration of the class markers of dress and leisure spaces. Likewise, the heathens of the *Idylls* almost always appear in the form of a threateningly faceless and inhuman “horde.”

There is an interesting connection between the narrativization of the Victorian slum as an invasive, “foreign” element and Arthur’s expulsion of the heathen host from Cameliard. Arthur’s ability to drive the heathens out of Britain displays a push toward creating a unified Britain by expelling some unwanted element. Indeed, an 1896 edition of *The Commonwealth* likens “the mass of a London slum” to a “diseased limb” on the seemingly healthy body of London “for which our suffering must be intensified until the disease is cured.”⁸⁵ Both heathens and slums represent a diseased element that must either be fixed or eliminated before its contamination spreads to the rest of the sovereign body.

⁸⁵ R. F. Horton, “It would do us all good...” in “Texts for the Times,” *The Commonwealth* 9 (1896): 336.

Similarly, the heathen invaders threaten to overwhelm and thus obliterate their victims. Tennyson plays on Victorian anxieties surrounding slums to establish Arthur's ability to purify and therefore preserve his realm, and Arthur's initial success in this endeavor provides comfort for an imperialist reader. The colonizer, despite residing in a position of power, always retains anxiety over identity. Though in theory the two may remain entirely separate, in practice colonization always involves a sexual and therefore reproductive element that blurs the lines between colonizer and colonized. Arthur's ability to expel the heathens from the Britain of the *Idylls* revivifies the reader's faith in the persistence of the British nation in the face of moral, spiritual, and cultural threats that slums and colonies might represent.

The fear of being overrun by the poorer classes was inextricable from a fear of being overrun by the colonized subject, psychologically as well as (and often more so than) materially. British colonization—and white European colonization in general—was founded on a deep-seated belief that “civilized” European societies were superior to “primitive” or “savage” communities outside of Europe. Ideas about evolution in the late nineteenth century inspired new anxieties over degeneration either as a result of “over-civilization,” like the Eloi of H. G. Wells's *The Time Machine*, or of regression, the idea that “evolution was not a simple, one-way progressive process; that civilization was only skin-deep, and that there was a savage beneath the skin of every civilized man, waiting to reclaim him,” in the same way that the working poor reclaimed spaces abandoned by the upper classes.⁸⁶ Lyn Pykett, a Victorian scholar and member of the British Association for Victorian Studies, connects this fear of degeneration to tales of “unchaining of the

⁸⁶ Lyn Pykett, “Sensation and the fantastic in the Victorian novel” in *The Cambridge Companion to the Victorian Novel*, ed. Deirdre David. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 209.

beast in man” in the gothic novel. Particularly relevant to this analysis is the concept of “imperial gothic,” a term coined by Patrick Brantlinger, which includes, among other narratives, “atavistic fantasies about the reversion of whole civilizations to barbarism.”⁸⁷

While the heathen invasion narrative of the *Idylls* cannot strictly be read as reversion given the poem’s setting in the distant past (and, perhaps more obviously, the fact that *Idylls* is not a gothic novel in either spirit or form) the genre of “imperial gothic” and Tennyson’s swarming heathen hordes both stem from the same anxieties over the susceptibility of civilization to the apparently contagious barbarity of the colonies. Arthur’s ability to eject the heathens and therefore protect the island from this contagion marks him as a key aspect of the Camelot’s civility.

Arthur’s ability to tame the heathen presence is intimately connected with his ability to restore lands which have been laid to waste (waste lands) to fertile, productive spaces. By the nineteenth century, the Roman concept of *occupatio* had become an important ideological underpinning of many imperialist ventures. Andrew Fitzmaurice explains:

The most persistent idea driving European expansion [in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries] was [...] the notion that states, and indeed humanity itself, could only preserve themselves through the exploitation of the earth’s resources to which all people had a common right, but to which particular people gained superior and particular rights through their acts of exploitation or occupation.⁸⁸

While other, less powerful kings fought one another and “wasted all the land” (CA 7), Arthur actually *utilizes* the land, thus gaining “superior and particular rights” to the island of Britain through legitimate occupation of the island.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Fitzmaurice, *Sovereignty, Property and Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 4.

