

MORDRED: TREACHERY, TRANSFERENCE, AND BORDER PRESSURE
IN BRITISH ARTHURIAN ROMANCE

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS	iii
ABSTRACT	iv
CHAPTER	
1. INTRODUCTION	1
2. MORDRED'S ORIGINS AND DEVELOPMENT	4
3. TREACHERY	18
4. TRANSFERENCE	31
5. VIOLENCE AND PEACE	45
6. CONCLUSION	55
SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY	57
VITA.....	61

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

Alliterative	The Alliterative Morte Arthure
Lazamon	Lazamon's Brut
Roman	The Roman de Brut
Stanzaic	The Stanzaic Morte Arthur

ABSTRACT

This study focuses on the question of how Mordred comes to be portrayed as a traitor within the British Arthurian context. Chapter 1 introduces the question of Mordred's treachery. Chapter 2 charts Mordred's origins and development in Welsh and British literature. Chapter 3 focuses on the themes of unity, kinship, loyalty, adultery, and incest that emerge in connection with Mordred's character. Chapter 4 deals with the idea that Mordred's treacherous characteristics have been transferred upon him in the course of the British Arthurian narrative's development. Chapter 5 discusses the possibility that Mordred's development is in part due to Geoffrey of Monmouth's response to political pressure. Chapter 6 briefly addresses the importance of this study.

CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

*XCIII. Annus. Gueith Camlann, in qua Arthur et Medraut corruere; et mortalitas in Britannia et in Hibernia fuit.*¹

93 The battle of Camlann, in which Arthur and Medraut fell. And there was plague in Britain and Ireland.

The preceding text, which appears in the *Annales Cambriae* or Annals of Wales (ca 960-80), is the first known reference to Mordred,² who is perhaps the most infamous character in Arthurian literature. Throughout the various Arthurian traditions within and without the British context, Mordred is most frequently depicted as a traitor for usurping the crown from Arthur and for his interest in Arthur's wife, Queen Guinevere. Several items concerning the entry in the *Annales*, which are crucial to understanding the development of Mordred's character in the body of British Arthurian works, deserve comment. Firstly, the entry makes no mention of Mordred's perfidy. Moreover, it cannot be determined from the text if Arthur and Mordred fought alongside one another or upon opposing sides of the battle. In fact, little can be inferred from the text other than that Arthur and Mordred fell at Camlann.

Mordred's connection to Arthur in the entry is itself significant. Arthur's place in the British tradition had already been established. Stories of Arthur had been in circulation for at least three and a half centuries. Arthur is mentioned in a line of the *Y Gododdin* by the poet Aneirin (ca 595-600). Recounting the deeds of the warrior Gwawrddur, Aneirin comments "[he] glutted black ravens on the rampart of a stronghold / Though he was no Arthur."³ At the very least, Mordred's association with Arthur in the Camlann entry draws Mordred into the

¹ John Williams, ed., *Annales Cambriae* (London: Longman, Green, Longman, and Roberts, 1860) 4.

² For the sake of convenience, I will use the modern spelling of Mordred throughout except when discussing sources in which his name appears differently.

³ Kenneth H. Jackson., *The Gododdin: The Oldest Scottish Poem* (Edinburgh UP, 1969) 112.

Arthurian landscape. In addition to the entry connecting him to Mordred and Camlann, Arthur is mentioned in the preceding entry, which recounts the battle at Badon. Here Arthur is described as having “carried the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ on his shoulders for three days and three nights”⁴ of battle. Though most scholars reject the Camlann and Badon entries as historical evidence of Arthur or Mordred’s existence, the Camlann entry in the *Annales* firmly establishes Mordred’s connection to Arthur and the strife at Camlann.

Mordred’s close affiliation with Camlann in the *Annales* establishes Mordred’s position in the Arthurian narrative. Most though not all of the Arthurian stories written after the *Annales* was compiled place Arthur and Mordred in a final, climactic battle at Camlann or, in later British works, at Salisbury Plains, in which Mordred’s and Arthur’s opposing forces nearly annihilate one another. Mordred is slain, sometimes anonymously in the confusion of the battle, other times in one-on-one combat with Arthur. Arthur himself is mortally wounded, either from prolonged fighting against impossible odds or in the struggle with Mordred, and is carried from the field, frequently to the mythical island of Avalon, where he may be miraculously restored to health. Having left no heirs to his kingdom, Arthur’s final words are often directed towards Constantine, Arthur’s kinsmen and the son of Cador, the Duke of Cornwall, one of Arthur’s staunchest supporters in early British texts dealing with the Arthurian tradition. Arthur names Constantine his successor and, depending on the text, charges Constantine with pursuing and slaying Mordred’s offspring.

The paucity of information regarding Mordred in the *Annales* is plainly at odds with later descriptions of Mordred as Arthur’s betrayer. Mordred’s relationship to Arthur in the Camlann entry is ambiguous at best. The question that arises from this contradiction is how

⁴ Williams 4.

Mordred comes to be known as one of the greatest traitors in the Arthurian narrative. More to the point, what are Mordred's motives for usurping the crown and for attempting, sometimes unsuccessfully, to make Guinevere his Queen? Scholars have variously attempted to answer this question by addressing the themes of unity, kinship, loyalty, adultery, and incest that emerge in connection with Mordred's character in several of the more prominent British accounts of Arthur's downfall. Each of these themes will be briefly explored in Chapter 3 of this paper.

The purpose of this project will primarily be to chart how Mordred's development as Arthur's treacherous nemesis informs Mordred's Pictish background in Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia regum Britanniae*, Robert Wace's *Roman de Brut*, Lazamon's *Brut*, the alliterative *Morte Arthure* and the stanzaic *Morte Arthur*. Building upon the ideas of transference and border pressure, each of which will be discussed in chapters 4 and 5 respectively, I will argue that the development of Mordred's character can partly be understood as a series of responses to the complex historical and geopolitical conditions in which the various authors of the British Arthurian tradition found themselves. Before attempting to explore any of these issues, however, a sketch of Mordred's development within the British context is needed.

CHAPTER 2. MORDRED'S ORIGINS AND DEVELOPMENT

One of the more intriguing pieces of evidence that has come to light concerning Mordred's origins is a reference to a person named Medraut within the *Bonedd y Saint* or Pedigrees of the Saints. Though the *Bonedd y Saint* is thought to have been compiled sometime after 1140, the Welsh forms of names throughout the text suggest that the material is considerably older.⁵ At first glance, the *Bonedd y Saint* offers little more than some genealogical information on Mordred. He is said to be the grandson of Caradauc Ureichuras or Caradog Strong-Arm. But the Caradog mentioned in the genealogical record corresponds to a historical person of the same name who ruled Gwent sometime in the early to mid fifth century.⁶ As Peter Korrel notes, this evidence would place Mordred as having lived around the time that the Battle of Camlann is said to have occurred in the *Annales*.⁷ Moreover, the *Bonedd y Saint* is believed to have been compiled independently of the *Annales*. On the surface, the reference to Mordred in the *Bonedd y Saint* seems to corroborate the account of Mordred's death either alongside or against Arthur. But problems with this theory remain. Korrel is careful to state, for example, that the reliability of the *Bonedd y Saint* itself is questionable. Further, the genealogical record makes no mention of Camlann.

Despite these discrepancies, the *Bonedd y Saint* links a man named Mordred to Welsh nobility. This piece of information seems relevant to the discussion of Mordred's development for two reasons. Firstly, Gwent borders Monmouth, the provincial jurisdiction

⁵ Robert Vermaat, "The Bonned y Saint and the Hystoria o Uuched Beuno," *Vortigern Studies*, 19 Mar. 2005 <<http://www.vortigernstudies.org.uk/artsou/bonedd.htm>>.

⁶ Peter Korrel, *An Arthurian Triangle: A Study of the Origin, Development, and Characterization of Arthur, Guinevere, and Modred* (Leiden: Brill, 1984) 30.

⁷ Korrel 30.

in Southeastern Wales from which Geoffrey of Monmouth comes. Secondly, Mordred retains a royal pedigree in much of the literature in the Arthurian tradition, though he is often a Pictish Prince rather than British. While it is extremely doubtful that Geoffrey, who completed his *Historia* at Oxford sometime between 1135 and 1138,⁸ had any personal knowledge of the *Bonedd y Saint*, the existence of material independent of the *Annales* that refers to Mordred raises the possibility that stories regarding Mordred were more widespread than is generally believed.

