CARL SRIGLEY PYRDUM, III
Arthur the Bastard King: Legitimacy and Inheritance in the Arthurian Literature of Medieval England
(Under the Direction of JUDITH SHAW)

This thesis examines three works of Arthurian literature, Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Reggum Britannie*, the 12th century *Of Arthour and Merlin*, and Thomas Malory's *La Morte Darthur*, correlating the depiction of the circumstances of Arthur's siring, birth, and accession with the laws and attitudes concerning primogeniture in medieval England. The thesis seeks to prove that Arthur is a figure whose dubious birth tale is seized by authors with political agendas and used as a means of commenting upon and arguing against the system of primogeniture, revealing it to be a construct insufficient to produce kings and heirs fit to rule England.

INDEX WORDS: King Arthur, Primogeniture, Inheritance, Succession, Medieval England (1100-1500), Thomas Malory, Geoffrey of Monmouth, *Historia Reggum Britannie* (History of the Kings of England), *La Morte Darthur*, *Of Arthour and Merlin*

ARTHUR THE BASTARD KING: LEGITIMACY AND INHERITANCE IN THE ARTHURIAN LITERATURE OF MEDIEVAL ENGLAND

by

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DEDICATION

This paper is dedicated to Brian Crawford, without whose knowledge of Old French and constant haranguing I wouldn't have finished this paper on time. If only more of that haranguing had been about the paper, and not about putting your name in the dedication.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Arthur has long stood at the juncture of the worlds of fantasy and reality. In 1301, Edward I, King of England, facing yet another rebellion in Scotland, wrote to Pope Boniface VII with the following justification for his rule over that kingdom:

> Item Arturus rex Britonum princeps famosissimus Scociam sibi rebellem subiecit, et pene totam gentem deleuit et postea quemdam nomine Anguselum in regem Scocie prefecit et cum postea idem rex Arturus apud ciutitatem Legionum festum faceret celeberimum, interfuerunt ibidem omnes reges sibi subiecti inter quos Anguselus rex Scocie seruicium pro regno Scocie exhibens debitum gladium regis Arturi detulit ante ipsum et successiue omnes reges Scocie omnibus regibus Britonum fuere subiecti.
>
> (Arthur, king of the Britons, that most famous leader, made subject to his authority rebellious Scotland, and destroyed nearly all its people and then appointed as king of Scotland one Anguselus. When later the same King Arthur had a celebrated feast at Caerleon, all the kings subject to him attended, among whom Anguselus, king of Scotland, displaying his service for the kingdom of Scotland, bore King Arthur's sword before him and subsequently all kings of Scotland have been subject to all kings of the Britons.) [1]

Not to be bested by this display of pseudo-historical bravado, the Scots fired back in kind, conceding that while it was true that Arthur had conquered the Scottish kingdom, since he had died without issue, Scotland had subsequently reverted back to its independent status. Edward I had a habit of using Arthur to justify his imperial ambitions. On Easter day in 1278, he and his wife Eleanor visited Glastonbury Abbey, the resting

[1] E.L.G. Stones (ed. & trans.), *Anglo-Scottish Relations 1174-1328: Some Selected Documents* (Edinburgh and London, 1965), no.30 364-366. Edward's evidence was drawn from Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britannie* and *The Prophecies of Merlin*.

place of Arthur and Guinevere's bones, exhumed the bones with all due ceremony, and re-interred them, sending a message to the then rebelling Welsh that Arthur the sleeping king would remain sleeping, and Wales would remain under the English throne.[2]

Though Edward was a particularly gifted propagandist, he was hardly the first and certainly not the last English king to justify his rule by referencing the Arthurian legacy. Many a medieval genealogy was constructed to show that a noble descended from Arthur, a neat trick considering that in most versions of the Arthur story, Arthur died without an heir, as the Scots had told Edward. Those genealogies had one other glaring problem. In many accounts, King Arthur had no legitimate claim on the throne of England since he was born of an adulterous union through the magic of a half-demonic sorcerer. The Scottish Arthurian chroniclers were quick to support the idea of Arthur's bastardy as well, even though Arthur's claim on Scotland would have been one of conquest, not rightful succession, so the question of his parentage would have been fairly irrelevant in their case.

New Historicist criticism contends that "the work of art is not itself a pure flame that lies at the source of our speculations … it is the product of a negotiation between a creator or class of creators, equipped with a complex, communally-shared repertoire of conventions, and the institutions and practices of society."[3] For the Arthurian literature of England, this statement holds true in a particularly substantial way. Critics such as Catherine Batt and Rosalind Field have argued that for the people of England, "Arthurian material, even in the romance mode, could rarely be detached from its historic or geographic origins to be entirely ahistorical or exotic, as it could be for the public for the romances of Chrétien and his followers in French, German, Italian, Spanish or any of the other languages of medieval Europe."[4] What, then, does it say about the conventions and institutions of medieval English society that its paragon of

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[2] James P. Carley, "Arthur in English History," *Arthur of the English*, ed. W.R.J. Barron (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1999), 50-51.
[3] Stephen Greenblatt, "Towards a Poetics of Culture," *The New Historicism*, ed. H. Aram Veeser (New York and London: Routledge, 1989), 12.
[4] Catherine Batt and Rosaline Field, "The Romance Tradition," *The Arthur of the English*, W.R.J. Barron, ed. (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1999), 60. Batt and Field extrapolate from Lacy, N.J. (ed.), *The New Arthurian Encyclopedia* (Chicago and London, 1991), 160-2; 182-8; 254-7;425-8.

kingliness was of dubious birth, and that the king through whom subsequent kings claimed their throne was arguably a bastard and most certainly the son of an adulterer?[5]

As demonstrated amply by Edward and the Scottish, Arthurian material was a double-edged sword, since his story involves both a great triumph, the conquest of Europe, and a great tragedy, his ultimate fall to Mordred. By invoking the name of Arthur, kings like Edward could justify their imperial ambitions, but with that invocation came the possibility that any negative qualities of Arthur might likewise reflect upon them. A king could be celebrated by comparison to Arthur, but he could also be shown to possess those failings that led Arthur to tragedy. Moreover, just as kings could model themselves on Arthur, authors could model their Arthurs on kings, emphasizing or de-emphasizing the characteristics of the Arthur that they constructed in order to make his virtues or flaws more relevant to the time in which the author was writing.

Nowhere is this tendency of amplification and suppression more apparent than in the varying accounts of Arthur's birth. The dubious nature of Arthur's birth tale can be used either to support or to deny a would-be king's claim to the throne. If Arthur is able to rise to the throne in spite of his dubious birth, then that rise is a powerful argument that kings need not have sterling pedigrees. If Arthur's bastardy is suppressed or deleted by an author, then a real-world claimant's illegitimacy would be seen, in the context of an Arthurian tradition, to be a similar bar to success. It should come as no surprise then that when Arthur's birth-tale is altered significantly in an English work, that alteration comes during a time when matters of inheritance and succession are in contention. This paper seeks to investigate the interplay between the historical circumstances of inheritance and succession in England and the literary depictions of Arthur's birth tale and rise to the throne.

Bastardy has been discussed by modern critics in conjunction with the Arthurian tales before, most recently in Rosemary Morris' s excellent analysis of Arthur' s various birth accounts in *The Character of*

[5] Arthur appears in the genealogies of the Mortimers in the fourteenth century and the earls of Warwick in the fifteenth century, as well as in the genealogy crafted for Edward IV. Henry VII claimed kinship to Arthur and even named his son after his illustrious ancestor, though an official genealogy has not been produced. Henry IV claimed to be the "vray successer du puissant empereur Arthur." For the genealogies, see Mary E. Griffin, "Cadwalader, Arthur and Brutus in the Wigmore Manuscript," *Speculum*, 16 (1941), 111. For Henry IV, see Bodleian Library MS Douce 271, ff.40^{r}, 43^{r}.

King Arthur in English Literature and in Jessica Watson's *Bastardy as Gifted Status in Mallory and Chaucer*. Morris' s discussion is by far the most complete of the two, though she often falls back on the simple guiding principle that "those hostile to Arthur will make capital of the bastardy charge; those favorable to him will try in various ingenious ways to refute it." She is quite correct in continuing with "In any case, the consequences of the birth-tale may colour Arthur' s whole life, and not merely add excitement to its beginning,"[6] but this paper will show that the troubled circumstances of Arthur' s birth can be used in far more complex ways.

This study will begin with Geoffrey of Monmouth and his *Historia Regum Britannie*. Although Geoffrey's work was not written in English, it is the seminal version of the Arthurian story. All subsequent writers take their cues from Geoffrey. Any ambiguity in Geoffrey's account of Arthur must be dealt with by subsequent writers, amplified or muted according to their own agenda. Geoffrey purposefully shaped the character of Arthur and the details of his birth in order to comment upon the politics of the kings and would-be kings of his day. The birth-tale that Geoffrey assigns to Arthur raises strong doubts about his legitimacy. That he is held up as a king to be emulated is of special importance given that during Geoffrey's day, the question of just whom should rise to the throne following Henry I's death was in contention. Geoffrey dedicated his text to one of the likely claimants to the throne, Henry's bastard son Robert of Gloucester, urging him to action covertly by depicting Arthur as a king whose claim to the throne is not hindered by his dubious birth.

The second section examines the twelfth-century poem *Of Arthour and Merlin*, the next major English text to engage questions of legitimacy and inheritance by manipulating the circumstances of the birth and accession of England's ideal king. Like Geoffrey, *Of Arthour and Merlin* depicts an Arthur whose claim to the throne is not fully legitimate according to primogenitary custom, but *Of Arthour and Merlin* goes further than Geoffrey, making Arthur's accession to the throne much more difficult. By forcing Arthur to face down a baronial rebellion caused by his illegitimacy, the author of *Of Arthour and Merlin* argues against those who would use legitimacy as a key factor in determining the future of the kingdom. The

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[6] Rosemary Morris, *The Character of King Arthur in Medieval Literature* (Rowman & Littlefied: D.S. Brewer, 1982), 25-26.

poem contrasts the reign of Arthur, the illegitimate heir, against that of Uther, a legitimate successor who failed to create peace and stability in England. Ultimately, *Of Arthour and Merlin* places faith in neither dynasty nor blood but in human virtue and personal strength. Matters of inheritance law are shown to be divisive and ultimately irrelevant in the choice of a king and the maintenance of a nation.

The final section treats the circumstances of Arthur's birth, rise, and fall as depicted in Sir Thomas Malory's *La Morte Darthur*. The doubts about Arthur's legitimacy first raised by Geoffrey were finally silenced by *La Morte Darthur*, where Arthur emerges a fully legitimate king, with every rightful claim on the throne. Such is to be expected, given the political climate in which Malory was writing, where every candidate for the English throne had to fight off rivals who charged illegitimacy. Malory's legitimate Arthur is not, however, a simple mirror of the dictates of Malory's era. In depicting the ultimate failure of the reign of an unquestionably legitimate king, Malory shows that legitimacy is no key to success, no proof against the terrors of civil war.

All three works engage the question of Arthur's legitimacy in a far more involved way than current scholarship suggests. Arthur's bastardy is not a detail limited to accounts hostile to the English Arthurian tradition, like those of the Scottish chroniclers or the French romance writers, and his legitimacy is not a facet of only those English works that celebrate him as an ideal king. Indeed, Arthur's dubious legitimacy has been a crucial facet of his characterization, from Geoffrey of Monmouth onward.