Though the phrase “waste land” appears only once in the *Idylls*, as I mentioned in chapter two, the word “waste” appears often, usually linked to wildernesses or the lands of lesser kings. Before Arthur’s coming, Cameliard is covered in

great tracts of wilderness,
Wherein the beast was ever more and more,
But man was less and less (CA 10-12)

Arthur clears the wilderness and restores the island to its most proper and legitimate use as a human habitation, as though his very presence has a civilizing effect the island. The beast threatens to overrun the kingdom, growing “more and more” in the endless swathes of wilderness, but Arthur arrives to subdue it and rescue the dwindling human element. Man’s growing “less and less” on one level suggests anxiety over the ability of the species to persist, but the duality of “more and more” and “less and less” implies that perhaps man has also begun to transform into beast, as the uncivilized wilderness causes him to regress further and further until he is no better than the beast. Arthur acts as a civilizing force, symbolic of British influence in the colonies. His ability to make use of the island where other kings allowed it to go to waste proves that he is best suited to rule it.

After Arthur arrives, he rescues the land from its current status as a barren, infertile, wild place:

Then [Arthur] drave
The heathen; after, slew the beast, and felled
The forest, letting in the sun, and made
Broad pathways for the hunter and the knight (CA 58-61).

Arthur slays the beast in the sense that he kills threatening creatures, but he also slays the beast in the hearts of men, driving away the heathen by civilizing him and turning him back into a man. Felling the forest suggests a rejection of the wilderness and the waste it

symbolizes, and the sunlight it allows through symbolizes the light of realization and progress while simultaneously underlining the sun's importance in agriculture. Finally, creating pathways for the "hunter" underscores man's superiority to beasts, permanently establishing the boundaries between human occupation and the unusable, threatening wilderness. The knight is the symbol Arthur's court on which nineteenth century gentlemen based their actions, and here it appears as the pinnacle of civilization. While hunters may exist in the wilderness as a civilizing force, the knight exists only in already civilized spaces and defends that civilization from outside influence.

The animal "beast" appears just as invasive as its human counterpart. Before Arthur's arrival there are

none or few to scare or chase the beast;
 So that wild dog, and wolf and boar and bear
 Came night and day, and rooted in the fields,
 And wallowed in the gardens of the King (CA 22-25).

That "none or few" could chase away these beasts emphasizes Arthur's ability to draw together enough men without fear to take on the animalistic threat; thus Arthur's military power lies not only in his own might but also in his ability to unite his knights and direct their strength toward protecting the land. A vast variety of creatures threaten the court, including the wolf, the symbol of Saxon invaders in the *Historia Regum Britanniae*. Their "rooting in the fields" hints again at anxiety over waste and agricultural infertility. Arthur's elimination of the beasts allows fields to be replanted and increases the utility of the land. Significantly, these animals represent an *incessant* menace: they come night and day, an unceasing tide of invasion that threatens even internal, private spaces like the King's gardens. "King" may refer to the king of Camelard, but the capitalization

suggests that it might refer to Arthur. “Gardens of the King” in that case refers not to gardens that the king already owns, but to gardens that rightfully belong to him.

The wolf presents a particularly potent threat:

And ever and anon the wolf would steal
 The children and devour, but now and then,
 Her own brood lost or dead, lent her fierce teat
 To human sucklings; and the children, housed
 In her foul den, there at their meat would growl,
 And mock their foster mother on four feet,
 Till, straightened, they grew up to wolf-like men,
 Worse than the wolves (CA 26-33).

These lines strengthen the connection between Saxon invaders and the wolf, who represents a sexual threat as well as a violent one. The wolf either steals and devours children, thus limiting the possibility for self-preservation as a species, or adopts them and creates monsters. The phrase “between the man and beast [we/they] die” (CA 45, 78) occurs twice in this idyll, emphasizing the idea that existence in the space *between* man and beast—neither one nor the other—that is most threatening. Children caught between man and beast are worse even than the beast, because they act as the physical incarnation of deep fears over the permeability of certain boundaries.