Though the development of Mordred's character does not necessarily progress in an increasingly negative fashion, he begins to acquire a bad reputation early on. In the Welsh triad Three Unrestrained Ravagings of the Island of Britain, Mordred is the aggressor in a feud between himself and Arthur:

...Medrawd came to Arthur's Court at Celliwig in Cornwall; he left neither food nor drink in the court that he did not consume. And he dragged Gwenhwyfar from her royal chair, and then he struck a blow upon her. The second Unrestrained Ravaging [occurred] when Arthur came to Medrawd's court. He left neither food nor drink in the court.⁹

While Mordred's relationship to Arthur here is still uncertain, his actions towards Arthur and Guinevere are unquestionably hostile. To consume all of the food of his host and, worse yet, to cause physical injury to Guinevere's person, would have been viewed as extremely insulting. Arthur's retaliatory behavior at Mordred's court, in fact, may have been regarded as Arthur's right under the law of *sarhaed* or the "insult price."¹⁰ Though payment usually

⁸ Michael J. Curley, *Geoffrey of Monmouth* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1994) xiii.

⁹ "The Red Book of Hergest Triads," *The Academy for Ancient Texts*, 13 Mar. 2005 <<http://www.ancienttexts.org/library/celtic/ctexts.triads1.html>>.

¹⁰ "Cyfraith y Gwragedd/The Welsh Law of Women," 21 Mar. 2005, *The Department of Welsh, University of Wales, Lampeter*, 23 Mar. 2005 <<http://cymraeg.lamp.ac.uk/Department/>>.

took the form of cattle and money, Arthur may have considered consuming all of the food and drink at Mordred's court to be acceptable compensation for the latter's insulting behavior.

Mordred's connection to Camlann may also have had a negative influence on the development of his character. Though the historicity of the strife at Camlann remains an open question, references to Camlann appear in Welsh literature as early as the mid-ninth century, beginning with the *Englynion Y Beddau* or The Stanza of the Graves, in which the grave of Osfran's son at Camlann is associated with graves throughout Wales belonging to the Arthurian figures of Bedwyr, Owein son of Urien, and Arthur himself.¹¹ Reasons for the strife at Camlann are difficult to ascertain, but in most of the literature blame is at least partially assigned to Guinevere.¹² In addition to Geoffrey of Monmouth's version of events in his *Historia*, two triads in the Island of Britain series, respectively Three Harmful Blows and Three Futile Battles, focus on a quarrel between Gwynhwyfar and her sister Gwenhwyfach. Three Futile Battles in particular depicts Camlann as the third and worst of the battles, each of which is stated to have begun for trivial reasons. In contrast to the quarrel between Guinevere and her sister in these two triads, Geoffrey attributes the precipitating events that lead to the strife at Camlann to Mordred's usurping of the crown and his adulterous affair with the queen. Alternatively, *Culhwch ac Olwen*, which is thought to have reached its present form sometime towards the end of the tenth century,¹³ describes the root of Camlann to be a plot instigated by

English/current/cyfraith.php>.

¹¹ A.O.H. Jarman, *The Cynfeirdd: Early Welsh Poets and Poetry* (University of Wales Press, 1981) 114.

¹² Thomas Green, "Arthur's Death and Destiny," 16 Jul. 2004, *Arthurian Resources* 23 Mar. 2005 <<http://www.arthuriana.co.uk/concepts/death.htm>>.

¹³ Norris J. Lacy, ed., *The Arthurian Encyclopedia* (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc.,

nine men, one of whom is Gwyn Bold-Anger, Steward of Cornwall and Devon.¹⁴ This last scenario is particularly intriguing, as immediate parallels can be drawn between Gwyn and Mordred. Both are stewards and both can be linked to acts of treachery. But making a solid connection between Gwyn and Mordred would require quite a bit more evidence, not the least of which would be proof that Geoffrey was familiar with *Culhwch ac Olwen*.

In any event, the development of negative characterizations of Mordred seems in part to coincide with the development of the strife at Camlann, which “became the symbol of irreversible, calamitous defeat.”¹⁵ Rachel Bromwich points out that Camlann had become synonymous with “a rabble [or] a confused mob” by the fifteenth century.¹⁶ Thus, disapproving views of Mordred’s involvement in the strife at Camlann are not altogether surprising if somewhat problematic. However, descriptions of Mordred are much more favorable when he is not associated with Camlann. Korrel, for instance, points to portrayals in the poetry of the *Gogynfeirdd* in which Mordred is praised as a great warrior and courteous knight.¹⁷ Similarly, in the Welsh triad *Pedwar Marchog ar Hugain Llys Arthur* or Twenty-Four Knights of Arthur’s Court (ca 1455), Mordred is one of three royal knights at Arthur’s court whose qualities are such that “neither king nor emperor in the world could refuse them,

1986) 124.

¹⁴ Green.

¹⁵ Green.

¹⁶ Qtd. in Green.

¹⁷ Korrel 97; Jarman 1, 94; Meic Stephens, ed., *The New Companion to the Literature of Wales*, (University of Wales Press, 1998) 268. Korrel does not provide dates for the poetry of the *Gogynfeirdd*. Jarman assigns dates between the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Stephens assigns dates between the mid-twelfth and mid-fourteenth centuries.

on account of their beauty and wisdom in peace; while in war no warrior or champion could withstand them, despite the excellence of his arms.”¹⁸

Beyond these accounts, there is one instance in which Mordred is explicitly stated as being present at Camlann but not directly responsible for the ensuing carnage. In the *Dream of Rhonabwy* (ca 1159-1200) Iddawc Cordd Prydain or Iddawc the Churn of Britain recounts how, through his desire for battle, he incited animosity between Arthur and Mordred.¹⁹ Charged by Arthur to broker a peaceful agreement, Iddawc instead speaks to Mordred in the harshest way he can imagine. Neither Arthur nor Mordred are entirely free of blame for the calamity. In particular, Iddawc’s speech to the dreaming Rhonabwy seems to imply that Mordred ought to have shown more loyalty to Arthur, his uncle and king. But the thrust of the passage seems to be that the unfortunate events at Camlann could have been prevented rather than to assign blame to Mordred. Moreover, the possibility that Mordred and Arthur could have come to a peaceful resolution, in spite of any differences they may have had, is a rarity in the various versions of the events regarding Camlann.

As is well known, Mordred first betrays Arthur in Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *Historia regum Britanniae*. However, Geoffrey provides few details concerning Mordred’s betrayal. In brief, Rome has dispatched General Lucius Hiberius with an army to re-conquer Britain after Arthur refuses to pay tribute for his unjust (from Rome’s point of view) campaigns in Gaul. Arthur instead responds that Rome owes him tribute and that he will be coming to claim what is rightfully his. As Arthur’s and Lucius’s armies prepare to meet, Arthur places Mordred and Guinevere in charge of defending Britain in his absence. Following his victory

¹⁸ Qtd. in Korrel 97.

¹⁹ “The Dream of Rhonabwy Excerpted from a Tale in the Mabinogion,” 1999, *Britannia.com, LLC* 24 Mar. 2005 <<http://www.britannia.com/history/docs/rhonabwy.html>>.

over Lucius's army, Arthur spends the winter months in France and prepares to assault Rome directly as summer approaches. Just as Arthur has begun the march southward, he receives word that Mordred now wears the crown and has sinfully taken Guinevere as his mistress. Outraged at Mordred's treachery, Arthur halts his advance on Rome and hastily returns to Britain with a portion of his men, though Arthur has the presence of mind to leave a sizeable force under the command of his kinsmen Hoel to ensure the territories Arthur has conquered do not revolt.

Mordred makes few appearances in the text of the *Historia* until his betrayal and the final scenes concerning Camlann, in which he is intimately involved. One crucial piece of information Geoffrey shares with his readers is Mordred's parentage. Mordred is Arthur's nephew through the marriage of Anna, Arthur's sister, to Loth, the ruler of Lothian. Anna and Loth also have another famous son in the *Historia*, Gawain. Scholars have frequently commented on the pairing of Mordred and Gawain here. Also of importance are Mordred's kinship ties to Arthur, which will be addressed in Chapter 3. But what seems more interesting in the context of the present discussion is Geoffrey's revelation that Loth is Mordred and Gawain's father.