CHAPTER 2

GEOFFREY OF MONMOUTH'S *HISTORIA REGUM BRITANNIE*

At or around 1136, Geoffrey of Monmouth completed work on the *Historia Regum Britannie*.[7] It is in this work that the figure of Arthur is first fully conceived for the English audience. It is literally the first treatment of Arthur's conception that we have reason to suppose exists, even given Geoffrey's words to the contrary. Though much critical energy has been spent trying to locate the "certain very ancient book"[8] that Geoffrey claims as his source, its existence has been dismissed by modern scholarship as a rhetorical tool utilized frequently by medieval authors to lend credibility to their work. Such dismissal is by no means an exclusively modern phenomenon. "It is quite clear," wrote William of Newburgh, "that everything this man [Geoffrey] wrote about Arthur and his successors, or indeed about his predecessors from Vortigan onwards, was made up, partly by himself and partly by others, either from an inordinate love of lying, or for the sake of pleasing the Britons."[9] William was writing in 1190, a scant forty years after Geoffrey's death.

Regardless of whether or not Geoffrey's account of Arthur's life and death, or even of his existence is true, one thing is clear, that the English people wanted to believe it. It fulfilled a national need for a shared history at a time when one was desperately needed, because the nobility was of one persuasion and the populace of another.[10] Though Geoffrey's work was written in Latin, subsequent translations and

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[7] Geoffrey of Monmouth was born around 1100. Through signatures on charters, we know that he was affiliated with the college of St. George at Oxford, and he may have been one of the Augustinian canons there. Twice his signature appears as *Galfridus Monemutensis, magister*, denoting some teaching role, even though Oxford did not formally exist during his lifetime. Little else is known about him, other than that he became bishop elect of Saint Asaph in Flintshire in 1151 and was ordained a priest the following year at Westminster. He died in 1155 according to the Welsh chronicles, likely never having visited his see, due to the wars of Owain Gwynedd in that region. In 1153 he was one of the bishops who witnessed the Treaty of Westminster between King Stephen and Henry FitzEmpress. See Michael J. Curley, *Geoffrey of Monmouth* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1994), 1-6.

[8] Geoffrey of Monmouth, *The History of the Kings of England*, translated with an introduction by Lewis Thorpe (London: Penguin Books, 1966), 51.

[9] William of Newburgh, *Historia Rerum Anglicarum*, in *Chronicles of the reigns of Stephen, Henry II, and Richard I*, ed. R. Howlett (Rolls Series), 1884-5.

[10] W.R.J. Barron, Introduction to *The Arthur of the English: The Arthurian Legend in Medieval English Life and Literature* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1999), xiiv.

adaptations spread its influence quickly, particularly the adaptation of Wace who, under the patronage of Henry II translated Geoffrey into the high tongue of the Anglo-Norman aristocracy, and that of La3amon, who adapted the tale to English verse.

Undoubtedly, the work of Nennius and the circulating oral traditions provided raw material for Geoffrey's account, as did the heroic model set forth by the Alexander romances.[11] But it was Geoffrey who drew these elements together into the seminal form that is modified, but never abandoned, by biographers of Arthur who follow. The story that Geoffrey gives of Arthur's conception and birth is sufficiently marvelous for a mythic hero. Like Hercules, the Alexander of medieval romance, Jesus, and many others, magical intervention is required for his creation. Unlike Hercules and Jesus, there is no godly intervention—indeed quite the contrary, for it is the demon-spawned Merlin who is the intercessor. The story is as follows:

> Uther, sick for love of Igrayne, the wife of his ally the Duke of Gorlois, lays siege to the Duke's castle to abduct her.[12] When the siege is unsuccessful, Uther enjoins Merlin to shapechange him into the likeness of her husband, so that he, along with Merlin and a shapechanged retainer may sneak behind enemy lines and allow Uther access to the woman. The plan works, and Arthur is conceived of Uther and Igrayne's union. The next morning word comes that the Duke was killed during the fighting that night. Uther and his companions slip away and rejoin their army. Due to the Duke's death, his castle falls soon thereafter and Uther takes Igrayne as his lawful wife. She gives birth to Arthur, who succeeds to the throne on Uther's death.

The *Historia Regum Britannie*'s account of the actual birth of Arthur is amazingly brief. Of the conception, he says only, "That night she conceived Arthur, the most famous of men, who subsequently won great renown by his outstanding bravery." Arthur, babe and child, does not appear until after Uther's death. All that is heard of him comes when Geoffrey writes that Uther and Igrayne, "lived together as

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[11] In the romance tradition, while Philip is away at war, Nectanabus, King of Egypt by magic tricked Alexander's mother Olympias and begot on her Alexander.

[12] As all of the different sources have different spellings for the names of Arthur's parents, for the purposes of this paper, Arthur's mother will be referred to as Igrayne and his father as Uther, unless directly quoted from one of the texts in question.

equals, united by their great love for each other; and they had a son and a daughter. The boy was called Arthur and the girl Anna."[13] Clearly, the interesting matter for Geoffrey was the circumstances surrounding the begetting, not the childhood of the boy that it produced.

A question that begs to be asked is, "Why Geoffrey choose to give Arthur such a fanciful (and troubled) birth-tale?"[14] Obviously, it makes the tale more interesting, something that Geoffrey, despite his protestations of writing a true history, cared about. Arthur is not the only king in the *Historia Regum Britannie*, but he is the most dramatically portrayed. He has the most face time of any of the kings, occupying nearly one fifth of the total pages in the work, even though his reign is a brief stint in the overall line of Britain's kings. In the *Historia*, Arthur is clearly held up as an ideal to which other kings should aspire, which makes the questionable nature of his birth all the more inexplicable given the support for the custom of primogeniture in Geoffrey's time.[15]

That Arthur is conceived in dubious circumstances is indubitable. Whether or not he is a bastard or the legitimate heir of Uther is another matter, and one not easily untangled. Since Arthur's parents, Uther and Igrayne, marry before the birth of their son, at face value Arthur is legitimate. Certainly, he is not a bastard by modern thinking, since now bastardy hinges on the time of birth, not the time of conception. However, medieval society recognized another circumstance that could render a birth illegitimate. According to medieval canon law, children born as the fruit of an adulterous union were bastards.[16] Since Arthur's mother was still married to the Duke of Gorlois when she conceived Arthur, he is by canon law a bastard. The question of his legitimacy does not end there, since English common law did not always agree with canon law, especially in questions of inheritance. Many have failed to recognize that Arthur might be a bastard in English sources, because of the difficulty in decoding the English laws concerning bastardy.

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[13] *Historia* (Thorpe), 207-208

[14] A question that Rosemary Morris asks to organize her discussion as well. See Morris, 26.

[15] Using Arthur as a point of comparison for nobility, both historic and contemporary to the author, is a tradition that was established long before Geoffrey took up the Arthur story. One king is said to be as brave as Arthur, in the life of St. Cadog, for example.

[16] For a more complete discussion of the vagaries of inheritance law, see Given-Wilson and Curteis, especially pages 42-45.

Officially, the law of the England stated that, "it does not belong to the king's court to enquire concerning bastardy."[17] Paradoxically, the English common law courts were the only arbiters of inheritance disputes. So in a question of inheritance where the legitimacy of a child was in doubt, the lay court entered suspension and sent a writ to the Church court for a determination.[18] When the verdict on the child's legitimacy was returned to the lay court, it then was in the position of enforcing the ruling handed down from the canon courts. The canon courts were regarded as the only source of information about legitimacy because marriage was an institution controlled by the Church. Only the Church could say whether or not a legitimate wedding had taken place, and if the wedding had occurred before or after the birth of a child.

Unofficially, the English courts did not want to send matters to the canon court for review, because of a difference in opinion concerning a subset of illegitimate children, mantle-children. A mantle-child is a child conceived by unmarried parents who marry after the child is born.[19] Mantle-children were distinguished from children of adulterous unions, and under special dispensation from the canon courts, they could be declared legitimate offspring of the parents' marriage. France's civil courts followed the canon courts and allowed their mantle-children, there known as *enfants du pail*, to inherit from their parents. England did not.

According to the 1190 legal treatise *Glanville*, named after Henry II's chief justicar Ranulf Glanville, "Although indeed the canons and the Roman laws consider such son as [a mantle child] the lawful heir, yet according to the law and custom of this realm, he shall in no measure be supported as heir in his claim upon the inheritance; nor can he demand the inheritance by the law of the realm."[20] Since English common law held that only the canon courts could determine legitimacy, it might seem that the English rejection of the custom of legitimization of mantle-children was hollow. This is not so. The

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[17] Given-Wilson and Curteis, 43.
[18] When a court is suspended, it takes no action until a ruling is made by another legal entity, at which point it may reconvene and continue to consider the original case, taking the ruling of the other entity into account.
[19] In the wedding ceremony, children of the couple betrothed were placed under a mantle (a care-cloth) which was spread over the parents as well, and from that point on they became lawful children of that marriage.
[20] Quoted in Given-Wilson and Curteis 44.

lawyers of England got around the problem by clarifying the role of the Church. The Church was limited to arbitration in cases where legitimacy was in question. In other words, the canon courts could rule on legitimacy by determining whether a valid marriage had occurred when there was some doubt as to the validity of the marriage. Since subsequent marriage was excluded from legitimization out of hand by the English courts, they were under no compulsion to ask the canon courts to arbitrate in the cases where a mantle-child wished to inherit by right. The matter was already clear according to the laws of the land. The marriage's validity was not an issue, the time of the child's birth was. The English court would not send the case down for arbitration, because there was no need for determination.

Because of this reticence to send matters to the canon courts, English common law had another precedent concerning canon arbitration that could affect Arthur's legitimacy. By rights, any child born to a man's wife was considered to be his heir and his property, even if adultery was suspected to have occurred. The only exception to this rule was if the adultery was unquestionable, either because of the known impotence of the husband or by proven non-access of the husband to the wife. The principle became something of a proverb in medieval England, "Who that bulleth my cow, the calf is mine." This is not to say that the English courts condoned adultery or championed sons born to adulterous unions.[21] Simply, in practice, unless the child was born during or in the first nine months after the husband was absent from the realm or county where he resided for two or more years, when it was to be "strongly presumed that he could not have had access to his wife," then the child was to be considered the legitimate offspring of the husband. [22] It is on this standard that many have failed to see the creditability of the charge of bastardy when leveled at Arthur.[23] Since he was an English king, the precepts of English common law should bind him and the question of his legitimacy. Since the English courts regularly ruled that aspersions of adultery

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[21] To argue that the English courts condoned adultery more than the French would be the same as arguing that American courts condone murder, because the burden of proof required for conviction in America is higher.

[22] Glanville again, as quoted in Given-Wilson and Curteis, 45.

[23] Bastardy has been discussed by modern critics in conjunction with the Arthurian tales before, most recently in Rosemary Morris' s excellent analysis of Arthur' s various birth accounts in Arthur *The Character of King Arthur in English Literature* and, and in Jessica Watson's *Bastardy as Gifted Status in Mallory and Chaucer*. Morris' s discussion is by far the most complete of the two, but she dismisses charges of bastardy against Arthur simply by reason of the two-year rule concerning adultery. It should be clear by this point that such a dismissal is contrary to the spirit of the law.

were not sufficient grounds to send the case to the canon courts, Arthur is legitimate. However, the stance of the English court differed from the French and canon courts not in intent, but instead in the burden of proof needed to take action against a potential case of adultery. Given incontrovertible evidence that the husband was not available to sire the offspring, the English courts would rule a child, even one born in wedlock, to be illegitimate—or rather, they would rule that canon arbitration was necessary, thus insuring a verdict of illegitimate to be handed up by the canon courts. This is important for many depictions of Arthur's birth, because the reader is often given incontrovertible evidence of adultery. This is the case in Geoffrey of Monmouth, where it is clearly shown that it was Uther who coupled with Igrayne the night that Arthur was sired, not her husband.