In Anglo-Saxon literature, many monsters are created by somehow distorting the human body or combining it with that of an animal, thus creating hybrid beings that threaten to destabilize both the boundaries of the body and the very identity of the human subject. Gothic novels use the animal-man hybrid of to represent the colonial subject, as racist pseudosciences like phrenology posited that colonial subjects were uncivilized because they were closer to animals and therefore to their baser selves. Arthur eliminates that threat by subduing the wolf and reinforcing boundaries between man and beast, self

and Other, and thus reinforces the boundaries of Britain as a whole, materially and ideologically.

As Tennyson uses animalistic language to demonize and subordinate the heathens, he similarly utilizes Victorian beliefs about race to identify Arthur with the “superior,” even angelic, Anglo-Saxons to lift Arthur above other characters. As I have discussed, the British of the Victorian era believed they were largely superior to their colonized counterparts and saw it as their duty to civilize “savages.” The same evolutionary ideas that led to fears over degeneration led to the construction of justifications for British colonial rule. In the 1860s, “scientific” and other arguments offered evidence for a racial hierarchy. Steinbach comments that the majority of British Victorians “believed there were separate human races, and that whites were superior—mentally, morally, and often physically—to nonwhites” and that racial superiority confirmed “their right to govern and civilize the rest of the world.”⁸⁹

At the top of this racial hierarchy was the blond, blue-eyed Anglo-Saxon, around which Victorian society had built up a number of idealistic myths. Indeed, Marion Sherwood notes that as an English origin myth, Anglo-Saxonism “supersed[ed] traditional accounts represented by Geoffrey of Monmouth’s twelfth-century *History* and widely accepted throughout the late Middle Ages [that Britons originated from Troy].”⁹⁰ While the medieval texts glorify the Trojan empire, the newly formed British empire glorified instead the racial heritage they believed made them superior to colonized peoples. Such an origin myth also had implications for ideals of masculinity. Queen

⁸⁹ Steinbach, *Understanding the Victorians*, 61.

⁹⁰ Marion Sherwood, *Tennyson and the Fabrication of Englishness* (Houndsmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013) 105.

Victoria's favorite preacher, Charles Kingsley, wrote a fictional piece on the Anglo-Saxon king Hereward the Wake, in which the long-dead king acts as a model of "the old berserker spirit, a primitive energy and simplicity much needed to save mid-nineteenth-century Britain."⁹¹ As a paragon of masculinity and strength, the Anglo-Saxon becomes a talisman against the feminizing effects civilization was believed to have on men.

Many histories praising Anglo-Saxon virtues appeared in the nineteenth century, including John Richard Green's *History of the English People* (1874), which lauded the political and military organization of Germanic tribes as well as the "Englishman's" warring spirit. At one point, Green references a story about St. Gregory the Great from Bede's *Ecclesiastical History* in which Gregory witnesses two boys for sale in a Roman market and is struck by the beauty of "[t]heir white bodies, their fair faces, their golden hair."⁹² Upon learning that they are "Angles," Gregory responds "Not Angles but angels, with faces so angel-like!"⁹³ The angelic nature of these boys and of Anglo-Saxons in general situates them in the liminal space between human and supernatural that Arthur similarly occupies.

Tennyson hints at the connection between the Anglo Saxon Arthur and angels throughout the Idylls, noting in "The Coming of Arthur," for example, that "there be those who deem him more than a man, / And dream he dropt from heaven" (CA 181-82). This connection is made explicit finally in "The Last Tournament," a sorrowful lament for the now-faded glory of the court, in which the comparison made between Arthur and

⁹¹ Velma Bourgeois Richmond, "Historical Novels to Teach Anglo-Saxonism," in *Anglo-Saxonism and the Construction of Social Identity*, ed. Allen J. Frantzen and John D. Niles (Gainesville, Fla.: University Press of Florida, 1997), 182.

⁹² John Richard Green, *History of the English People*, volume 1 (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1880), 37.