Loth, whose name is clearly derived from the land under his governance, is the ruler of Lothian, a region that lays between that of the Scots to the west, ruled by Loth's brother Auguseus, the Pictland to the north, and Britain to the south.²⁰ Historically, Lothian and the surrounding areas were hotly contested. Rachel Bromwich notes, for example, that "from the sixth century onwards they were the scene of fierce fighting against the Anglian invaders

²⁰ Rachel Bromwich, "Scotland and the Earliest Arthurian Tradition," *Bulletin Bibliographique de la Société Internationale Arthurienne* 15 (1963) 85.

engaged in establishing their kingdoms of Deira and Bernicia along the east coast.”²¹ Apart from Anglian incursions in and around Lothian, the region seems to have had strategic importance to both the British and the Picts who were fighting for control of the area: “Lothian...had a northwestern border which seems always to have been a debatable land between the Britons and the Picts, until all Lothian was finally conquered by the Nagles in the seventh century.”²² Lothian and Scotland as a whole are treated similarly in the *Historia*. The mention of Mordred and his father closely follows Arthur’s successful campaign to conquer Scotland and Pictland, under the pretense that the pagan denizens of Alclud have mistreated his cousin Hoel.²³ Though no doubt Geoffrey is influenced by his desire to cast Arthur as the great restitutor of the British Empire, he is not narrating events in a vacuum. But while Geoffrey attempts to show Arthur’s generosity by returning the kingship of Scotland to Augustus, Arthur restores “the dukedom of Lothian and other near-by territories” to Loth.²⁴ Naming Loth as a duke rather than king need not be seen as a slight on Arthur’s part: he later raises Loth to the kingship of Norway.²⁵ At the same time, however, Arthur’s reestablishment of a dukedom in Lothian underscores the perception of the territory as Britain’s rightful property.

Another curiosity in connection with Mordred’s parentage lies in the racial implications of his name. Geoffrey is slightly more creative in choosing a name for Mordred

²¹ Bromwich 86.

²² Bromwich 88.

²³ Geoffrey of Monmouth, *The History of the Kings of Britain*, Lewis Thorpe, trans. (New York: Penguin Books, 1966) ix.5. Thorpe comments that Geoffrey confuses Arthur’s relationship to Hoel, who must be Hoel’s cousin.

²⁴ Geoffrey ix.8.

²⁵ Geoffrey ix.11.

than for his father, but Geoffrey does not, as one might expect, give Mordred a Pictish name. Nor does Geoffrey retain the Welsh name Medraut, which Geoffrey certainly knew from the *Annales* if he was not familiar with the lineage of the Gwentish nobleman Medraut who is mentioned in the *Bonedd y Saint*. Instead, Geoffrey chooses a Latin spelling, Modedrus, which is itself based upon the Cornish form, Modred. Geoffrey's reasons for doing so are not altogether clear. One possible explanation is that Geoffrey was building upon the established tradition of Kelliwig, one of the three places where Arthur allegedly held court, which is mentioned in the Welsh triad Three Unrestrained Ravagings. Further, the tradition of an Arthurian court at Kelliwig is at least as old as the late tenth-century *Culhwch ac Olwen*. In the main, Geoffrey's accounts of Cornwall are in keeping with this tradition. Arthur himself is born in Cornwall at Tintagel castle. Cador, the Duke of Cornwall, is one of Arthur's strongest supporters in the *Historia*. Prior to his departure for Avalon, Arthur names Cador's son Constantine successor to the crown. However, Geoffrey makes no mention of Kelliwig in the *Historia*, instead moving Arthur's plenary court to Caerleon or The City of Legions in Geoffrey's home province of Monmouthshire, ostensibly to aggrandize its importance in the Arthurian tradition. More importantly, Geoffrey positions the strife at Camlann, perhaps the most cataclysmic event in the *Historia*, in Cornwall.

Investigations into the exact location of the strife at Camlann have proven inconclusive. Indeed, whether the battle actually took place has been a point of contention. Several places have been put forward, one of the most notable being Birdoswald, which harbors a Roman fort near Hadrian's Wall bearing the name Camboglanna, the British word

for “crooked bank.”²⁶ The Welsh equivalent of this is Camlann. Camboglanna is situated “high above the River Irthing, which runs through a valley suitably crooked.”²⁷ As appealing as this hypothesis might be, difficulties remain. Etymologically speaking, insufficient time lapses between the appearance of Camlann in the Welsh language for it to be derived from the British word Camboglanna.²⁸ Nonetheless, Geoffrey chooses to locate the strife of Camlann near the River Camel in Cornwall. Wace and Lazamon would follow suit in their accounts.

Geoffrey’s complex etymological and geopolitical maneuverings with respect to Mordred’s character and the events with which he is associated are difficult to fathom. Any number of possible explanations for Geoffrey’s rearranging the linguistic and geographic landscape of the Arthurian narrative could be put forward. At the same time, however, the very complexity of Mordred’s background suggests an ambivalent attitude towards his character on the part of Geoffrey. No longer belonging to a Welsh tradition in the *Historia*, Mordred inherits a literary history which Geoffrey splits between a Pictish birth of his own invention and a Cornish tradition of Mordred’s demise. That Geoffrey endows Mordred with a Pictish origin yet allows him to penetrate Cornwall, an area with perhaps the most firmly established Arthurian tradition, attests to Geoffrey’s ambivalence regarding Mordred’s character and, by extension, the peoples on the fringes of his imaginary British Empire.

While Mordred’s pedigree becomes somewhat muddled in Arthurian tales written after the *Historia*, textual evidence strongly suggests that Mordred retains a connection to the Scottish and Pictish territories, at least in name if not in birth.

²⁶ Lacy 77.

²⁷ Lacy 77.

²⁸ Lacy 77.

Robert Wace, who is one of the first to write about the matter of Britain after Geoffrey, completes his *Roman de Brut* around 1155. Wace does not specifically state that Mordred is the child of Lot and Arthur's sister, who is now anonymous in the *Roman de Brut*, but Mordred's birthright can be inferred. Early on in the Arthurian section of the *Roman de Brut*, a comet appears in the sky. The people who witness the event, including Uther Pendragon, who is Arthur's father, wonder what the shooting star might portend. Uther asks the much mythesized prophet Merlin to explain the meaning of the event to him. In summary, Merlin explains that Uther's brother, King Aurelius Ambrosius, has died, and that Uther will become the next king of Britain. Merlin further states that Uther will father both a son and daughter. The son, Merlin tells him, will "become a puissant prince, conquering France, and beyond the borders of France."²⁹ This son, of course, turns out to be Arthur. Merlin goes on to prophesize that Uther's daughter will be "Queen of Scotland. Many a fair heir will she give to her lord, and mighty champions shall they prove both on land and sea."³⁰

Wace is closely following Geoffrey's narrative here, which states that Uther's daughter's "sons and grandsons shall hold one after the other the kingship of Britain."³¹ Strangely, this second part of Merlin's prophecy in the *Historia* does not entirely come true. The only recognizable son of Anna that ever holds the crown, albeit briefly, is Mordred. Nevertheless, Geoffrey does state that Loth marries Arthur's sister Anna, and that they have at least two children: Gawain and Mordred. Similarly in the *Roman de Brut*, Merlin prophesizes that Arthur's nameless sister will be Queen of Scotland and will bear several fair and mighty

²⁹ Eugene Mason, trans., *Wace and Layamon: Arthurian Chronicles* (University of Toronto Press, 1996) 32.

³⁰ Mason, *Roman* 32.

³¹ Geoffrey *viii*.15.

children. A little further on in Wace's narrative, Lot is once again named Arthur's deputy ruler of Lothian.³² In addition, Lot is revealed to be the husband of Arthur's sister and the father of Gawain. Though Wace never mentions Mordred in connection to Lot or Gawain, Mordred is Arthur's sister's son. While the possibility that Arthur had another sister exists, there is no independent textual evidence to support this supposition. In this light, Mordred's relationship to Lot in the *Roman de Brut* can be inferred.

Lazamon's *Brut* (ca 1190) is the first known translation of the British Arthurian narrative into English.³³ The *Brut*, as it is more commonly known, presents no difficulties regarding Mordred's parentage. As Arthur divides the Scottish and Pictish lands between Lot and his brothers, Arthur expresses affection for Lot, owing to the fact that Lot is his brother-in-law and is the father of Gawain and Mordred. As an aside, Lazamon's mentioning of Gawain and Mordred as the sons of Lot seems to indicate that the text of the *Brut* is a conflation of the *Roman de Brut* and the *Historia*. This seems noteworthy, as Lazamon generally follows Wace's account uncritically.³⁴

The alliterative *Morte Arthure* (ca 1400)³⁵ poses a new problem regarding Mordred's parentage. Though Mordred is once again Arthur's nephew, the anonymous poet never mentions who Mordred's parents might be. This may stem in part from the anonymous poet's attempt to suppress the brotherly relationship between Mordred and Gawain that had been

³² Wace refers to Lothian as Lyones.

³³ Mason, *Lazamon ix*.

³⁴ Mason, *Lazamon ix*.