Behind each law, there is also the "spirit" of the law. By the letter of the law, so long as the Duke is dead before Arthur is sired, then Arthur is legitimate. By the spirit of both canon and common law, violation has occurred. Common law is concerned with inheritance. Canon law is concerned with punishing unsanctioned sexual activity. Uther' s taking of another man' s wife while in the form of that man is an affront to both. It is rape, since Igrayne does not consent to sleep with Uther but with her husband. It is a subversion of the natural order of inheritance, by planting one man's seed in another man's marriage bed, the one place where any system of primogeniture relies on to be the unquestionable source of legitimate heirs.[24] It is a subversion of the institution of holy matrimony brought about through demonic influence. Marriage was the institution that the Church relied on to control the sexual impulses of men and channel them into a contained environment; Uther breaches this institution and defiles it with his lust. So then it is no small thing for Geoffrey to complicate Arthur's begetting in such a way; it is an affront to all forms of the law and all conceptions of marriage.

On the question of adultery and the related question of legitimacy, Geoffrey is evasive. Though Geoffrey does say, "Uther was happy when he thought on the death of Gorlois, for due to it Ygerna was freed from her marital obligations," he leaves it up in the air whether or not those obligations were still in force during Uther's time in Igrayne's bedchamber. That he does not clear the matter up explicitly is not

[24] The English brand of primogeniture relied even more deeply than the French on the marriage bed, as the presumption of legitimacy could not be easily over-ruled by aspersions of adultery. Concrete proof was needed.

reason to suppose that Geoffrey thought that such an idea did not deserve comment. Many of the writers of the Arthurian tales after Geoffrey are very specific about the time of the Duke's death in relation to the time of the coupling. Indeed, Geoffrey's silence on the point suggests that he wished to leave the possibility of an adulterous union open. With the adulterous union comes bastardy.

Ultimately in the *Historia*, Arthur's begetting has no consequence on his later life. He rises to the throne unchallenged and has a brilliant reign during which he almost conquers Rome and forges a mighty empire, in spite of the dubious circumstances of his birth. That Arthur later falls to the treachery of Mordred should not be seen as stemming from any personal weakness of Arthur's. Never once is there the barest suggestion that Arthur's illegitimacy has affected his character or the way in which he is treated by his subjects. Though many subsequent authors seize on Uther's sin, his seduction of Igrayne, and use it to explain the fall of Camelot, Geoffrey does not.[25] In the *Historia*, Uther's lust is described as being cruel and guilty, but Geoffrey does not refer to the lust again after the seduction scene. Indeed, he does not dwell on it even in the scene that it is presented. At other points in the *Historia*, Geoffrey is not at all reticent to step back from his narrative and lecture the reader on the finer points of morality.[26] In the *Historia*, Arthur's fall is brought about by "those robbers and perjured villains," by the villainy of Mordred that has no root in Arthur's life story.[27]

So, why then add the bastardy to the story of Arthur, if not to use it to explain his fall? Geoffrey's ideal king is by definition and design a point of contrast for all who have held the throne and all who would be king. An examination of the facts of kingship in Geoffrey's day, the English throne in particular, should provide valuable insight into the possible repercussions of Geoffrey's choice to make Arthur illegitimate. During the beginning of the composition of the *Historia Regum Britannie*, Henry I was

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[25] Modern readers should be cautious not to read backward the views of subsequent Arthurian treatments onto Geoffrey. Geoffrey's Mordred is not the product of an incestuous union, as he is in Malory. Morgan does not shapechange to trick Arthur, as she does in Tennyson, where Mordred's begetting is a darker mirror of Arthur's. The adultery of Lancelot and Guinevere is nowhere to be seen. In these later works, additional parallels to the conception of Arthur are threaded through the works to make the fall of Arthur a reflection of his illegitimacy or his father's lust. Geoffrey lacks these additional elements.

[26] Indeed, the story of Uther begs to be made into an exemplum. It parallels the Biblical story of David and Bathsheba (II Samuel 11-12). A king desires the wife of a valued ally, begets a child on the wife, and causes the death of the husband, subsequently marrying the wife. Geoffrey could not have been unaware of the parallel, but no reference to it is made in the *Historia*.

[27] *Historia*, 260.

the reigning King of England.[28] Some years before Geoffrey began the *Historia*, Henry's sole legitimate son and his heir, William Audelin, had died in November of 1120, while crossing the Channel from Bartfleur in Normandy to England. His boat, the White Ship, was steered onto a rock by a drunken helmsman. According to the sole survivor of the shipwreck, Audelin escaped in a lifeboat, but upon hearing the cries of his illegitimate sister, the Countess of Perche, he returned to rescue her and was swamped by others who tried to clamber aboard. It was said that Henry I grieved as much for his illegitimate daughter as for his legitimate son, which is saying a great deal, since Prince William's death left Henry with only one legitimate child, his daughter Matilda, who he had married off to the German emperor in 1114. Past his wife's likely childbearing age, Henry decided that his only option was to put Matilda on the throne, so that his grandson might rule after his death. He had the English barons swear fealty oaths to Matilda repeatedly, once in 1127, then again in 1131 and 1133.

Nonetheless, it was clear to everyone, even to Henry, that his daughter would likely not succeed him without comment. The repeated oaths bear testament to this. Few of the Anglo-Norman lords wished to be ruled by a woman or her Angevin husband. Great must have been the trepidation with which the

[28] The exact timeline of the *Historia*'s composition is uncertain. We know that he likely completed it in 1136, and that it was sent to Robert of Gloucester around that time, probably bearing the dedication that is witnessed by so many of the manuscripts of the *Historia*. Not knowing the exact pace of Geoffrey's writing, we cannot know for certain which parts he was working on when, if he undertook to write from beginning to end or if he wrote in some other manner. The dedication is clearly written in the voice of one who has completed the work, so it seems plausible to say that it was written upon the completion of the text, or near to it in expectation of impending completion. The last books of the *Historia* contain the Arthurian material, and could plausibly have been written during the final years, 1135-1136. It is known that the parts of the *Historia* immediately prior to the Arthurian material, Book VII, the story of Merlin and most importantly his prophecies, were in circulation as *The Prophecies of Merlin* by at least 1135. Geoffrey "published" the *Prophecies* before the rest of the *Historia* was complete, he says, because word had spread of the important texts that he had, and that the bishop Alexander requested that he get these important texts out. As the *Prophecies* hint at events that later appear in the Arthurian material in the *Historia*, it must be concluded that some work had gone into that material by 1135, though since it was not ready for publication yet, it is also likely that the year between 1135 and the likely completion in 1136 saw the composition of the Arthurian sections of the *Historia*.

Of the extant manuscripts of the History of the Kings of England, ten bear double dedications - one to King Stephen and Robert, earl of Gloucester, the remainder to Robert and Waleran of Meulan, a Norman noble whose only connection to Robert comes through Stephen, who Waleran supported until 1141. Sixteen omit the introductory chapters, and twenty-seven witness nameless dedication. The remainder of the 170 manuscripts in which the History of the Kings of England appears bear a single dedication to Robert of Gloucester. Much scholarly debate has surrounded these dedications, as they relate to the dating of the text. Truly, the issues on which the debate impinges are complex, as the politics of the day were quite muddled, with alliances forming and breaking throughout the civil war that followed Henry I's death. See Julia C. Crick, *The Historia Regum Britannie of Geoffrey of Monmouth* IV: Dissemination and Reception in the Later Middle Ages. (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1991), 113-120.

kingdom awaited the death of the king. Many men were casting around for qualified candidates other than Matilda to step forward and claim the throne on the king's passing. One group of barons supported Count Theobald of Blois, but there was perhaps no more popular candidate to fill the role than Henry's illegitimate son, Robert of Gloucester. Historians contemporary to Robert are without exception extremely complimentary to him, and many at the time still remembered that William the Conqueror had risen to the throne a bastard.

Robert of Gloucester was born around 1090 to an unnamed woman of Caen. He was acknowledged by Henry from infancy and reared in Henry's household before and during Henry's reign as king. He regularly witnessed royal charters as "Robert, the king's son." His marriage to Mabel, heiress to the lordship of Glamorgan was paid for in 1107 by the king, and he was granted valuable lands in Normandy. Henry trusted Robert's military prowess greatly and is said to have taken him everywhere. In 1119 he was a major part of Henry's defeat of king Louis VI at Bremule. Indeed, Robert was respected throughout the lands as an able military commander and was by far the most influential and respected of Henry I's descendents. Henry granted Robert a title and made him an earl, the only earl whom he created during his thirty-five year rule.

When Henry I died in 1135, Matilda was not crowned Queen of England. Her nephew, Stephen of Blois, the son of William the Conqueror's legitimate daughter and brother to Theobald, seized the initiative. He wasted no time in heading across the Channel to England to be crowned at Winchester. Those barons who had supported his older brother Theobald soon transferred their allegiances to him. Another group of barons approached Robert and asked him to advance his claim to the throne. For reasons that are unclear, Robert did not immediately make his stance on the succession known. He did not press his claim, that much is certain. And he was among the barons who met to discuss the possibility of electing Theobald. For two years the kingdom waited for Robert to make his choice. Stephen in particular was worried. Robert eventually became the sole holdout, refusing summons and invitation alike to come and do homage to the new king. Perhaps not coincidentally, it was during this time that Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia* was likely completed and sent to Robert for correction. Eventually, late in 1136, Robert swore a provisional oath to Stephen, that he would recognize his rule only so long as his position remained

unchanged and his lands protected. This was hardly the sort of oath that a king could accept, but Stephen had no choice. Yet, the kingdom knew that this sham of fealty could not last long. Either Robert would have to swear formally or reject Stephen altogether.

In 1138 Robert made his choice, siding with his father's wishes and advocating Matilda's cause, attacking in the west country of England, while Geoffrey of Anjou invaded Normandy and King David of Scotland, Matilda's uncle, invaded the north. For two years Matilda had been building her strength in Normandy. The war continued and devolved into a virtual stalemate. Both sides maintained courts and issued royal proclamations, though Stephen seems to have exercised his authority more freely and more often. Robert died in 1142, and with his death Matilda left for Normandy, never to return to England. Her young son Henry took up her cause, fighting bravely, if rashly, until eventually things began to go Matilda's way. Her husband, Geoffrey of Anjou took Rouen in 1144 and was proclaimed duke of Normandy. The barons who had supported Stephen owned lands in Normandy as well and did not wish to continue fighting against Matilda now that her husband was in control. Stephen continued to try to press for the designation of his son Eustace as his heir, but the Archbishop of Canterbury refused. Stephen even tried to have Matilda declared illegitimate by the pope on grounds that her mother had been sworn to the oaths of a nun before she married Henry I. The pope judiciously refused to intervene in the civil war. Both sides continued to war for the designation of their heirs, Stephen for Eustace and Matilda for Henry. Things were made dramatically simple when Eustace died unexpectedly, allowing for compromise. In October of 1154, Stephen agreed to the Treaty of Westminster, which guaranteed that his rule would be unchallenged, but that his heir would be Henry.