⁹³ Green, *History of the English People*, 37-38.

the angel Michael serves to illustrate a disconnect between Arthur and his knights. Arthur is somehow beyond human; his greatest flaw is his inability to recognize others' imperfections, because he himself is perfect. Tristram expresses his frustration over having pledged himself to such a king to Isolde, and recalls his first glimpse of Arthur:

His hair, a sun that rayed from off a brow
 Like hillsnow high in heaven, the steel-blue eyes,
 The golden beard that clothed his lips with light—
 [...]
 his foot was on a stool
 Shaped as a dragon; *he seemed to me no man,*
But Michael trampling Satan (LT 661-68, emphasis mine).

Like the boy slaves witnessed by Gregory, Arthur's golden hair and blue eyes make him seem more angel than man. Indeed, the natural metaphors make him seem almost a pagan god, the spirit of some great mountain over which the sun has begun to crest; his entire face is circled in light from his hair and beard, as though he were the sun or possessed of some bright angelic halo. That Tristram equates the dragon with Satan rather than a symbol of Britain (like the Welsh dragon) indicates his distance from the court. Despite this incongruity, the image of Michael subduing the fallen Lucifer retains its power and recalls Arthur's singular ability to expel the heathen hosts, a human personification of the devil, in "The Coming of Arthur." Furthermore, Michael's triumph over Satan occurs in a time before time, just like Tennyson's constructed British national mythos. Tristram's reference to "that weird legend of his birth" and "Merlin's mystic babble about his end" (LT 664-65) confirms this connection: Arthur is something more than human whose birth and death are shrouded in mystery, a liminal figure who belongs to a time and space before time became linear or regional identity coalesced.

Crucially Arthur's ability to unify the realm, to "[draw] all [the] petty pryncedoms

under him, / Their king and head, and [make] a realm, and [reign]" (CA 18-19) derives from "the puissance of his Table Round" (CA 17). The unity of the island is dependent on the unity of the Round Table, and Arthur's "puissance," his power, lies in his ability to bring the knights of the Round Table together to reach a common goal, rather than in his own innate might. These lines appear again, almost word for word, at the end of "The Coming of Arthur":

And Arthur and his knighthood for a space
Were all one will, and through that strength the King
Drew in the petty pryncedoms under him,
Fought, and in twelve great battles overcame
The heathen hordes, and made a realm and reigned (CA 514-18).

Once again, Arthur's capacity to draw together the "petty pryncedoms" into one larger empire, to "[make] a realm and [reign]," and even, here, to "over[come] / The heathen hordes" is explicitly reliant on the Round Table's collaboration. He achieves success because he is of "one will" with his knighthood; internal harmony leads to the construction of a great and powerful nation, just as internal dissonance leads to its destruction. The King draws strength from his knights just as they draw strength from him.

Arthur's court finally falls when conflict erupts within the Round Table, leading to his empire's disintegration. At Guinevere and Arthur's wedding, the bishop Dubric declares:

Reign ye, and live and love, and make the world
Other, and may thy Queen be one with thee,
And all this Order of thy Table Round
Fulfil the boundless purpose of their king! (CA 470-75)

The dramatic irony of Dubric's charge for Guinevere and Arthur to be "one" lends ominous import to his proclamation that Arthur will "make the world / Other." To make

the *world* “Other” emphasizes the insular nature of his court, but the reader’s awareness that Arthur will become alienated from his queen—usurped by the “other man,” as it were—and his court suggests that Other also refers to internal divisions. For now, however, the fellowship is whole, ready to “Fulfil the *boundless* purpose of their King.” The Order of the Round Table is meant to be a tool to help the king achieve his goals, which both themselves are boundless and may include the boundlessness of his empire. “Boundless,” however, appears portentous in retrospect, as it is in part Arthur’s inability to place bounds on his expectations of the court (or, alternatively, the court’s inability to be “boundless,” and infinite like the not-quite-human Arthur) that leads to the destruction of the court.