³⁵ Larry D. Benson, and Edward E. Foster, eds., *King Arthur's Death: the Middle English Stanzaic Morte Arthure and Alliterative Morte Arthure*, Revised ed (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1994) 4.

established in the earlier British Arthurian narratives. Kuniko Shoji comments on the fact that both Mordred and Gawain are said to be Arthur's nephews in the alliterative poem, but their relationship to one another is unclear: "since there is no specific reference, it is impossible to tell of their relationship definitely."³⁶ Tellingly, Gawain does not acknowledge his relationship to Mordred when they meet upon the field of battle. Likewise, when Mordred passionately eulogizes over Gawain's corpse, lamenting the fact that he has slain such an excellent knight, Mordred neglects to mention any kinship with the deceased.

Though it cannot be determined that Mordred is Gawain's brother or Lot's son in the alliterative *Morte Arthure*, one tantalizing piece of evidence does suggest that Mordred claims a Scottish ancestry. In the final battle,³⁷ Mordred changes his heraldic devices in an attempt to trick Arthur. Though the ruse does not work, the switch itself is worth examining. Mordred "...had smoothly forsaken the sauturour engreled, / And laght up three lions all of white silver, / Passand in purpure of perry full rich."³⁸ The coat of arms Mordred adopts during the battle has been shown to be the coat of arms of the English Kings from the House of Anjou.³⁹ The reasons why Mordred adopts this particular coat of arms are not entirely clear. As Korrel points out, the text of the alliterative *Morte Arthure* states that he does so out of cowardice.⁴⁰ Be that as it may, what is more significant is that the engrailed saltire Mordred abandons in this scene is a pattern commonly associated with Scotch heraldic

³⁶ Kuniko Shoji, "The Failed Hero: Mordred, Gawain's Brother," *Poetica: An International Journal of Linguistic-Literary Studies* 38 (1993) 58.

³⁷ Once again in Cornwall, but no exact location is named.

³⁸ Benson, *Alliterative* 4182-4.

³⁹ Korrel 217.

⁴⁰ Korrel 217.

devices. The cross saltire is the emblem of St. Andrew, patron Saint of Scotland.⁴¹

Reportedly, the saltire can be traced to around 832 AD, when “an army of Picts and Scots under King Angus...invaded Lothian to drive out the Northumbrians.”⁴² That Mordred should be associated with such an important emblem in Scottish tradition suggests that the Mordred of the alliterative *Morte Arthure* possesses a Scottish background.

Mordred’s origin story changes substantially in the stanzaic *Morte Arthur* and Malory’s voluminous *Le Morte Darthur*. This is largely due to the anonymous stanzaic poet and Malory’s heavy reliance on the French *Vulgate Cycle* to write their accounts of the matter of Britain. As is well known, the *Vulgate Cycle* diverges from the early British tradition established by Geoffrey of Monmouth, Wace, and Lazamon. With respect to Mordred, the author or authors of the *Vulgate Cycle*⁴³ initiate the story of Mordred’s incestuous birth with which most people are familiar.

Little is said regarding Mordred’s parentage in the stanzaic *Morte Arthur*. Mordred’s relationship to Arthur is mentioned just once, when the anonymous stanzaic poet reveals that Mordred has betrayed Arthur: “The kinges soster son he was / And eek his own son, as I rede.”⁴⁴ There can be little doubt that the anonymous stanzaic poet is referring to the *Vulgate Cycle* in the second line. However, Arthur commits incest with his anonymous sister in the stanzaic poem. In the *Vulgate Cycle*, Arthur has an incestuous relationship with his

⁴¹ “Union Flag,” *The Monarchy Today*, 25 Mar. 2005 <<http://www.royal.gov.uk/output/page398.asp>>.

⁴² “A Sign from Above,” May 2004, *Friends of Scotland*, 25 Mar. 2005 <<http://www.friendsofscotland.gov.uk/education/images.html>>.

⁴³ The *Vulgate Cycle* is popularly attributed to Walter Map, but scholars generally believe that Map could not have written such a lengthy work on his own. See, for example, Korrel, 176.

⁴⁴ Benson, *Stanzaic* 2955-6.

half-sister. Why Arthur's sibling reverts to a full sister in the stanzaic poem is not entirely clear. Malory follows the *Vulgate Cycle* here, describing Morgause as Arthur's half-sister. Regardless of this quandary, Mordred retains part of the Pictish tradition of his parentage in both the *Vulgate Cycle* and Malory. Morgause is married to Lot, though Lot is now the King of Orkney. Additionally, Lot and Morgause are once again Gawain's parents. Though Mordred is actually Arthur's son in all three stories, he still has strong connections to the Pictish tradition in two of them.

Considering the popularity of the *Historia* among scholars and British kings, the impact Geoffrey's work may have had on British imperial aspirations as well as attitudes towards Scots and Picts becomes clear. As a rule, sentiments towards the Scots and Picts throughout the British Arthurian narrative are often split between tolerance and deep suspicion. The Scottish and Pictish people are tolerated as long as they cause no trouble and continue to pay tribute to Arthur. At the same time, the Scots and Picts are frequently described as barbarians, thieves, robbers, perjured villains, and untrustworthy in general. These negative portrayals of the Scots and Picts usually coincide with accounts of the betrayals of Mordred and Vortigern. The latter will be discussed at length in Chapter 4. For the time being, the discussion will turn to theories as to what motivates Mordred to betray Arthur.

CHAPTER 3. TREACHERY

As previously stated, Geoffrey of Monmouth does not offer much evidence regarding Mordred's perfidy. Geoffrey simply announces that Mordred betrays Arthur by usurping the crown and committing adultery with Guinevere. Geoffrey does not provide Mordred with a clear motive for committing these acts. He sidesteps the issue by referring the reader to an ancient book. Geoffrey also cites the expert testimony of one of his benefactors, Walter, the Archdeacon of Oxford.

About this particular matter, most noble Duke,⁴⁵ Geoffrey of Monmouth prefers to say nothing. He will, however, in his own poor style and without wasting words, describe the battle which our most famous King fought against his nephew, once he had returned to Britain after his victory; for that he found in the British treatise already referred to. He heard it, too, from Walter of Oxford, a man most learned in all branches of history.⁴⁶

Geoffrey only mentions this ancient book two other times in the *Historia*. In his dedication, Geoffrey states that he is translating the very ancient book, which is written in the British language, into Latin, at Walter's request.⁴⁷ In addition, at least two surviving manuscripts contain an *explicit* in which Geoffrey warns his contemporaries Caradoc of Llancfarn, William of Malmesbury, and Henry of Huntingdon to not discuss the matter of the Kings of Britain, as they do not have access to Walter's ancient book.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ At least four dedications for the *Historia* exist. In the majority of surviving manuscripts, Geoffrey dedicates the work to Robert, the Earl of Gloucester and illegitimate son of King Henry I. In several others, Geoffrey jointly dedicates the work to Robert and Waleran, Count of Meulan and nephew of King Stephen I; and Robert and King Stephen himself. In an 1147 edition, none of the aforementioned personages are named. Presumably, Geoffrey is referring to Robert in the cited text, though why Geoffrey refers to Robert as Duke instead of Earl remains a mystery. See Korrel, 104-105.

⁴⁶ Geoffrey *xi.2*.

⁴⁷ Geoffrey *i.1*.

⁴⁸ Geoffrey 284f.

Not surprisingly, the ancient British treatise Geoffrey cites as his primary source has not been recovered, or at least no book has been conclusively proven to be the work in question. Scholars tend to regard Geoffrey's statements concerning Walter and the ancient book as a literary tactic Geoffrey employed to express pride in his heritage, as well as to discredit the Anglo-Saxon conquest of the island; to establish the appearance of authority concerning the text; and to make a name for himself. Korrel, for example, following the work of Roger Sherman Loomis, avers that Geoffrey, ever the patriot, provides the British with a glorious past of which they can be proud while attributing their ultimate downfall to disunity and God's displeasure with their infighting, which manifests itself in the form of famine and plague, rather than to Anglo-Saxon dominance.⁴⁹ The Anglo-Saxons of Geoffrey's *Historia* "never really managed to conquer the Britons. Their ultimate victory was never brought about by a heroic feat of arms."⁵⁰ In this context, the argument that Geoffrey sought to gain prestige by passing himself off as the translator of British historiography is somewhat more appealing. As Korrel comments, the Anglo-Normans would have had a vested interest in gathering intelligence on the people whom they conquered.⁵¹ The person who supplied them with such information could go far. Moreover, two of Geoffrey's supporters, Alexander, the Bishop of Lincoln, and Robert, the Earl of Gloucester, were both interested in historical works. Robert was William of Malmesbury's patron and was familiar with William's *Gesta regum Anglorum* (1125). Geoffrey, then, needed to cite a seemingly credible source in order

⁴⁹ Korrel 107-8.

⁵⁰ Korrel 108.