With such complex political maneuvering going on around the time of the *Historia*'s composition, it is no surprise that Geoffrey seems to have changed his mind many times about whom to dedicate the text to.[29] Nevertheless, the version of the dedication written first[30] was likely to Robert of Gloucester, the King's only son:

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[29] One does not have to be very cynical at all to see this fence straddling as a result of a certain entrepreneurial desire. Geoffrey wished greatly for a noble patron, and a patron in a position of power is a much better patron than one who is not. While it is hard to dismiss such charges out of hand, Geoffrey's desire for patronage does not have to rule out any other motives in the dedications, especially the initial one, whichever one that may be, especially considering that the dedication first crafted would most likely

> Opusculo igitur meo, Roberte dux Claudiocestrie, faueas uc sic te doctore te monitore corrigatur quod non ex Galfridi Monemutensis fonticulo censeatur exortum sed sale Mineruae tuae conditum illius dicatur edicio quem Henricus illustris rex Anglorum generauit, quem philosophy a liberalibus artibus erudiuit, quem innata probitas in militia militibus prefecit: unde Britannia tibi nunc temporibus nostris asci alterum Henricum adepta interno gratulatur affectu.[31]
>
> [I ask you, Robert, Earl of Gloucester, to do my little book this favour. Let it be so emended by your knowledge and your advice that it must no longer be considered as the product of Geoffrey of Monmouth's small talent. Rather, with the support of your wit and wisdom, let it be accepted as the work of one whom learning has nurtured in the liberal arts and whom his innate talent in military affairs has put in charge of our soldiers, with the result that now, in our own lifetime, our island of Britain hails you with heartfelt affection, as if it had been granted a second Henry.][32]

In addition to dedicating the text to Robert of Gloucester, Geoffrey also assigned a very prominent place to Gloucester in the *Historia*. He sets it up as one of the chief cities of Arthur's kingdom. In the days of Uther and Aurelius, the Duke of Gloucester, Eldol, displays great bravery and skill at arms in taking on Hengist the traitor in single combat. Eldol's brother, Ealdus, is Bishop of Gloucester in Uther and Arthur's time, even though Gloucester had no see in Geoffrey's era. The first bishop in Gloucester was installed in

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reflect the views that Geoffrey had while composing the *Historia*. Other names could be substituted later on for the dedicatee's. According to Geoffrey of Monmouth's biographer, Michael Curley, "Whatever their value as a guide to the dating or as an indication of Geoffrey's attempt to keep pace with the political allegiances of his day, the surviving dedications to the *HRB* were attempts to gain patronage and preferment. Geoffrey's bitter remarks in the preface to the *VM* [Vita Merlin] on Alexander of Lincoln's lack of response to his translation of the *Book of Prophecies* (PM), amply demonstrate that the prefaces were practical and not merely literary adornments" (9).

[30] It seems to be the opinion of most scholars today that Geoffrey first dedicated the *Historia* to Robert of Gloucester alone, probably in 1135 or early 1136 and that he then subsequently added the dedication to Waleran. The dedication was then rewritten when Stephen and Robert had their temporary truce sometime between 1137-1138, with Waleran's dedication changed to suit Robert and Robert's dedication given to Stephen. Either Geoffrey or manuscript copyists may have dropped the dedication altogether after that point. Supporting the view that Robert was the original sole addressee of the dedication is the text of the *Historia* itself, wherein Geoffrey addresses himself to *consul auguste*, a single "noble duke."

[31] Geoffrey of Monmouth, *The Historia Regum Britannie of Geoffrey of Monmouth I: Bern, Burgerbibliothek, MS. 568* ed. Neil Wright. (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1984), 1.

[32] *Historia*, 51-52

the days of Henry VIII. Ealdus is responsible for negotiating the treaty with the defeated Saxons and with motivating Uther to re-erect the Giant's Ring. In Arthur's fight against the Romans, the Earl of Gloucester, Morvid, is responsible for commanding the attack that scatters the Roman lines and allows Lucia, their general, to be killed. Eldol's exploits and Ealdus's negotiations are recounted immediately prior to Uther's rise to power and his seduction of Igrayne. Morvid's tale is followed immediately by the war between Mordred and Arthur. Eldol, Ealdus, and Morvid are the only men of Gloucester given prominence, and their prominence comes right before moments that are critical if Geoffrey is trying to craft parallels between Arthur and Robert. Even if Robert were just skimming the text, he would likely have paid special attention to those sections that mention his earldom. Linking Arthur and Gloucester would have been a particularly shrewd decision for Geoffrey to have made.

The qualities that Geoffrey assigns to Arthur when he is initially presented in the *Historia Regum Britannie*, appear to be a combination of the compliments that he addresses to Robert of Gloucester in the dedication, and the qualifications for a perfect patron, something that Geoffrey desires Robert to be.[33] Above all, Geoffrey singles out Arthur for his bravery in battle, his generosity, and the degree to which he is loved by the people of Britain. "And his inborn goodness gave him such grace that he was loved by almost all the people."[34] Such praise is similar to that in the introduction to Robert, who is described as talented in military arts and loved so much by the people of England that he is virtually a "second Henry"—a loaded compliment to bestow when the royal succession was in such doubt.

Robert is also praised for his wit, wisdom, and proficiency in the liberal arts – all qualities of a refined gentleman, a true noble. Likewise, Arthur is praised for his urbanity. Under Arthur, Geoffrey claims that Britain attained "such a level of dignity, that it excelled other kingdoms in abundance of wealth, the richness of its ornamentation, and the urbanity of its inhabitants."[35] Arthur is a patron and master of the liberal arts. In Geoffrey he is famed for his courtliness and poise to the point that knights of all lands try to emulate his manner of dress and the way he composes himself. Under Arthur's direction, his plenary court

[33] And Stephen in the one dedication where he replaces Robert.
[34] *Historia*, 212. In quo tantam gratiam innata bonitas prestiterat ut a cunctis fere populis amaretur (101).
[35] *Historia*, 229.

is established in a town with "a college of two hundred learned men, who were skilled in astronomy and the other arts."[36] The advice of these learned men is taken quite seriously by Arthur.

It could be said that the characteristics that Geoffrey gives to Arthur and Robert are fairly generic praise for a king – to be brave, well loved, wise, and skilled in noble, liberal arts. To some extent this is the case. Many of the kings in the *Historia Regum Britannie* receive such compliments. Marius is called a man of "great prudence and wisdom"[37] Lucius is said to be loved by all his people. Constantine is praised for having the courage of the lion. Some of the kings that follow Arthur are held up for their civility and urbanity. But of all the kings in the *Historia Regum Britannie*, Arthur alone is praised for having all of these characteristics.[38] That Robert, too, is given this illustrious combination, must also be significant.[39]

Geoffrey's linking of Robert and Arthur does not end with Arthur's birth or the qualities that make him fit for the throne. The darkest chapter in Arthur's life also bears strong parallels to Robert's situation at the time of Geoffrey's writing. Indeed, the depiction of the civil war that brings down Arthur in the *Historia* reads like a warning and a call to action to Robert. While Arthur is busy on the continent, his kingdom is usurped by his nephew Mordred, and the resulting war ends his reign and sends England into darkness. Similarly, Robert was still on the continent when Stephen took control of England.

Parallels abound between the war of Arthur and Mordred and the war that might have been predicted at the death of Henry I. Arthur was the only son of the third son (Uther) to follow the rule of the former king (Constantine). Robert was the only son of the third son (Henry I) to follow the rule of the former king (William I). Both were of dubious birth. Mordred was the son of a legitimate daughter (Anne) of the former king (Uther). Stephen was the son of a daughter (Adela) of the former king (William I). The claim of each to the throne came through a maternal line of descent. Mordred claims the throne and crown

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[36] *Historia*, 226-7.
[37] *Historia*, 123.
[38] Of Lucius, Geoffrey says, "When Coilus died and Lucius had been crowned King of the country, the latter imitated all his father's good deeds, with the result that he was considered by everyone to be a second Coilus" (*Historia*, 124). It should come as no surprise, then, that Lucius dies in Gloucester, and his reign follows the description of the founding of Gloucester. Geoffrey's use of Gloucester as a marker for things important to Robert was widespread.
[39] The main quality of Arthur's that Geoffrey does not ascribe to Robert in the dedication is his generosity. This is understandable, as even an entrepreneur like Geoffrey must have realized some degree of subtlety. To praise a potential patron for his generosity would be blunt in the extreme. Many other medieval entrepreneurs were not so subtle, of course.

in England while Arthur is away on the continent. Stephen claimed the throne and crown of England while Robert was in Normandy. All of these things were known in 1135, when Geoffrey was likely composing the *Historia*'s Arthurian material, and he may very well have consciously decided to model the Arthurian civil war after the war brewing in England.

When the *Historia* was likely presented to Robert, in early 1136, Stephen had just taken hold of Winchester and been crowned there. Arthur's fatal failing was in being delayed for so long in France that Mordred was able to raise so many allies against him. Certainly, Robert might have found himself in a similar situation had he waited too long and had Stephen been shrewder at gathering allies. Moreover, the charge that Geoffrey makes to Robert in the dedication to the *Historia* is for Robert to *amend* his work, not for him to follow its model precisely. In a sense, Geoffrey charges Robert with correcting the mistakes made within the *Historia*, the mistakes of Arthur included as well. For Robert to prevail, he needed to act quickly in order to head off Stephen, as Arthur did not do against Mordred. That Robert did not follow Geoffrey's advice does not destroy the possibility of it.

Whether or not Geoffrey intended for his audience, particularly Robert of Gloucester, to recognize Arthur as being modeled off the king's beloved illegitimate son, or whether he intended Robert to model himself on the arguably illegitimate Arthur must by necessity remain speculation. But the choice to have the Arthurian story culminate in the death of a line of kings in one gigantic civil war could not have gone unnoticed or uncommented upon by Geoffrey's contemporaries. Many have seen similarities between the prophecies that Merlin makes in the *Historia* and the civil war that everyone in England had to be waiting for with each passing day of Henry I's waning years. If nothing more, the current tension concerning the inheritance of throne of England was in the air. A treatment of succession, even the fantastic succession of a semi-mythical king, could not have been easily dismissed as irrelevant.

It seems safe to conclude that Arthur's birth-tale was, in part, crafted with an eye toward spurring on the ambitions of an illegitimate royal son, in defiance of the prevailing tradition of primogeniture. Geoffrey's "history" provides precedent and justification for those who would act in his day. The attempt at motivating Robert proved unsuccessful. His inaction and shifting loyalty likely exacerbated and prolonged the civil war that followed Henry's death. Geoffrey's account of Arthur's birth was far more

successful, influencing every subsequent treatment of the Arthurian material, on English soil or elsewhere. Each author who followed Geoffrey had to make something of Geoffrey's tale. In Geoffrey's day, a bastard, either one born out of wedlock as Robert was, or one conceived in adultery as Arthur was, would not likely rise to the throne, but it was not inconceivable. The custom of primogeniture was still solidifying in England. Just a century before, William I – known as both 'The Conqueror' and 'Bastardus' in his day – had risen to the English throne and founded the Norman dynasty. Just a century later, Geoffrey Planagenet's bastardy precluded him altogether from being considered for the throne. Robert was the last bastard to be seriously considered for the English throne. Geoffrey's *Historia Regum Britannie* provided Robert with a model that he chose not to use, that of a king who rose to the throne by right of military prowess, his cultivation, and his dearness to the English people, but not by his unquestioned legitimate right.

CHAPTER 3

OF ARTHOUR AND MERLIN

One hundred years after Geoffrey, England was a much different place. While none of the Norman kings succeeded to the throne without challenge, the Angevins and Plantagenets had a much easier time of it, with regular succession from father to eldest son becoming the norm. Primogeniture was firmly established as a custom. The English writers who translated Geoffrey, La3amon and Wace, did little with the account of Arthur's begetting and accession. It is not until the twelfth century-poem *Of Arthour and Merlin* that new ground was broken. Written in a time of stable royal succession, the poem takes a surprisingly liberal view of the requirements for kingship. In rejecting the baronial preoccupation with legitimacy and inheritance as the root of internal dissent, the poet argues for personal merit and virtue rather than blood-born nobility and rightful descent. The Arthurian material is well suited to this task, as Geoffrey's ambiguous birth-tale provides an excellent vehicle for discussions of this sort.