Internal divisions come to a head in “The Passing of Arthur,” which narrates the final battle between Arthur and Mordred and Arthur’s departure to Avalon. Arthur reminisces, with Bedivere, about the days when they and the rest of the Round Table “brake the petty kings, and fought with Rome” and “thrust the heathen from the Roman wall” (PA 58-59). Now, however, Arthur’s “ill doom” is “[t]o war against [his] people and my knights” (PA 60-61). Internal conflict is agony for the king who has worked so hard to unite the realm. He conceives of the Round Table and of Britain at large as extensions of his own body, and every “stroke / That strikes [Arthur’s knights] dead” feels akin to his own death (PA 63-64). Arthur’s greatness makes his fall all the more tragic, and his deep anguish over the deaths of his knights, even as they make war against him, serves as a warning to readers of the dangers of internal conflict. Regionalism, while not necessarily (though occasionally) a cause of military disputes creates internal tension that weakens the empire as a whole. To fight with Scotland and Wales causes

metaphorical death to England—the countries are better when united into a larger whole. As Arthur asserts, “The king who fights his people fights himself” (PA 62). The nation—or national identity—that allows conflict within its own borders crumbles from the inside out.

Conclusion: Theories of Connection

Over the course of history, definitions of what it means to be a people or a nation have shifted, but the drive to “imagine,” per Anderson, cohesive communities to which we feel a sense of loyalty and belonging has never wavered. We are constantly creating and recreating divisions between the internal “self” of our own community and some externalized “Other,” establishing and reestablishing the difference between the “us” of those whom we trust and the “not us” of those whom we do not. In the twenty-first century, as in the nineteenth, these communities exist in the form of nations and our allegiance to one or the other is figured as nationalism, but at times of crisis we rely on national myths—fictions more potent than nationalism itself—to reaffirm our faith in the unity and dominance of our nation. The legend of King Arthur offers one such myth to the British people and their descendants, even outside the United Kingdom.

In these chapters, I have explored King Arthur’s connection to the construction of a British “national identity” in two very different time periods nevertheless suffering from similar confusion over the boundaries of community and self. I wish to end this exploration by again referencing to Anderson’s conception of the “nation.” While an application of this conception to the twelfth century texts is necessarily anachronistic, its construction provides useful ideological frameworks to examine both medieval and nineteenth century Arthuriana. In a discussion of what it means to write the “biography” of nations, Anderson comments: “All profound changes in consciousness, by their very nature, bring with them characteristic amnesias [out of which] [...] spring narratives.”⁹⁴ Fractures in cultural memory, whether caused by changing leadership, as in the twelfth

⁹⁴ Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 204.

century, or a redrawing of the nation's borders, as in the nineteenth, necessitate the construction of narratives to create some sense of continuity between before and after, "then" and "now." Crucially, the *Historia*, *Roman de Brut*, *Brut*, and *Idylls of the King* all recount stories of communities that no longer exist: the medieval texts operate under a framework that not only acknowledges but also foregrounds the end of British civilization, while the *Idylls of the King* follows a cyclical narrative that begins and ends with a wasteland from which Arthur is conspicuously missing.

Although these narratives do not explicitly begin with "the end," their internal structure relies on the awareness of the impending fracture of cultural memory. Anderson notes that because nations have no precise beginnings, "the nation's biography can not be written evangelically, 'down time,' through a long procreative chain of begettings," therefore "[t]he only alternative is to fashion it 'up time.'"⁹⁵ That is, cultural fictions always begin at a fixed point that is necessarily unconnected to the nation's beginning and write backward to some fictional "point of origin." The *Historia*, *Roman de Brut*, and the *Brut* all purport to begin at the actual founding of Britain, but this founding is in fact a construction of their own historical moment. While the story of Arthur theoretically possesses a logical starting point at Arthur's conception, such a starting point is antithetical to the unification of past, present, and future embedded in the *Idylls of the King*. Tennyson instead begins *in media res* at an unspecified point within Arthur's reign, and on returning to the "precise" moment of conception confounds even the seemingly straightforward temporal logic of such an event. In these texts, ambiguity ironically offers a way to clarify a community's borders.

⁹⁵ Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 205.