⁵¹ Korrel 110.

lend support to his version of events, which differed widely from William's, who told events from the point of view of the English.⁵²

Similar arguments have been made regarding Geoffrey's deferral to the authoritative British work to explain Mordred's betrayal. Siân Echard, for instance, makes the case that referring the reader to the ancient book at this precise moment in the narrative allows Geoffrey both to evade responsibility for the unfortunate direction in which the story turns as well as to lend his fictionalized account of events credibility.⁵³ This reading certainly has merit. Reinserting the book into his narrative gives Geoffrey some flexibility. More importantly, this strategy obviates the need for Geoffrey to supply Mordred with a motive for betraying his uncle. But this move is not without its problems. For one, Geoffrey makes reference to the book only after he has reported Mordred's betrayal. On the surface, the sequence in which Geoffrey narrates events in this passage may seem inconsequential, but Geoffrey establishes Mordred's character based upon his actions: usurping the crown and marrying Guinevere. Mentioning the book afterwards serves to supplement what the reader may already presume: that Mordred is a traitor. Geoffrey appears, then, as Echard suggests, to be covering his tracks⁵⁴ In addition, with the exceptions of the dedication and *explicit*, at no other time does Geoffrey mention the ancient book as evidence to support his claims. Interrupting his story at such a critical juncture to refer the reader to a source that may or may not exist arouses suspicion. On the one hand, that Geoffrey reintroduces the mysterious British source when Arthur is one victory short of capturing Rome only to have his imperial

⁵² Korrel 110.

⁵³ Siân Echard, *Arthurian Narrative in the Latin Tradition* (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge UP, 1998) 64.

⁵⁴ Siân 64.

plans dashed by Mordred's perfidy, serves to reinforce Geoffrey's narrative regarding Arthur's achievements and his downfall. On the other, Geoffrey's need to buttress his claims exposes not only the fact that he is at least partially inventing British history, but also the threat that Mordred's actions are insufficient grounds upon which to label him a traitor. Geoffrey acknowledges the possibility that his readership may not take him at his word.

The problems that Geoffrey's reference to the very ancient book impose upon the development of Mordred's character would have far-reaching effects on treatments of Mordred in subsequent Arthurian works coming from within and without Great Britain. Wace, who translates the *Historia* into French at Henry II's request, makes some notable changes to the Arthurian part of the story. He introduces the concept of the Round Table and weaves in elements of courtly love, which would have appealed to his largely Anglo-Norman audience.⁵⁵ In response to these concerns and possibly because he does not have Geoffrey's alleged book in his possession, Wace fills in some details concerning Mordred and Guinevere's relationship in order to smoothly incorporate Mordred's treachery into his narrative. When Arthur once again prepares to embark on his campaign against Lucius, Wace takes the opportunity to inform the reader that Mordred and Guinevere are secret lovers. Wace's revelation of Mordred and Guinevere's affair is quite striking in contrast to Geoffrey's treatment of their relationship. In the *Historia*, Geoffrey does not implicate Guinevere in Mordred's treachery until he announces that Mordred has betrayed Arthur. Importantly, Wace establishes a motive for Mordred's betrayal: he desires Guinevere. Wace emphasizes the shameful nature of the relationship:

⁵⁵ Korrel 135.

Feme son oncle par putage,
Ama Mordès, si fist hontage.
A Mordret et à la roïne
Dex, tel mal fist cele saisine!⁵⁶

But Wace's explanation does not seem any more plausible than Geoffrey's. Surely Mordred and Guinevere could have carried on their adulterous relationship in secret, much like the Queen and Lancelot in various other Arthurian romances beginning with Chrétien de Troyes. In this context, Mordred's usurping the crown seems to be a separate issue. Nevertheless, the moral implications that undergird Mordred's involvement with his uncle's wife and, likewise, Guinevere's involvement with her husband's kinsmen, would have an impact on Lazamon and the anonymous alliterative and stanzaic *Morte* poets' characterizations of Mordred.

Patricia Price theorizes that references to Mordred's connection to Arthur as his sister-son, which she terms the avuncular bond, would have resonated with Celtic and Germanic societies in which emphasis was placed on loyalties between maternal uncles and their nephews.⁵⁷ Readers of the *Historia* and Wace and Lazamon's *Bruts*, Price argues, would have viewed Mordred's overtures towards Guinevere as a sign of his disloyalty to his uncle the king. Price is careful to point out, however, that cultural sentiments towards kinship ties would be supplanted by Christian doctrine on marriage, which would in turn weaken the significance of Mordred's relationship with Arthur: "As notions of clan loyalty (indicated by the avuncular bond) slowly erode, new motives have to be found for Mordred's treachery."⁵⁸ This theory ties in nicely with the development of Mordred's incestuous birth in the *Vulgate*

⁵⁶ Edouard Frère, *Le Roman de Brut par Wace* (Rouen: Librairie de la Bibliothèque Publique, 1838) 11466-69.

⁵⁷ Patricia A. Price, "Family Ties: Mordred's Perfidy and the Avuncular Bond," *Medieval Perspectives* 4-5 (1989-1990) 161.

⁵⁸ Price 169.

Cycle, which eventually makes its way into the British Arthurian construct in the stanzaic *Morte Arthur* and Malory's *Le Mort Darthur*.

Another important theory regarding Mordred's relationship with Guinevere is advanced by Amy Varin. Referring to ancient Celtic and Irish tradition, Varin proposes that Mordred's desire to marry Guinevere may ultimately derive from symbolism in which the king's marriage to the queen represents his taking sovereign possession of the kingdom: "In Celtic tradition, sovereignty is often represented as a woman and the king's assumption of power as his marriage to the kingdom."⁵⁹ This conception of the queen as a sovereignty figure seems very much in line with Geoffrey's descriptions of the island of Britain as well as of Guinevere and Ygerna, the latter whom becomes Uther Pendragon's queen and the mother of Arthur. The first words of Geoffrey's *Historia* translate as "Britain [is] the best of islands."⁶⁰ Similarly, Ygerna and Guinevere are described respectively as "the most beautiful woman in Britain" and "the most beautiful woman in the entire island."⁶¹ Guinevere and Ygerna's unmatched beauty are their key features. Also significant is that each of them is connected to Cornwall. Prior to her marriage to Uther, Ygerna is the wife of Gorlois, the Duke of Cornwall. Likewise, Guinevere is raised in the household of Arthur's friend Cador, the Duke of Cornwall, in his own time. Ygerna and Guinevere's associations with this stronghold of Arthurian tradition, coupled with their physical descriptions, make them potent sovereignty figures through which the land may be attained. Possessing these women marks both Uther and Arthur's ascendancy to power. In this context, then, Mordred's desire for

⁵⁹ Amy Varin, "Modred, King Arthur's Son," *Folklore* 90 (1979) 170.

⁶⁰ Geoffrey *i.2*.

⁶¹ Geoffrey *viii.19, ix.9*.

Guinevere throughout the British Arthurian tradition (and, it may be added, Uther's desire for Ygerna) begin to take on political meaning.

Closely related to the concept of sovereignty over the land is the founding myth Geoffrey creates to explain the naming of the kingdoms of Britain. Brutus, the legendary founder of Britain, gives the island his name. Upon his death in the *Historia*, his three sons Locrinus, Kamber and Albanactus divide the larger part of what is Great Britain into the kingdoms of Loegria, Kambria, and Albany, which correspond to the realm of the English in the East of the Island, Wales in the West, and Scotland to the North. Geoffrey also attributes the naming of Cornwall to Cornieus, to whom Brutus has given a share of Britain for the former's services during their Gaulic campaigns before completing the journey to the British Isles. Cornieus follows Brutus's example and names his kingdom after himself. As with Uther and Arthur's taking possession of Britain, Brutus, his sons, and Cornieus claim the land in the act of naming their kingdoms after themselves.

Several scholars see Geoffrey's willingness to construct a fictionalized history for the Britons as an attempt to create a British tradition comparable to the great traditions of the Greeks, Romans, and Franks; to justify the repeated conquering of Britain and the British people at the hands of the Romans, Angles, Saxons, and Normans as a land and people worth conquering; and to downplay the role of the invading Germanic tribes in the fall of the British kingdoms.⁶² Intertwined with each of these purposes is a concern for both unity and continuity that runs throughout not only the *Historia* but also Gildas's *De Excidio Britanniae*

⁶² Curley 14-18; Hugh MacDougall, *A Racial Myth in English History: Trojans, Teutons, and Anglo-Saxons* (Hanover, New Hampshire: University Press of New England, 1982) 8-13.

or *The Ruin of Britain*, the *Historia Brittonum* or *The History of the Britons*, and the *Annales Cambriae*, all of which Geoffrey drew from in writing his narrative.