Of Arthour and Merlin exists fully in only one manuscript, the Auchinleck.[40] Shorter versions exist in Lincoln' s Inn Library MS Hale 150, Bodleian MS Douce 236, and the 17th century Percy Folio MS. These shorter versions do not include any Arthurian material past the coronation of Uther Pendragon. Though it has been shown that much of the material is an adaptation of the Robert de Boron's twelfth century *Merlin* and the early thirteenth century prose rendition and continuation of it, the *Estoire de Merlin* from the Vulgate Cycle, *Of Arthour and Merlin* is not a strict translation or even a close following of these texts, as it compresses and expands events freely. Internally, *Of Arthour and Merlin* claims to be based upon the *Brut*, (538, 2730, etc.), but there is no close following of either La3amon or Wace. David Burnley

[40] The author of Of Arthor and Merlin has been associated with and sometimes identified as the author of *Richard Coer de Lion, Kyng Alisaunder* and *The Seven Sages of Rome*. Those that claim all the texts for the same author also argue that *Of Arthour and Merlin* is the first of this author' s works, sometimes on account of apparent incompetence, other times on account of the lack of certain motifs and stylistic devices used in the later texts. This is a plausible enough assessment, though it could certainly also be the case that the author of *Of Arthour and Merlin* self consciously reigned in his style when attempting to treat the Arthurian material.

has come to the conclusion that *Of Arthour and Merlin* must be viewed as the "independent adaptation of an inherited tradition."[41] Although Malory is usually credited as the first to adopt the romantic tradition of the French literature into English, *Of Arthour and Merlin* brings Robert de Boron's story to the island a full two centuries before Malory. It is important, in that it is the oldest extant reworking of the French Arthurian romances, the first stage in the "repatriation" of Arthur.[42] The author of *Of Arthour and Merlin* clearly had access to sources in English and French and freely picks and chooses between their accounts. Understanding those choices and their implications is central to understanding the poet's intent and the way in which his Arthur engages the question of legitimacy and succession.

In *Of Arthour and Merlin*, the throne that Arthur ascends to is explicitly that of "Ingelond," even though in his French sources, Boron and the Vulgate, Arthur is not the king of England or Britain, but of Logres, and in Geoffrey of Monmouth he rises to the British throne (though he does subsequently conquer all of England and much of Europe). The poem's author draws attention to his desire to tell the story of an English king to his English audience in the English language in the introduction to the work:

"Of Freynsch no Latin nil y telle more,	Of French nor Latin will I tell any more
Ac on Inglisch ichil tel þer fore;	But in English I shall tell therefore
Ri3t is þat Inglische understonde	Right is it that English be understood
þat was born in Inglond;	By those who were born in England
Freynsce use þis gentilman	French is used by this gentleman
Ac everich Inglische Inglische can.	But every Englishman English knows.
Mani noble ich haue ysei3e,	Many a noble I have seen,
Þat no Freynsche couþe seye:	That could speak no French:
Biginne ichil for her loue	I shall begin for their love

[41] David Burnley, "*Of Arthour and Merlin*," *The Arthur of the English*, W.R.J. Baron, ed. (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1999).

[42] See also Elizabeth K. Sklar, "The Englishing of Arthur," *The Michigan Academician* 8, (1975): p. 49-57. The deliberate attempts to English the source material is particularly important, as deliberate assertions of Englishness is a notable feature of the Auchinleck manuscript. *Of Arthour and Merlin* survives sandwiched between tales of English paragons Beues, Guy, and Richard the Lion Heart. Repeatedly the works reference the deliberate selection of English as the literary medium of choice. It is apparently the conscious attempt of the manuscript collators to create a tradition of secular English literature, a whole generation before Chaucer.

Bi Iesus leue, þat sitt above,	By dear Jesus's love, who sits above,
On Inglische tel mi tale.[43]	In English tell my tale.

To this English audience, the poet presents a work that is largely centered on the need for national unity. *Of Arthour and Merlin* is concerned primarily with politics, king and country, very unlike its romantic French sources. Gone, too are those source's overt religious elements. The Grail Quest and the importance of the Round Table to the completion of that quest are not mentioned, even in passing. Instead, the text opens with the exposition of the political problem in England, that King Constaunce is dead and his eldest son would rather be a monk than a king. The son does fall, due to the treachery of Fortiger, and the kingdom is plunged into civil war. The first fourth of *Of Arthour and Merlin* concerns the battles that Uther, the "ri3t air of þis lond," must fight to claim the English throne and Merlin's role as the harbinger of his arrival. All is set up so that the legitimate heir to the throne will bring peace and glory to the land of England. All of these circumstances are additions by the *Of Arthour and Merlin* poet. Though the *Historia Regum Britannie* includes details of Uther's rise and reign, it puts no special emphasis on Uther's being the legitimate heir wrongly deprived. In this sense *Of Arthour and Merlin* seems to be setting up Uther's coming in the manner of an Anglo-Norman romance, where the rightful heir's acquisition of his inheritance is the entire matter of the plot.[44]

Uther's coming does not work out as advertised. Peace is not restored to the land; the rightful heir is brought low by poisoning, and the barons fall to squabbling again over who should be the new king. As in Geoffrey, the king himself does violence to the notion of legitimate succession by entering Igrayne's chamber and seducing her out of wedlock. *Of Arthour and Merlin* ups the ante by having Uther allow his only son to go hidden and unrecognized. Uther's actions and the circumstances of his rule are not unique to *Of Arthour and Merlin*, but the way in which they are framed against the background of the concerns of inheritance by the poet makes them significant in a new way. Arthur's rise to the throne must be viewed in the context of the failure of his father, the legitimate heir, to bring peace and uphold the law. It then

[43] O.D. Macrae-Gibson (ed.), *Of Arthour and Merlin*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 19-29.
[44] See Susan Crane, *Insular Romance* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986).

becomes doubly significant that Arthur's claim to the throne by law is not all that it should be, and certainly not all that his father's was.

Of Arthour and Merlin follows Geoffrey's account of Arthur's siring, not dwelling on it for long. The French sources added to Geoffrey the concealment of Arthur after birth and his secret consignment by Merlin to the home of Sir Antor. The question of Arthur's legitimacy had by the time of the writing of *Of Arthour and Merlin* also been complicated by the French Arthurian tales. The French *Persevaus* is clear that Arthur was conceived before the Duke's death, in explicit contrast with Gawain's birth-tale, thus establishing that Arthur is a bastard. Gawain was born out of wedlock but conceived by an unmarried woman, so according to the French tradition concerning mantle-children, he was legitimized when his parents married. Arthur, conceived by a married woman, remains a bastard. The *Persevaus* did not influence *Of Arthour and Merlin* directly, but was rather transmitted through the Boron and the Vulgate's *Merlin*.

In Robert de Boron this issue is raised by Uther in a bedchamber conversation with Igrayne.

> Einsis ot li rois Ygerne et tint tant que sa groisse parut; et quant il rois gisoit une nuit avec lui, si mist sa mein seur son ventre et li demanda de cui estoit grosse, que ele ne pooit mie estre grosse de lui, puis que il l'avoit prise, quar il n'avoit onques a lui geu nule foiz qu'il ne l'eust mise en escrit; ne ele ne povoit pas estre grosse dou duc, que il avoit grant piece devant sa mort que ele ne l'avoit veu. Quant Egerne s'oi dou roi acheisoner, si ot paor et honte et plora et dist tout en plorant...[45]
>
> (So did the king have Ygerne, and had her until her pregnancy appeared; and one night when the king was laying next to her, he put his hand on her stomach and asked her who had made her pregnant, and that she could not have been pregnant by him, as he had never once had his pleasure with her without writing it down; nor could she be pregnant by the duke, as there had been such a large space of time before his death that

[45] Robert de Boron, *Merlin: Roman du XII^e Siècle* ed. Alexandre Micha (Genève: Librairie Droz, 1979), 245.

> she had not seen him. When Igrayne heard the king reason so, so was she afraid and ashamed, saying as she wept…)[46]

While England operated under the two-year rule for determining whether or not a husband could have had access to his wife, and thus whether or not she was guilty of having a child by adultery, France allowed for charges of adultery to be used by the husband to illegitimize a child. The most prominent example of the French law in practice is the bastardizing of the Dauphin, the future Charles VII of France, who was disinherited and disowned by his father, Charles VI and his mother Isabella of Bavaria, a known adulteress who herself denied her son's royal paternity.[47] So, for a French writer like Boron, the King's comments are enough to render Arthur a bastard. And although not two years in length, the separation of Igrayne and the Duke clearly evokes the English tradition, too, if only in spirit. As Igrayne could not possibly have been with either of her lawful husbands, the child must be born of adultery, and Uther has written proof. By this account, then, Arthur is clearly a bastard born, according to the traditions of either side of the Channel. This bedroom scene appears in *Of Arthour and Merlin*, following closely, but not precisely, the Vulgate account, but the conclusion of bastardy is the same. The slight differences in the accounts, though, put a different spin on the need for Arthur's concealment, one unique to *Of Arthour and Merlin*. In the Vulgate, Merlin instructs Uther to go to Igrayne and bring up the subject of her pregnancy as a means of getting her to agree to give up the child to him, according to the agreement that Uther swore to in order to get Merlin's help when he seduced her. The Vulgate takes responsibility from Uther and places it on Merlin, reversing their roles from Boron's version. When the ploy to conceal Arthur is Uther's, it is a means of hiding the shame and guilt of having sired a son in adultery. When the ploy is Merlin's, as it is in the Vulgate and in *Of Arthour and Merlin* alike, the concealment of Arthur becomes all a part of Merlin's grand and mysterious machinations. In Boron, the king's plan is successful and the shame is never revealed to the people, for there Arthur's parentage is not a factor in his being crowned king. He is king by divine intervention, and his rule further proof of the glory of God. *Of Arthour and Merlin* does not share Boron's religiosity, so it cannot rely on divine intervention. It chooses instead the Vulgate's alternative account.

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[46] Translation provided by Brian Crawford, University of Indiana, 2000.
[47] This is the woman referred to by her grandson Louis XI as "a great whore."

Merlin's plan appears to have more to it than simply satisfying the king's lust and the concealment of the product of that lust. When Merlin instructs Uther to obtain the child from Igrayne, he emphasizes two things. The first is that the child is of Uther's blood. The second is the nobility of Sir Antor's bloodline, but more specifically, the high quality of his wife's milk. "In þis lond nis sqiche blode / No milk þat haþ half so gode"[48] For the project of *Of Arthour and Merlin*'s Merlin, nurture is as important as nature. This move is not entirely without precedent, for the quality of Antor's wife's milk is brought up in Boron and the Vulgate, when Antor beseeches Arthur to make Kay his seneschal. In these texts, Arthur owes Kay a debt, because Kay's bullheadedness is due to Kay's suckling from a peasant girl. "So that you might be reared properly, he lost his birthright," explains the Vulgate Antor. *Of Arthour and Merlin* follows the French sources in this, but expands on it, changing the negative quality of the peasant milk into the positive quality of Kay's mother's milk, and making this one of Merlin's explicitly stated reasons for giving Arthur to Antor.

In the early pages of *Of Arthour and Merlin*, Merlin's role as the harbinger of Uther's coming and legitimacy is emphasized. He is a kingmaker. So, when Merlin is found making another king, his actions must be seen as an attempt to correct the mistakes of the past and create a king who will rule better and more ably than Uther has. At first it would seem that Merlin's plan is only going to make things worse. Rather than urging Uther to reign in his passions and sire a legitimate heir, Merlin allows Uther to commit adultery and sire an illegitimate son. He further complicates the matter by sending the son away so that none will know of his paternity and royal blood. Merlin's actions are without rhyme or reason unless with Arthur he is orchestrating the addition of something positive that Uther lacks. The only candidate for that additive is the nourishment of Antor's wife and his rearing away from the court. Certainly, Uther is no man to emulate, and Arthur will be the better for being raised apart from him. But these are concerns of practicality—there may perhaps be more symbolic meaning to Merlin's actions.