In some sense, all histories, whether factual or fictional, are simply attempts to create some cohesion between the past, present, and, implicitly, the future. According to Anderson's formulation, the construction of a nation as a unified concept is not necessary for its own sake. Rather, the idea of the nation offers citizens of that nation a sense of immortality; to exist within the apparently timeless bounds of a given nation is to, yourself, be timeless. Human fictions, like nationalism and mythology, exist to foster connection within communities across geographic and temporal lines. This connection both creates and transcends boundaries, just as King Arthur does.

Appendix A Brief Publication History

Tennyson experimented some with Arthurian literature before beginning the idylls. In 1833, he published an anthology of poems (*Poems* 1833), including the famous “The Lady of Shalott,” which draws inspiration from the tale of Lancelot’s suicidal would-be lover, Elaine.⁹⁶ The collection was panned by critics, and Tennyson would not publish again until 1842. Nevertheless, he continued to write. “Morte D’Arthur,” a poem-within-a-poem that would become “The Passing of Arthur” (1869) was published in the 1842 collection (also called *Poems*), but was likely begun much earlier, soon after the death of Tennyson’s good friend Arthur Henry Hallam in September of 1833.⁹⁷ The project of the *Idylls* therefore stems in part from Tennyson’s grief over the passing of his own Arthur. In 1850, Tennyson published a verse elegy for Hallam called *In Memoriam A.H.H.* In part due to the success of *In Memoriam*, he was appointed poet laureate in December of 1850 after Wordsworth’s death in April.

The first version of *Idylls of the King* was published in 1859 and consisted of four poems: “Enid,” “Elaine,” “Vivien,” and “Guinevere.” The first of these would later be split into “The Marriage of Geraint” and “Geraint and Enid.” “Vivien” was eventually expanded and renamed “Merlin and Vivien.” In like manner, “Elaine” became “Lancelot and Elaine,” shifting focus from the character of Elaine to Lancelot and the relationship between the two. Though Tennyson’s primary source for the *Idylls* was Malory’s *Le Morte Darthur*, he draws inspiration from a wide range of Arthurian and Celtic myths;

⁹⁶ Alfred, Lord Tennyson, *Poems* (London: Edward Moxon & Co., 1833).

⁹⁷ Alfred, Lord Tennyson, *Poems* (Boston: William D. Ticknor, 1842).

the events of “Enid” appear nowhere in Malory’s text and instead derive from a tale that appears in the Welsh *Mabinogion* and Chrétien de Troyes’s romance “Erec et Enide.”

Queen Victoria’s husband, Prince Albert, passed away in 1861, and in 1862 Tennyson wrote a dedication to Prince Albert for a new edition of the *Idylls*.⁹⁸ *The Holy Grail and Other Poems* followed in 1869, which began with four idylls: “The Coming of Arthur,” “The Holy Grail,” “Pelleas and Ettarre,” and “The Passing of Arthur,” a revised version of 1842’s “Morte D’Arthur.”⁹⁹ In 1872, he released *Gareth and Lynette: Etc.*, a short collection containing “Gareth and Lynette” and “The Last Tournament” (which had been published in *Contemporary Review* a year earlier). The collection began with a paragraph explaining where these idylls fell with respect to previously published works and a promise that a forthcoming collection would contain the entire series in its proper order.¹⁰⁰ As promised, such a collection was published including a new epilogue, “To the Queen,” which directly addressed Queen Victoria and her grief over Albert’s death. Finally, in 1885, the idylls were completed with the publication of “Balin and Balan” in *Tiresias and Other Poems*. An asterisk informs readers that “Balin and Balan” is an introduction to “Merlin and Vivien.”¹⁰¹ Tennyson passed away seven years later, in 1892.

⁹⁸ Alfred, Lord Tennyson, *Idylls of the King*, a new edition (London: Edward Moxon & Co., 1862).

⁹⁹ Alfred, Lord Tennyson, *The Holy Grail: And other Poems* (London: Strahan 1870).

¹⁰⁰ Alfred, Lord Tennyson, *Gareth and Lynette: Etc.* (London: Strahan 1872).

¹⁰¹ Alfred, Lord Tennyson, *Tiresias and Other Poems* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1885).

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