Brynley Roberts discusses the theme of unity as an important structuring principle found in a number of stories and legal tracts reaching back at least two hundred years before Geoffrey wrote the *Historia*.⁶³ In particular, Roberts points to references to the Crown of London in Gildas's *De Excidio* and Geoffrey's *Historia* as evidence of the importance of not only the idea of a unified British people but also of unified rule: "The island of Britain was one, there was one crown, and at any one time, a single king."⁶⁴ Roberts extends this concept to the three kingdoms founded by Brutus's sons in the *Historia*, noting that overlordship of the three kingdoms as a whole passes to Lucrinus, the eldest of the three brother kings: "The eldest son Locrinus is the chief ruler, and the supremacy of the crown of London is formally expressed later when the elder Belinus is crowned King of the island and rules Lloegr, Wales and Cornwall, leaving the North to the younger Brennius."⁶⁵ Moreover, discord erupts between the realms when one of the lesser rulers aspires to complete rule over the entire kingdom. Roberts cites two examples. In one episode, civil war breaks out between both Ferrex and Pollex and their sons the following generation over who should be the overlord of Britain. Additionally, the final break between the English and the Welsh at the end of the *Historia* is the result of Edwin's desire to wear a crown so that he may perform ancient ceremonial rights in his kingdom of Northumbria. The high King Cadwallo agrees to meet

⁶³ Brynley F. Roberts, "Geoffrey of Monmouth and Welsh Historical Tradition," *Nottingham Medieval Studies* 20 (1976) 32.

⁶⁴ Roberts 32.

⁶⁵ Roberts 37.

with Edwin to discuss the matter, but before the meeting Cadwallo's nephew Brian bursts into tears at the thought of a Saxon wearing the crown:

'I have every reason to keep on crying,' answered Brian, 'and so has the British people, too... Now the minute fragment of their honour which yet remained to them is being made still smaller, and this with your approval, since these Saxon adventurers, who have taken every opportunity of betraying our country, are now beginning to be crowned, so that they may have a share in your kingship. Once they are raised to the rank of king, will not their fame spread even wider throughout the land from which they originally came, and will they be even quicker to invite their fellow-countrymen and so press on with the extermination of our race?'⁶⁶

Brian's message in this emotional outburst is clear. The idea of allowing the Saxons, who have already done much to diminish British control of the island, to wear the symbol of sovereignty over the whole of Britain, would be tantamount to raising them to the status of equal rulers. The line, Brian reasons, must be drawn somewhere. Upon listening to his nephew's teary-eyed speech and the advice of his counselors, Cadwallo decides to deny Edwin's request. As Roberts notes, the loss of unity did much to bring about the loss of sovereignty. "The coming of the Saxons was the turning-point in Welsh history and psychologically it was, indeed is, one of the deepest events in the Welsh consciousness. The predominant element here is the loss of sovereignty, not simply the loss of unity."⁶⁷

Connected to the concept of British unity through kingship is the continual succession of British kingship. Roberts, for example, discusses the impact of lineage on the naming of kings several centuries prior to Geoffrey's *Historia*:

[The] conception of a succession of single kings...underlines the rhetoric of the titles bestowed on British kings of the sixth and seventh centuries. It was not a meaningless rhetoric, for the battles of the seventh century were the

⁶⁶ Geoffrey *xii.2*.

⁶⁷ Roberts 34-5.

battles for the overlordship of Britain, and these titles were full of significance for those who read them.⁶⁸

Though Roberts cautions that no king-lists have been found in the literature from this time period, he does not rule out the possibility that one may have existed. Further, while the possibility that Geoffrey was following a specific list of kings to trace the succession of British kings in his *Historia* is doubtful, he does draw upon historical data as a template when it serves his purpose. Michael Curley touches upon this notion in his book *Geoffrey of Monmouth*, commenting that Geoffrey borrows from Welsh genealogies “in order to flesh out his narrative and to provide a continuous account of the succession of leaders of early Britain.”⁶⁹ In addition, for all of Geoffrey’s imaginings in putting together his *Historia*, he does so by closely following the conventions laid out in the works of previous British chroniclers with whom he was familiar. Curley notes, for example, that Geoffrey adopts Bede’s strategy in the “*De temporum ratione* of providing a strict annalistic and synchronistic framework for history.”⁷⁰ Moreover, Geoffrey’s attempt to narrate the history of British kings and their exploits throughout the *Historia* had a profound impact on conceptions of kingship far into the future. Hugh MacDougall expounds upon the *Historia*’s effects on later monarchs of the British Isles who were familiar with the chronicle, noting that “Geoffrey’s fanciful account was used by early Plantagenet monarchs to support their regal claims and for both Tudors and Stuarts it came to constitute a useful prop to their dynastic ones.”⁷¹

⁶⁸ Roberts 32.

⁶⁹ Curley 13.

⁷⁰ Curley 19.

⁷¹ MacDougall 7.

Within the larger framework of British sovereignty and unity, the symbols of Mordred's betrayal in the various works: kinship, adultery, and incest; take on political significance. Mordred's usurpation of the throne is repeatedly marked by these various transgressions throughout the Arthurian narrative. In *History on the Edge*, Michelle Warren touches upon the matter of adultery as it is hashed out in the *La Mort le roi Artu* of the French *Vulgate Cycle*. Mordred's uncontrollable love for Guinevere, Warren argues, "...directly undermines stable dominion."⁷² Mordred's disloyalty to Arthur and Mordred's unfortunate begetting in the various tales may similarly be read as disruptive to the continuity of British rule. However, a problem remains in that Mordred is not the only character to pose a threat to the continuity of the Arthurian narrative. Uther and Arthur each act indiscreetly in the early tales. In many ways, Mordred's desire for Guinevere mirrors Uther's desire for Ygerna. Additionally, Arthur's begetting through Uther's adulterous affair with Ygerna is replicated in Mordred's conception through Arthur's incestuous relationship with his sister or half-sister, depending on the tale. Outside the early stories, Lancelot threatens unity through his adulterous relationship with Guinevere. While Uther, Arthur, and Lancelot are sometimes reprimanded for their indiscretions, they never fall to the status of villain as Mordred does. In particular, Arthur's claim to the throne as the illegitimate child of Uther and Ygerna frequently goes unquestioned, whereas Mordred's illegitimacy becomes a point of contention. A possible explanation for this seeming incongruity may lay in Mordred's heritage. Mordred's usurping of political power may be tied to his ancestry and the threat that a Scottish or Pictish king posed to the British crown.

⁷² Michelle R. Warren, *History on the Edge: Excalibur and the Borders of Britain, 1100-1300* (University of Minnesota Press, 2000) 218.

The matter of Mordred's claim to the British throne is well attested in the Scottish Arthurian tradition. Beginning with John of Fordun's *Scotichronicon*, written in the 1380s and completed by Walter Bower, abbot of Lincoln around 1440, Scottish authors would criticize Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia*, arguing that Arthur was the illegitimate child of Uther and Ygerna but was made king because Gawain and Mordred were as yet too young to rule.⁷³ Nicola Royan, for example, makes the following remarks regarding John Mair's (sometimes referred to as John Major) criticism of Geoffrey in his *Historia Majoris Britanniae* (1521):

Despite the possibility of Arthur's miraculous conception, Mair questions his right of accession because of his illegitimacy. Arthur's bastard status had concerned Scottish historiographers from Fordun onwards, and Mair's arguments are broadly in line with theirs. Although Mair is prepared to accept the particular circumstances that allowed the Britons to choose Arthur over Mordred, still he has questioned Arthur's absolute regality⁷⁴

Fordun and Mair's questions regarding legitimacy pave the way for Hector Boece to write his *Scotorum Historiae* (1527), in which he radically rewrites the role of Arthur and Mordred in the eventual ruin of Britain. King Lot, who is once again Mordred's father, questions Arthur's right to wear the crown. Arthur and Lot reach a peaceful compromise in which Mordred is named Arthur's successor. When Lot dies, however, the British force Arthur to recant and name Constantine of Cornwall his heir. Enraged at Arthur's treachery, Mordred attacks, which once again results in an unhappy conclusion to the Arthurian story. The growing sense of Scottish nationalism during the early sixteenth century in part accounts for Boece's treatment of Arthur and Mordred. Men like John of Fordun and John Mair, while

⁷³ Lacy 495.

⁷⁴ Nicola Royan, "'Na les Vailyeant than Ony Uthir Princis of Britane': Representations of Arthur in Scotland 1480-1540," *Scottish Studies Review* 3.1 (Spring 2002) 12.

critical of Geoffrey of Monmouth's accounts of Arthurian events in the *Historia Brittonum*, were not prepared to place Arthur in the role of the treacherous king. Mair in particular advocated Anglo-Scottish unification. Royan observes, for instance, that completely discrediting Arthur's role in Britain's glorious past may have been detrimental to "Mair's great goal of demonstrating the benefits of Anglo-Scottish union."⁷⁵

⁷⁵ Royan 12.