Arthur's simultaneous rearing by Antor and his begetting by Uther allow him to, in effect, be two things at once. He is the eldest child of the king, of royal blood, and thus a good candidate for the throne. Yet, he is also the second child of Antor, a foundling, and thus a horrible candidate for the throne. All of

[48] *OAM*, 2653-2654.

his legal, social, and hereditary advantages are negated by Merlin's actions. The only things that can recommend him to the throne are his personal qualities, which are, of course, unquestionably noble and positive. The young Arthur grows into a man who possesses every virtue. That it requires the advantages of both royal blood and non-royal nourishment seems to indicate that a proper king is not made by birth alone.

The circumstances surrounding Arthur's accession are drawn primarily from the Vulgate's account of the matter. *Of Arthour and Merlin* spells out clearly the situation of Arthur's parentage and the country's knowledge of it in narrative "Non no wist hem among / Þat Arthour of þe king sprong / Bot sir Antor and sir Vlfin / and þe gode clerk Merlin, / Ac for in spouse he was not bi3ete."[49] (None knew among them [the nobility of the land] that Arthur was born of the king, but Sir Antor and Sir Ulfin and the good clerk Merlin, that in marriage he was not begotten). This ignorance of Uther's surviving offspring is what drives the barons and bishops to come together to elect a new king. Outside the church where they gather, the sword in the stone appears in answer to their prayers. Unlike in Boron and the Vulgate, the inscription on the sword does not clear up the succession. "Icham yhot Estalibore / Vnto a king fair tresore" It is the bishop that makes the conclusion that "Þis swerd who drawe of þe stone / He shal be our king ymade / Bi Godes wille and our rade."[50] (Whosoever draw this sword from the stone, he shall be made our king, by God's will and our agreement.) When Arthur arrives on the scene with the sword from the stone, in response to Antor's request that he fetch Kay a sword, Antor immediately assumes that Arthur's claim to the kingship will be recognized. He demands of Arthur a boon for Kay, that he be made Arthur's steward. Antor's actions follow the French sources precisely.

Of Arthour and Merlin does not follow the French sources very closely on other counts. In Boron and the Vulgate (as well as Malory's later treatment of them), Arthur is forced to pull the sword from the stone on multiple occasions, first on Christmas Eve, then on the Feast of the Circumcision, then on Candlemas, Easter, and Whitsuntide. Each action is accompanied by disbelief and delay. The only remainder of this repetition in *Of Arthour and Merlin* is the statement, "In and out he pelt it oft,"[51] an

[49] *OAM*, 2769-2774
[50] *OAM*, 2823-2825
[51] *OAM*, 2932.

activity that is witnessed only by Kay and Antor and which happens on the same day. Arthur must pull the sword out of the stone only once in front of the bishop and the assembled nobility. "He drou3 it out and pelt o3en,"[52] and he is crowned in short order, after Merlin tells the bishop of Arthur's true heritage:

Þis barouns and eke Merlin	These barons and also Merlin
Wenten to þe bischopes in	Went to the bishops in
And all him teld fair and 3erne	And all them he told seemly and eagerly
Hou Arthour was bi3eten of Ygerne,	How Arthur was begotten of Igrayne,
Þe bischop Þonked God so gode	The bishop thanked God so good
Þat he was of þe kinges blode.[53]	That he was of the king's blood.

That Merlin tells them "fair and 3erne" may not be as innocuous a comment as it might at first seem. The words indicate a degree of haste in the telling, and a bit of sugarcoating to the account. It could just as well be translated, "And all them he told prettily and quickly," or "short and sweet." Such a reading is corroborated by the language used earlier, when Merlin tells Arthur in private the story of his birth. There, Arthur is told "ende and ord,"[54] or every detail. The account is sworn to by Ulfin, Jordan, and Bretel. In *Of Arthour and Merlin*'s French sources, the testimony of Ulfin and the others is given in public, and it is corroborated by documents signed by Uther and Ulfin the night of the conception.[55] The documentation is missing in the account in *Of Arthour and Merlin*.

The circumstances of Arthur's birth must be told repeatedly to the barons and others who doubt Arthur's rightful claim on the throne. The author of *Of Arthour and Merlin* seems to have replaced the multiple sword-tests with multiple revelations of Arthur's parentage, how he was begotten and born. Merlin says before all:

And seyd he nas harlot non	And said he was not a low born man
Ac nobler þan her ani on;	But nobler than any there;

[52] *OAM*, 2995.
[53] *OAM*, 3035-3041.
[54] *OAM*, 3023.
[55] For once the author of the Vulgate seems to have been cleverly innovative, explaining Boron's odd choice of phrase, "he had never once had his pleasure with her without writing it down." Uther is being crafty when he says that to the Vulgate Igrayne, for she is not aware that he has written down the event and given the document to Merlin.

Þer he teld, al hem bifore,	There he told, all them before him
Hou Arthour was bi3eten and bore.	How Arthur was begotten and born.
Þe wise men of þat lond	The wise men of that land
Þonked Ihesu Cristes sond	Thanked Jesus Christ's grace
Þat her king schuld ben	That there king should be
Of Vter Pendragouns stren;	of Uther Pendragon's line.[56]

In the Vulgate, the barons' objection is that Arthur is "a lowborn man."[57] This is why when Merlin recounts the circumstances of Arthur's birth and his concealment, there is no harm in Merlin giving the king's exact words, that "The child is therefore not mine, so it would not be right for him to inherit this land or be king after I die."[58] Merlin is not arguing for Arthur's legitimacy, merely for his noble birth. For the French audience, to be king by right was to be king by divine election. In England after Magna Carta, the King ruled by tradition and law, not by divine providence. In the Vulgate, the sword in the stone was sent by the Lord, Merlin tells the barons, in order to undo the sin of the father. Arthur's election is due to nothing less than the direct intervention of the Lord. Such intervention is required to undo the circumstances of his birth in any case, either ignoble blood or ignoble siring. The French barons' opposition to Arthur on grounds of bastardy is a separate objection, one that the Vulgate Merlin had apparently never considered, as he plainly tells the barons that Arthur's father did not consider Arthur to be rightly his by law. Moreover, the baronial claim of bastardy does not trump the bishop's words, his claim that god's grace has erased Uther's sins as they relate to Arthur. The French barons are clearly in the wrong.

In *Of Arthour and Merlin*, Merlin does not relate the full account, as he does in the Vulgate, the "ende and ord" of the matter, to the barons, either, for again, the text merely states that Merlin tells them how Arthur was begotten and born, that he is of the king's line and the queen's womb. The baronial response to Merlin's story in the English poem is not what he might have hoped for. "He was founde þurh

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[56] *OAM*, 3146-3152
[57] Vulgate, 216.
[58] Vulgate, 217, recounting imperfectly Uther's words at 208 that "this child that you are carrying is neither yours or mine by rights."

wiching þin, / Traitour,' þai seyd 'Verrament / For al þine enchauntement / No shal neuer no hores stren / Our king no heued ben."[59] (His foundation was laid through thy witchcraft, Traitor,' they said, "Truly, for all thy enchantment, never shall a whore's son our king or ruler be.) Apparently, the English barons have deduced the true answer on their own. Their words, "no hores stren," deliberately echo and refute the bishop and Merlin's claim that Arthur is "of kinges stren." They see the adultery.

The fourth telling of the story occurs in lines, where it is rendered by the bishop, who says to all the commoners:

"And gan to preche to hem alle	And began to preach to them all
And seyd Arthour was kinges stren	And said Arthur was of the King's line
Of king bi3eten and born of quen	Of king begotten and born of a queen
Þe King it wist in his liue	The King knew it in his life
Blisced his chld and bad him Þriue	Blessed his child and bade him thrive
And tok him to sir Antour." [60]	And took him to sir Antor.

Merlin's relating of the tale is echoed by the bishop, and Merlin's clever prevarication convinces the commoners of Arthur's rightful claim to the throne. Arthur was sired by a king and birthed by a queen, but the queen was not married to the king when Arthur was sired. The King did know the circumstances of the birth when he was alive, but he was not motivated to put Arthur in Antor's hands in order that he thrive, rather under direct and unfathomable edict from Merlin. The bishop supplies an understandable motive for the concealment, that the king was worried for Arthur's life and his chances of survival. Merlin's lie is so effective that the bishop fills in the blanks on his own. Of course, the bishop's defense of Arthur's legitimacy falls short for those who know the true circumstances of Arthur's birth. The bishop's sermon is directed to the people of the land, not to the barons, to those ignorant of Arthur's birth, not to those in the know. The blind leads the blind.

Thus, the baronial revolt in the English version of the story is not without its merits. Unlike the French barons of the Vulgate, they are correct by law in their reaction. Their actions cannot be dismissed

[59] *OAM*, 3154-3158.
[60] *OAM*, 3172-3179

as simply motivated by greed and envy. Any comment that the author of *Of Arthour and Merlin* might be seen to be making about the tradition of primogeniture, the rightful inheritance of the legitimate first-born, is intensified by the baronial justification. And the barons' subsequent defeat only drives the point home further. It seems to be the case in the world of *Of Arthour and Merlin* that legitimacy need not be the only pre-requisite for being king, that the laws supported by the barons need not force a good man out of the job.

Because the dating of *Of Arthour and Merlin* is so imprecise, it is hard to draw specific parallels to the events within and the events surrounding it historically. At its latest date, early in the fourteenth century, Edward I was ruling. Given Edward's attempts to claim Arthurian prestige and justification, any poem written during his reign concerning Arthur necessarily had political implications. The poem's flagrant flouting of the legal tradition could, at the very least, be seen as a message to Edward and others that would try to claim Arthur's legacy as their own. Arthur's legal justification was far less important than his personal virtues, and any would-be Arthurs must have a similar portfolio of virtuous traits. At the poem's earliest supposed date, the middle of the thirteenth century, the poem would have been written during the reign of Henry III. Henry's regency and early reign was characterized by disunion and baronial revolt, much like Arthur's early reign. Part of the source of baronial tension in Henry III's England, not surprisingly, was one of inheritance and legitimacy. At a royal council held at Merton in 1236, the English barons united to reject the canon law concerning mantle-children, proclaiming, "Nolumus leges Anglie mutare."[61] This event was one of many baronial actions under Henry III meant to curb the liberties that the crown had taken with the rights to their lands. Increasingly, the barons relied on the common law of England alone to sue for their rights to control of their lands, including control over inheritance.

Surely, the rejection at Merton has implications for Arthur, for his only claim to legitimacy lies in the fact that his parents were married, and that that marriage erases any past wrongdoing on the part of his parents. The parallel is not exact, of course, as Arthur is no mantle-child, so the comparison should not be pushed too far on specific terms. The more important fact is that the barons of *Of Arthour and Merlin* come together as one to officially invalidate the ruling of a Church official concerning legitimacy, a Church

[61] "It is not right for them to change the laws of England." Whether *Of Arthour and Merlin* was written in the middle of the thirteenth century or the middle of the fourteenth, the events at Merton and the general travails against the barons were in living memory.

ruling corroborated by royal approval. Writings that comment on and complicate the already complex question of legitimacy can hardly be viewed as unthreatening or mundane in such an environment. That the English barons in 1236 were openly flaunting the law of the Church regarding legitimacy is enough to show that discussions of just what made a legitimate heir were in the air in a very public and dramatic way.

One thing that the poet of *Of Arthour and Merlin* fails to do is to confirm the legitimacy of Arthur's birth. At the most, he emphasizes that he was begotten of the king, but he never denies that the begetting was adulterous. The disunion and discord in Arthur's kingdom stems from the barons being at odds with a king who is described glowingly in every way other than the circumstances of his birth. The disconnect between the will of the barons and the will of a canon official leads to much bloodshed. This conflict is contrasted with the previous depiction of the inability of the legitimate heir to unite a kingdom and quell dissent. Clearly then, the author cannot be offering as a solution to political dissent a reliance on legitimate succession, since he has already demonstrated the failure of such a system. That Arthur is victorious over the barons who invalidate him over questions of legitimacy seems also to advocate a stance that rejects such questions as relevant to the future of a nation. Divine designation also seems to be excluded by the author of *Of Arthour and Merlin* by the deliberate downplaying of the religious justifications of Arthur's kingship found in his source Boron's account. Even the significance of the sword in the stone is muted in the poem, for the sword only promises to be a "fair treasure" to the king who wields it, not a justification for that king's rule. What then is left?

It seems that the only thing left to Arthur is that which was given him by his nurse and taken from Kay, his bravery, strength, generosity, and piety—all qualities of Arthur the man, not Arthur the king. *Of Arthour and Merlin* then becomes a text that takes on the question of rightful inheritance and legitimacy and argues in favor of neither. Uther's legitimacy was no help to England, while the illegitimate Arthur is an ideal king, a brave warrior to his enemies, a generous lord to his subjects, and a pious servant before his god. The text spares him his ultimate fall, ending with Arthur still at the height of his power and at the end of a successful campaign against King Rion, celebrating at castle Carohaise. The author of *Of Arthour and Merlin* thus advocates personal virtue as the means of securing national unity and prosperity. Questions of

legitimacy and inheritance are ultimately irrelevant to the fate of the kingdom, a lesson that Arthur's barons and the barons of the poet's own day would do well to learn.

CHAPTER 4

THOMAS MALORY'S *LA MORTE DARTHUR*

It must be noted before proceeding that Malory's *La Morte Darthur* is not primarily the tale of Arthur's life and that Arthur is but a part of the work's interweaving themes and its artistic purpose. Arthur's relationship to the various knights in his realm, their adventures, and the quest for the Grail is a complex subject best left untreated in a work of this size and scale. That said, the way in which Malory adapts the scenes of Arthur's birth and his accession says something about the political climate in which Malory was writing and his expectations of the audience for whom he was writing. Malory's *Le Morte Darthur* is arguably the most influential of all Arthurian texts, and likely the reason that the charge of bastardy leveled at King Arthur seems so foreign to modern readers, for Malory's Arthur is no bastard born.

Malory's *Morte* is dated by its closing lines, "For this book was ended the ninth yere of the reygne of King Edward the Fourth, by Sir Thomas Maleoré, Knyght, and Jesu helpe hym for Hys grete myght, as he is the servaunt of Jesu bothe day and nyght," sometime between March 4th, 1469 and March 3rd, 1470.[62] So like Geoffrey before him, Malory wrote his Arthurian material in the midst of an English civil war. The so-called War of the Roses pitted the factions of Lancaster and York against one another over control of the throne. And questions of legitimacy and inheritance were woven throughout the dispute. Briefly, Henry VI, the legitimate ruler of England and son of Henry V rose to the throne in 1422. Prudish about sexual matters and periodically insane, he did not immediately sire an heir. Two dukes beneath him, Richard, Duke of York and Edmund, Duke of Somerset jockeyed back and forth to be named successor to the king. The Duke of York's claim to the throne descended from Gaunt's eldest brother, Lionel, through his mother, and from Gaunt's youngest brother, Edmund, through his father, Richard, Earl of Cambridge. The Duke of

[62] Thomas Malory, *The Works of Thomas Malory* ed. Eugène Vinaver (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1947), 1260.

Suffolk's claim to the throne came from John of Gaunt's legitimated children, the Beauforts. From these two men sprung the War of the Roses.

The case of the Beauforts is probably the most complex in all of English nobility. The Beaufort family, named after a former French possession of John of Gaunt's, were the children of John of Gaunt and Katherine Swynford, his third wife. All were born before their parents married. John of Gaunt's first marriage, to Blanche of Lancaster, produced three other children who survived infancy. The most important of these was the only son, Henry Bolingbroke, who usurped the English throne in 1399. Gaunt's second wife, Constanza of Castile, produced a daughter named Katherine who married Henry III of Castile and was mother to the kings of Castile and Léon. It was during Gaunt's second marriage that Katherine bore him four children. After the death of Constanza, all four of Katherine and John's children were legitimized, first by special dispensation from the pope.[63] While this was against the laws of England, stemming from the tradition of the barons at Merton in 1236, their first cousin, Richard II, then king, had Parliament of 1397 pass a special act that officially recognized the inheritance, granting the children the ability to inherit "all dignities, honours, pre-eminences, statuses ranks and offices, public and private, perpetual and temporal, feudal and noble … as if they were born in noble wedlock"[64] When Henry ascended to the throne, they became the legitimate half-brothers and sisters of the king. No one involved thought that this was a good thing, so in 1407 Henry IV officially recognized their legitimacy with another act of Parliament, but added the condition *excepta dignitate regali* (excepting the royal dignity). Joan, the youngest of Gaunt and Swynford's children married twice. By her second marriage, to Ralph Nevill, earl of Westmorland, she had a daughter, Cicely, who subsequently married Richard the duke of York. Richard and Cicely had four sons, Edward, Edmund, George, and Richard. The eldest and the youngest became the Yorkist kings of England, Edward IV and Richard III.

Even though part of the act of parliament recognizing their legitimacy specifically barred the Beaufort children from inheriting the throne, with Henry VI childless it was possible that it be revoked in the Duke of York's favor. Henry IV had approved the act once, leaving open the option that it might need

[63] Special dispensation was needed, since the Beauforts were sired in adultery, and thus could not qualify as mantle-children under even the lenient French tradition.
[64] Curteis, 150.

further approval by subsequent kings, or perhaps that that approval might be revoked. York and Somerset sparred openly. In 1452 they gathered armies and marched against one another in London, the situation was defused only by Henry VI's arrest of York and York's subsequent pledge never to take up arms against Henry's subjects. When Henry's wife Margret gave birth to an heir, Edward, in 1454, the situation was not made any better. At around the same time Henry's madness rendered him unfit for the throne, resulting in York's appointment as protector. After York was dismissed from this post in 1455, he gathered arms and defeated the king's army, killing Somerset. In the months that followed, York submitted his claim on the throne to Parliament, while Margaret raised an army and attacked York, in defense of her son's claim. In the end, Margaret and Henry would be forced out, and York declared the heir, and subsequently the king. He rose to the throne in 1461 as Edward IV.

Once again, in a time of disputed succession and legitimacy, a work that presents the birth story and conditions of accession of an ideal king cannot be dismissed as irrelevant, especially when that work changes many of the details that occur in previous versions of the material, versions known to the audience at large. Any shift in Arthur's legitimacy will be duly noted by the readers and taken to reflect the situation at hand in the real world. And Malory most certainly changes the account of Arthur's birth substantially. In Malory' s day, a bastard king was not unthinkable, but rather all too conceivable. In the fifteenth century, more allegations of bastardy were put forth against the English throne and claimants to it than in any other. Henry VI's son Prince Edward, King Edward IV, his sons Edward V and Richard of York, and Henry Tudor were all accused of being either bastards or descended from bastards, just as Richard II had been accused by Henry Bolingbroke in 1399. Quite frankly, the custom of primogeniture was straining at the seams, with family trees so bent in upon themselves that M.C. Escher would have a headache trying to unravel them. So it is no surprise that Malory clears up each and every point on which Arthur might be thought illegitimate. With so many aspersions being cast on the legitimacy of the kings of fifteenth century England on so little evidence, Arthur's birth tale had to be spotless.

Where Geoffrey and *Of Arthour and Merlin* were vague, Malory is precise. He puts the point of Arthur' s conception precisely three hours after the death of the Duke of Tintagel. Merlin reveals this to the rebellious kings when they question Arthur' s legitimacy. 'Syres,'" said Merlyn, "'I shalle telle yow the

cause, for he is kynge Uther Pendragons sone borne in wedlok, goten on Igrayne, the dukes wyf of Tyntigail.' 'Thenne is he a bastard,' they said al. 'Nay,' said Merlyn, 'after the deth of the duke more than three hours Arthur was begoten, and thirtene days after kyng Uther wedded Igrayne, and therfor I preve hym he is no bastard.'"[65] Merlin's initial words echo the bishop of *Of Arthour and Merlin*, the prevarication that recounts the paternity and maternity but not the timing of the conception, but when bastardy is charged he quickly clarifies. Malory's rebellious kings are not as easily bluffed as the commoners of *Of Arthour and Merlin*. Malory's setting the date of the marriage thirteen days after conception betters by half the time period that Robert de Boron assigned. Truly, Malory has Arthur's parents married at the earliest possible moment still consonant with the tradition he adapts.

Uther's motive for hiding the child out of shame is completely eliminated by Malory, who even goes so far as to have Uther reveal himself to Igrayne as the father of Arthur. Even the specter of possible rape of Igrayne is eliminated; she rejoices to find that it was Uther who fathered the child. That said, Malory's insistence on the legitimacy of Arthur results in the motivations of his Merlin becoming obscure to the point of being nonsensical. There is no need to hide the child Arthur; he is legitimately conceived and legitimately born to parents who love one another. There is no need to hand the child to Antor to rear, for Malory, unlike the author of *Of Arthour and Merlin*, assigns Antor's wife's milk no special quality, and Antor himself, while noble, is not credited with any great role in the raising of Arthur.

The significance of the sword in the stone is reduced by Uther's open designation, "I gyve hym Gods blissyng and myne, and byd hym pray for my soule, and righteuously and worshipfully that he clayme the croune upon forfeture of my blessyng," a detail from La3amon's *Brut* that *Of Arthour and Merlin* also chose not to include.[66] Open designation by the previous king was one of the many paths to the throne in medieval England, though by Malory's time it had lost the significance it had in La3amon's day. Still, Malory misses no opportunity to increase Arthur's rightful claim on the throne and his legitimacy. The inscription on the sword Excaliber reads, "Whoso pulleth oute this swerd of this stone and anvyld is

[65] *Works*, 18.
[66] *Works*, 12.

rightwys kynge borne of all En(g)lond."[67] The commoners witness the pulling of sword from stone, so they too know the truth of Arthur's legitimacy.

While Malory's barons follow the French source in their willingness to delay the crowning of Arthur and in having hum draw the sword from the stone over and over again, they do not follow *Of Arthour and Merlin* in declaring open warfare upon him. Malory does mention subsequent wars, but they appear to be suppressions of the disorder that follows an interregnum, not a full-fledged rebellion, perhaps even simply the pacification of Scotland, perennial hotspot of dissent. This is supported by the oath of office that Arthur swears, which is not the romantic commitment to chivalry of the French romance sources or the compact between him and God sworn in Robert de Boron, but rather a secularized oath that includes a promise to right the wrongs perpetrated during the interregnum.[68]

There is no duplicity anywhere to be found in Malory's account. Arthur is the true king of England by rightful inheritance. That Malory was so doggedly determined to clear up any possible challenges to Arthur's legitimacy is independent confirmation that he was viewed as such by many in Malory's own time. With the many sources for Arthur's life story available to Malory's era, the possible grounds on which Arthur might be viewed a bastard were many. Mallory converts the ambiguities and uncertainties of the source material into independent confirmations of Arthur's right, freeing him from the burden of suspicion under which the kings of Malory's day had to labor.[69]

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[67] *Works*, 12 (emphasis mine).
[68] Morris, 48.
[69] It is possible that Malory had access to a copy of *Of Arthour and Merlin* and that he used it as a point of departure for his account of Arthur's birth. In many respects, *Of Arthour and Merlin* appears to be a rough draft of the scenes that Malory uses to describe Arthur's begetting and rise to the throne, with the key details all reversed. One unaltered detail in particular stands out linking the two accounts. In almost every version of the Arthurian conception story, Uther is accompanied to Tintagel Castle by Merlin and Ulfin, his loyal retainer. The three enter shape-changed, Uther as the Duke, and Merlin and Ulfin as his retainers Bretel and Jordan. In every extant version where this scene appears, Merlin disguises himself as Bretel, and Ulfin he makes to look like Jordan—in every account that is, save for *La Morte Darthur* and *Of Arthour and Merlin*, where the disguises are reversed. Jordan's likeness is assumed by Merlin and Bretel's by Ulfin. While many would like to point to *Of Arthour and Merlin*'s switching of the two disguises as further evidence of his incompetence with his material, the same charge will not hold up for Malory. Malory is exacting in the detail with which he treats Arthur's conception and ascension to the throne. Even the minor detail of the disguises would not be missed by Malory, who goes to such painstaking lengths to reconcile the French and English sources of the young Arthur's tale. If Malory makes the change, it must be because it appears in one of his sources, and the only other source for this alteration is *Of Arthour and Merlin*. *Of Arthour and Merlin* was of course by no means Malory's only source. He borrowed omnivorously from multiple sources.