CHAPTER 4. TRANSFERENCE

Though Mordred's Pictish ancestry may play a part in Mordred's development as a traitor, how Mordred's heritage is attached to the themes of kinship, adultery and incest is somewhat problematic. As has been shown, other characters in the British Arthurian tradition at least embody some of these traits. Mordred often duplicates the actions of the other Arthurian characters, as in the case of Uther and Arthur's adulterous affairs. In other instances, as with Lancelot's adulterous relationship with Guinevere, Mordred himself seems to be the originator of the motif. A partial explanation for Mordred's development along these lines may lie in the idea of transference of character traits, as outlined by Kuniko Shoji and others regarding Mordred's brotherly connection to Gawain in many of the tales and the development of the incest story as part of Mordred's background.

Shoji proposes that Mordred's begetting through incest may be derived from the story of Gawain's birth in the late twelfth-century Latin *De Ortu Waluuanii*, or The Rise of Gawain, Nephew of Arthur, *Les Enfances Gauvain* (ca 1200-1300), and the early thirteenth-century *Perlesvaus*.⁷⁶ In each of these works, Gawain is abandoned at sea shortly after his birth, though the reasons for Gawain's abandonment vary.⁷⁷ In Shoji's view, the abandonment motif is transferred to Mordred in the *Vulgate Cycle*, which also first mentions Mordred's conception as the illegitimate child of Arthur through the latter's incestuous encounter with his anonymous half-sister. Similarly, J. Douglas Bruce argues that Mordred's begetting may owe its origins to the legendary birth of Pope Gregory, whose conception is

⁷⁶ Shoji 53-4.

⁷⁷ Shoji 54.

alleged to have been wrought through the incestuous raping of his mother by her brother.⁷⁸

Jean Frappier also argues that Mordred's nativity belongs to a tradition of heroes conceived in incest.⁷⁹ Likewise, Shoji points to the legend of Roland, who is "born of an incestuous relation to Charlemagne,"⁸⁰ though Shoji regards the story as more important to the tales concerning Arthur's adulterous and incestuous relations than to accounts of Mordred's birth.

These arguments, though intriguing, are not without their problems. Korrel argues that the stories of Mordred and of the literary and historical figures mentioned above have little in common apart from their births. Most damning, in Korrel's view, is the fact that Mordred never appears to be a hero in the *Vulgate Cycle* or in any of the tales written afterwards.⁸¹ To complicate matters further, Korrel raises the possibility that the author of the *La Mort le Roi Artu* may have derived the incest motif from Robert de Boron's *Merlin* and Robert Wace's *Roman de Brut*. In *Merlin*, the eponymous protagonist takes Arthur away from his parents to be educated by his foster parents. This leads to Arthur's unfortunate and unwitting relationship with his half-sister. Also, in some versions of Wace's *Brut*, Guinevere turns out to be Mordred's sister. Thus, Mordred's incestuous origins may be the conflation of the stories set forth in *Merlin* and the *Roman de Brut*. Beyond these complications, Korrel argues that the incest motif is best understood not in terms of its similarities to other stories but in terms of its impact upon the Arthurian narrative's trajectory towards its tragic end. Pointing to the *Statutes of Salisbury*, Korrel likens Arthur's incestuous relations with his

⁷⁸ Korrel 188.

⁷⁹ Korrel 188.

⁸⁰ Shoji 60.

⁸¹ Korrel 189.

half-sister to homicide and sacrilege, some of the worst sins a person could commit in the Middle Ages.⁸²

If the transference of heroic character traits onto Mordred's character seems problematic, the conference of the traits of a villain onto Mordred's portrait may be less so. Parallels can be drawn between Mordred and the other major villain of Geoffrey's *Historia*, Vortigern. The details concerning Mordred and Vortigern's betrayals of Britain are very similar, though a one-to-one correlation between the two characters would be difficult to establish. Nonetheless, Mordred's rise to power is somewhat reminiscent of Vortigern's. Vortigern deviously takes possession of the throne, first by hiring a Pictish assassin to dispatch Constantine, then inciting the Picts to kill Vortigern's puppet king Constans. Though Mordred comes to power much more easily with Arthur preparing to assault Rome, Mordred indeed usurps the throne when the opportunity presents itself to him. Vortigern further grants the Saxon brothers Hengist and Horsa Kent in exchange for Hengist's daughter Renwein's hand in marriage. Likewise, "Mordred had made an agreement with Chelric that he would give him that part of the island which stretched from the River Humber to Scotland and all that Hengist had held in Kent in Vortigern's day."⁸³ Perhaps obliquely related here are Vortigern's desire for Renwein and Mordred's desire for Guinevere. Though Mordred's relationship with Guinevere may be more politically motivated than Vortigern's yearning for Hengist's daughter, the actions of both men threaten the unity of Britain. Geoffrey has no qualms about describing Vortigern's desire for Renwein in the blackest of terms: "Satan entered his heart, so that he fell in love with Renwein and asked her father to give her to him.

⁸² Korrel 187-8.

⁸³ Geoffrey *xi.2*.

I say that Satan entered his heart because, despite the fact that he was Christian, he was determined to make love with this pagan woman.”⁸⁴ Geoffrey spends less time describing Mordred’s relationship with Guinevere but is not much less severe in his pronouncements: “What is more, this treacherous tyrant was living adulterously and out of wedlock with Queen Guinevere.”⁸⁵ Lastly, Aurelius Ambrosius, son of Constantine and next in line for the throne, swears vengeance upon Vortigern for poisoning his father and inciting the people against his brother Constans, for usurping the crown, and for allying himself with the Saxons. Though the roles are somewhat reversed with respect to Arthur and Mordred, Arthur makes similar oaths of vengeance against Mordred and his foreign allies.

Geoffrey’s story of Vortigern’s misdeeds follows the accounts of Vortigern in the *Historia Brittonum* almost to a fault. Vortigern’s alleged betrayal of Britain was well known. In addition to the author of the *Historia Brittonum*, Bede, Gildas, and Geoffrey’s contemporary Henry of Huntingdon had also written accounts of Vortigern’s betraying Britain and exposing it to Saxon invasion.⁸⁶ Vortigern appears to be the title (meaning “superior ruler”)⁸⁷ of the leader of the British beginning in the 430s or 440s but possibly as early as 429.⁸⁸ Scholars generally accept that Vortigern invited Saxon mercenaries to live in the East of the island to serve as a buffer colony against the threat of invasion from the North after

⁸⁴ Geoffrey vi.13.

⁸⁵ Geoffrey xi.13.

⁸⁶ Curley 135.

⁸⁷ John Morris, “Introduction,” *Gildas: The Ruin of Britain and Other Works*, Michael Winterbottom, ed. (Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Littlefield, 1978) 4.

⁸⁸ Geoffrey Ashe, *The Discovery of King Arthur* (Garden City, New York: Anchor Press, 1985) 36.

requests for Roman aid were denied.⁸⁹ However, Geoffrey, like the authors of his source material, condenses into the space of a few passages the encroachment of the Saxons upon outlying lands, which probably did begin with Vortigern's initial grant but in reality gradually took place over the course of at least fifty years.⁹⁰ Further, though Hengist was likely the Germanic leader to whom Vortigern ceded lands along Britain's Eastern coast, Horsa is probably a literary construction.⁹¹

One notable difference between Geoffrey's telling of Vortigern's betrayal and the account in the *Historia Brittonum* is that, in the latter, Vortigern does not marry Hengist's daughter, who remains unnamed in the *Historia*, but his own daughter: "Vortigern, as if desirous of adding to the evils he had already occasioned, married his own daughter, by whom he had a son."⁹² Be that as it may, Geoffrey's description of Vortigern's marriage to Renwein is simply a variation on the same theme in the *Historia Brittonum*. At the same time, however, the similarities between Vortigern and Mordred's transgressions within the *Historia* itself are worth noting, as Geoffrey's characterization of Mordred is largely original insofar as Geoffrey is the first to attribute these various offenses to Mordred. In any event, the possibility that Vortigern's sins are duplicated in Mordred may account for much of

⁸⁹ William R. Leckie, *The Passage of Dominion: Geoffrey of Monmouth and the Periodization of Insular History in the Twelfth Century* (University of Toronto Press, 1981) 6.

⁹⁰ Leckie 7.

⁹¹ J.M. Wallace-Hadrill, *Early Germanic Kingship in England and on the Continent: The Ford Lectures Delivered in the University of Oxford in Hilary in Term 1970* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971) 22-3.