Given his insistence on the legitimacy of Arthur, one might expect that Malory was biased against bastards on all counts. This is not the case. Malory's encyclopediac treatment of the Arthurian material includes far more bastards and low birth-order sons than any previous treatment. This is partially due to the scope of Malory's work, of course, but it is significant that Malory had no problem giving center stage to characters who would not have featured very prominently in the other romances of English heroes or in the Anglo-Norman romances. His Galahad is the most glowing example of a noble bastard, the hero who completes the Grail Quest and who is the most perfect flower of religious knighthood. Here and there are references to other bastard characters, Bors' son Elayne le Blank, Pellinore's son Torre, Gylberd the Bastarde. There is no shortage of praise for them, either. Gylberd the Bastard is known to be "one of the beste knyghtys of the worlde,"[70] for example. No shame is attached to the fathering of bastard children, either, for Lancelot is overjoyed to recognize Galahad as his child, and Pellinore, too, brags to Arthur of his discovery that Torre is his son.[71] Even the villainy of Mordred does not serve as an indictment of bastardy in general. By definition, a child of incest is illegitimate, to be certain, but incest was its own special burden.[72] The two should not be conflated.[73] A bastard, though cut off from succession and inheritance, was often a valued child of the parents, as evidenced by numerous recognized bastards, royal and non-royal. In contrast, a child of incest was a deep shame, to be hidden away or worse. Arthur's actions towards the infant Mordred, the slaughter of the innocent children to eliminate the stain of incest bear testament to that.

An illegitimate son could be many things in Malory's world, a noble knight included, but illegitimacy was a clear bar to the throne. This was no prejudice on Malory's part, but rather sober understanding of the hard facts of the world in which he lived. Malory's adaptation of Arthur is a reflection of contemporary events. Many attempts have been made to link Malory's writings to the politics

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[70] *Works*, 167.
[71] *Works*, 113.
[72] Mordred's incestuous birth is very dangerous if any of his contemporaries were looking to the text for parallels to the political circumstances of Malory's day. As an ideal king, Arthur would most likely be associated with whatever candidate that Malory had favored during the War of the Roses. The other candidate must by default be associated with Mordred, not a particularly pleasant association.
[73] As Jessica Lewis Watson does in *Bastardy as a Gifted Status in Chaucer and Malory*. Lewiston (Queenston, and Lampeter: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1996). See that work for an account of Mordred as an example of a noble bastard.

of his day. In one instance near the end of the *Morte*, Malory chastises the English people for ingratitude to good kings, indicating a possible allegiance to the then deposed Lancastrian king, Henry IV.[74] In another passage, one of Malory's favorite knights is attacked by a "traytour" from a castle that belonged in Malory's day to a Yorkist peer.[75] The traitorous Mordred raises troops against Arthur in counties that some have tried to identify as having Yorkist ties.[76] Others have pointed to a parallel between Henry VI and Arthur—both rise to the throne young, are manipulated by one faction (Beauchamp/Merlin) and rejected by another (Gloucester/Malory's barons).[77] These factors have caused some to label Malory a Yorkist patriot, but this view is complicated by the totality of the book's possible contemporary allusions. Malory claims to be writing from jail, and his humble request that his readers pray for his deliverance seems to preclude the possibility that he was misrepresenting himself on this point.[78] If Malory was truly Sir Thomas Malory of Newbold Revel, he was likely imprisoned as a Lancastrian partisan in a Yorkist prison.[79] But whatever his loyalties in civil life, the *Morte* shows sympathy for chivalrous actions performed by both sides during the majority of conflicts, suggesting that at least by the time of his imprisonment, Malory's views had grown less partisan and more contemplative.

The closest that Malory ever comes to direct political commentary in the *Morte* is the following:

> Lo ye all Englysshemen, se ye nat what a myschyff here was? For he that was the moste kynge and nobelyst knyght of the worlde, and moste loved the felyshyp of noble knyghtes, and by hym they were all upholdyn, and yet myght nat thes Englyshemen holde them contente with hym. Lo thus was the olde custom and usayges of thys londe, and men say that we of thys londe have nat yet loste that custom. Alas! thys ys a greate defaughte of us Englysshemen, for there may no thynge us please no terme.[80]

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[74] *Works*, 1229.
[75] *Works*, 677.
[76] *Works*, 1233. For the Yorkist Malory, see R.R. Griffith, "The Political Bias of Malory's *Morte Darthir*', *Viator* 5 (1974) 365-86.
[77] Morris, 48. This comparison is quite vague, and could almost be made of any regent.
[78] Otherwise, his request would be audacious and near sacrilegious. See Field, 1 (below).
[79] For a full treatment of the Thomas Malories who are candidates for the writing of *La Morte Darthur*, see P.J.C. Field, *The Life and Times of Sir Thomas Malory*, (Suffolk: D.S. Brewer, 1993).
[80] *Works*, 1229.

The positive qualities claimed for Arthur by Malory here are his nobility, his proper support and generosity toward his subjects, his love of the fellowship of his knights, these three things cast against the backdrop of betrayal.

So, is this a Yorkist or a Lancastrian Arthur that Malory laments? At the presumed time of Malory's writing, early 1470, a Yorkist might have read this statement as a lament for King Edward, since his fighting qualities make him an easy parallel for Arthur over the unwarlike Henry. Like Arthur, he had recently been deserted by some who had followed his banner for years, especially the queen's family, whom he had rewarded generously with gifts throughout his reign. Yet, a Lancastrian supporter, aware that it had only been ten years since Henry's supporters had fled his standard, might see Henry as a modern-day Arthur. Malory's insistence on Arthur's legitimacy would add credence to their view as Henry was the legitimate heir to the throne according to primogeniture. Henry, too, was known for his regal generosity, though his detractors called it opulence and extravagance. And both sides in the war would wish to claim Arthurian nobility for their candidate. So the answer appears to be that Arthur is lamented in a way appropriate to both kings, and so even at his most explicit, Malory's political allegiances are elusive.

While the lament may not shed light on which side Sir Thomas Malory supported during the War of the Roses or on his political allegiances in that conflict, it may offer a key to understanding the significance of his desire to make Arthur into an unquestionably legitimate heir to the throne. That Malory has to lament at all is significant. It was fully within Malory's power to change the ending of the Arthurian story just as much as he changed its beginning. Or, he could have taken the route of his predecessor, the author of *Of Arthour and Merlin*, and ended the story before Arthur's fall, allowing it to become a positive statement about the glory of Arthur. But Malory's work trudges dutifully to the end of the story, and in doing so he makes a powerful statement about legitimacy that is every bit as skeptical as those made by Geoffrey and *Of Arthour and Merlin*.

For all the effort that Malory goes to in order to justify Arthur's claim on the throne, that legitimacy with which Malory imbues Arthur is no proof against tragedy. Even a king born of the most legitimate birth, with an unquestionable claim to the throne, is unable to overcome the dense web of treachery that surrounds the throne. In a way, Malory's lesson is then that the questions of legitimacy and inheritance that were sending men to their deaths in the War of the Roses merely provide a vehicle for the human failings, ground for them to take root in and bring down the kingdom. The fall of a perfectly legitimate king shows that legitimacy is of no special value to a potential king. Malory's work reflects the excessive insistence upon legitimacy that was prevalent in his day, but in the context of Arthur's fall, this insistence is shown to be misplaced, misguided, and ultimately futile.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

All three authors discussed in this paper, recount the circumstances of King Arthur's birth quite differently, even though the *Historia Regum Britannie*, *Of Arthour and Merlin*, and *Le Morte Darthur* all treat roughly the same story. Uther gets Arthur on Ygerne; Arthur rises to power and conquers England. The difference lies in the details, details that are reflections of the circumstances of each author's day.

At first glance, the link between the historical circumstances of royal succession surrounding the composition of the Arthurian texts and their content seems tenuous. An examination of the one hundred years on either side of the publication of the *Historia Regum Britannie* reveals that primogeniture was anything but a firmly established principle for the throne of England. On only one occasion between 1066 and 1216 was the throne handed down from father to eldest surviving son, when Richard I succeeded Henry II in 1189. *Of Arthour and Merlin* was written in the middle of two hundred years of relative stability, when the throne followed the eldest male's line in every instance, up until the deposition of the childless Richard II in 1399. In the two centuries flanking the *Morte Darthur*, no claimant to the throne was able to succeed easily on the principle of hereditary right alone. Every king of England in the fifteenth century was faced with either a rebellion or a conspiracy led by men who claimed that he had no right to the throne. Yet Geoffrey's Arthur rises to the throne unchallenged, *Of Arthour and Merlin*'s Arthur must fight tooth and nail for his succession, and Malory's Arthur's legitimacy is unassailable on all counts.

It can be said of all three major English sources of the Arthurian legend that the aim seems to be the advocacy of a certain formula for national unity. Geoffrey wrote in a time when King Stephen and Emperess Matilda stood ready to raze the country in bloody civil war over their competing claims on the throne. Geoffrey uses his depiction of Arthur to try and motivate Robert of Gloucester to action, and in doing so makes a very strong statement that the circumstances of one's birth should not be the only criterion in determining one's fitness to rule. That Geoffrey's Arthur rises to the throne without a problem

when the kings of his day were faced with rival claimants on all sides is a testimony to the strength of Geoffrey's claim, for in the Arthurian world where bastardy is no bar to the throne, peace and prosperity ensue, while in the real world where it remains a stumbling block, war is the ultimate result. While it is entirely possible that Geoffrey's argument was meant to substantiate the claims of one and only one man, Geoffrey's depiction of Arthur's birth paves the way for subsequent authors to make similar claims of a broader sort, negating the value of the system of primogeniture.

Such is indisputably the claim of the author if *Of Arthour and Merlin*, who seizes on the most illegitimate renderings of Arthur's birth-tale in order to craft a parable in which the problems of England are shown to require much more than a king of legitimate royal blood. The character of the king and the unity of the people are far more important determinations of success. Arthur's strongest claims to the throne come from his personal virtues and his support from the people of the land that he rules.[81]

Malory's *Morte Darthur* takes exactly the opposite approach as *Of Arthour and Merlin* and ends up at exactly the same conclusion, that primogeniture does not insure stability and peace. Yet despite Arthur's legitimacy, civil war still destroys all that Arthur has created. Malory's Arthur is given every possible qualification of legitimacy, but his kingdom ultimately falls through a lack of personal strength. He is the mirror of *Of Arthour and Merlin*'s Uther, a legitimate king who is killed by treachery and whose kingdom is thrown into chaos, all due to events that take place in a marriage bed violated. Malory's valorization of personal honor and his support for the ideals of chivalry performed in any context align him clearly with a view that what truly matters about a man, and especially a king, is not the circumstances of his birth. His work reflects the concern in his era for a legitimate king, a concern that he ultimately shows to be misplaced and irrelevant. National unity stems not from blood, but from the character of the king and the nobility.

[81] Having the magic of Merlin on your side does not hurt, either.

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