⁹² "From: The History of the Britons (*Historia Brittonum*)," *The Camelot Project*, 10 Jan. 2005 <<http://www.lib.rochester.edu/camelot/nennius.htm>>) Chapter 39; John Morris, ed., *Nennius: British History and the Welsh Annals* (Totowa, NJ: Rowman & Littlefield, 1980) 29. The Morris text mistakenly refers to Vortimer as Vortigern's daughter.

Mordred's development. This would also partly resolve the problem of looking for parallels to Mordred's development in non-Welsh sources.

In the *Historia Brittonum*, Vortigern's son through his incestuous relationship with his daughter is Vortimer, a great military leader not unlike Arthur who first drives the Saxons back to the island of Thanet, successfully besieging them there three times, and afterwards defeats a newly reinforced army led by Hengist on four successive occasions. Geoffrey somewhat rewrites the story of Vortimer in his *Historia*. Vortimer is no longer the son of Vortigern and his daughter but of Vortigern and his Saxon wife Renwein. Moreover, the Vortimer of the *Historia Brittonum* dies soon after the fourth battle against Hengist for unstipulated reasons. In Geoffrey's *Historia*, Renwein poisons Vortimer. Additionally, the dying Vortimer of the *Historia Brittonum* asks his men to build a tomb for him by the coast as a warning to any future attempts by the Saxons to land there; in Geoffrey's *Historia* Vortimer asks his men to build a bronze pyramid for the same purpose. In both stories, Vortimer's men disobey him. In the *Historia Brittonum*, he is instead buried at Lincoln; in Geoffrey's *Historia*, at *Trinovantum*.⁹³

Why Geoffrey chooses to suppress Vortimer's incestuous birth is a matter for speculation. Perhaps Geoffrey was uncomfortable with the idea that a great British warrior could have been born in such an unsavory manner. Whatever the reason, Geoffrey brings in an element of treachery here by causing Renwein to poison Vortimer. Poisoning, in fact, is one of Geoffrey's favorite modes of assassinating British heroes in the *Historia*. Constantine and his son Uther also die after they are poisoned. These treacherous acts almost always come at the point when the British appear on the verge of overcoming the Saxons, who

⁹³ Geoffrey refers to London by its various mythological names throughout the *Historia*.

continually threaten the stability of British dominion over the island. In this context, Arthur's downfall through Mordred's traitorous misdeeds is somewhat more understandable. At the same time, Geoffrey seems to be transferring Vortimer's mysterious origins in the *Historia Brittonum* onto Arthur while simultaneously translating Vortigern's sinister nature onto Mordred.

As is evident by Vortimer and Mordred's various dealings with them, the Scots and Picts are often employed to carry out the schemes of the nobility. With few exceptions, these peoples bear the brunt of the blame for the execution of Vortigern's machinations. One notable example in the *Historia* is Vortigern's treatment of the Picts who kill Constans for him. Upon seeing Constans' decapitated head, Vortigern feigns grief, though he is overjoyed that his plan has come off so well. With little ado, Vortigern orders that the king's attackers be executed. Interestingly, there is some debate among the populous as to whether the Picts had acted independently or had received their orders from Vortigern. The Picts even revolt against Vortigern, but they quickly fade from Geoffrey's major concerns in his narrative until he can call upon them again to commit another treasonous act. The Picts and Scots in general do not often occupy the landscape of Geoffrey's *Historia* except to serve the role of traitors to the crown or rebellious pagans who must be subdued and, ultimately, conquered.

Treatment of the Scots and Picts throughout the Arthurian story in the British context is often severe. Arthur's conquest of the whole of the Scottish and Pictish lands, which originates in the *Historia* and is repeated in the *Bruts* of Wace and Lazamon, begins when Arthur learns that his cousin Hoel is being held at Alclud. Enraged, Arthur chases the Scottish and Pictish people to Moray, where he begins to brutally and systematically exterminate the populous. Arthur first drives the Scots and Picts to an island in Loch

Lomond. Encircling the island with boats, Arthur besieges his foes for fifteen days, “reduc[ing] them to such a state of famine that they died in their thousands.”⁹⁴ Though the Irish temporarily intervene, Arthur quickly forces them to return to Ireland. Arthur then resumes his assault on the Scots and Picts, “treat[ing] them with unparalleled severity, sparing no one who fell into his hands.”⁹⁵ Arthur only ceases his savage attack on the Scots and Picts when their bishops present Arthur with “the relics of their saints and the treasures of their churches [and sue for peace,] seeing that they were in any case going to bear the yoke of servitude.”⁹⁶ Arthur similarly treats foreigners harshly in the alliterative *Morte Arthure*. In a scene reminiscent of the *Historia* for several reasons, a nobleman in the retinue of the Duke of Lorraine named Sir Cheldrik slays a young man of Arthur’s chamber named Chastelayne. Upon receiving word of Chastelayne’s death, Arthur orders his men to bombard Lorraine:

Ministeres and mason dewes they mall the erthe,
 Churches and chapels chalk-white blaunched,
 Stone steeples full stiff in the street ligges,
 Chambers with chimnees and many chef inns,
 Paised and pelled down pastered walles;
 The pine of the pople was pitee for to here!⁹⁷

The mentioning of Sir Cheldrik in this scene is likely not accidental. The name corresponds to the Saxon Chieftain who makes an alliance with both Vortigern and Mordred. In this context, it is not surprising that Sir Cheldrik’s actions in the alliterative *Morte Arthure* are perceived as inhospitable. Seeking vengeance for the mistreatment of one of his men, Arthur reduces buildings to rubble. He only stops the bombardment when the duchess of the

⁹⁴ Geoffrey *ix.6*.

⁹⁵ Geoffrey *ix.6*.

⁹⁶ Geoffrey *ix.6*.

⁹⁷ Benson, *Alliterative* 3038-43.

province, kneeling upon the battlements, asks for mercy and swears allegiance to him. Thus, Arthur frequently enforces his rule through fear and intimidation. In the early British Arthurian tales in particular, Arthur quickly earns the reputation of a warrior to be “dreaded by all.”⁹⁸ As word of Arthur’s military might spreads, the rulers of Gotland, Gunhpar, and the Orkneys swear fealty and offer tribute rather than face Arthur’s war band. Following the *Historia*, Wace similarly tells us that these three rulers, upon receiving word that Arthur has conquered Iceland, “feared mightily in case Arthur should descend upon them, and waste their land.”⁹⁹ Lazamon, following Wace, vividly recounts the King of Iceland Ælcus’s meeting with Arthur: “As soon as he saw Arthur, he fell on his knees – the king was afraid.”¹⁰⁰

Arthur’s iron grip on his empire is somewhat paradoxical. On the one hand, Arthur quickly conquers the Island of Britain, frequently though not always beginning with the Scottish and Pictish peoples. An exception is the alliterative *Morte Arthure*, in which Arthur first conquers Argyll, the Orkneys and Ireland. As Arthur gains control over more and more territory, he accrues vast resources which he can distribute among his vassalage. On the other hand, Arthur must come to depend upon the peoples he has conquered to maintain his empire. Not infrequently, he turns to the peoples of the North whom he has so cruelly subjugated. Beyond his reliance on Mordred in his absence, Arthur is supported by the three leaders of the Scottish and Pictish lands, the brothers Auguselus, Urian, and Loth, as well as Gawain. Significantly, King Auguselus is always the first person of importance named in the long list of vassals who attend Arthur’s coronation in the *Historia* and the two *Bruts*. As Arthur’s

⁹⁸ Geoffrey ix.11.

⁹⁹ Mason, *Roman* 55.

¹⁰⁰ W.R.J. Barron and S.C. Weinberg, eds. and trans., *Layamon’s Arthur*, Revised ed. (University of Exeter Press, 2001) 101.

procession slowly makes its way to the church at Caerleon, Auguselus is once again mentioned first, even before Arthur's chief supporter Cador: "Four Kings, of Albany, Cornwall, Demetia, and Venedotia, preceded him, as was their right."¹⁰¹ Auguselus's position in this scene thus indicates his importance as part of Arthur's regime. Auguselus is also among the first to pledge men to Arthur to support the king's decision to do battle with Rome. Much later in the story, Auguselus will be one of only two nobles who are named as being slain by Mordred's forces upon Arthur's return to Britain. The other is Gawain. The Scots and Picts who enforce the king's will, thus, are as often praised as they are condemned.

To a point, Mordred too acts as a servant of Arthur's rule. In the *Historia* in particular, there is no reason to suppose Mordred does not carry out his duties as Arthur's steward with the best of intentions, until the point when Geoffrey mentions his betrayal. In Wace's *Roman de Brut* Mordred's intentions are much less certain, as he does not wait long after Arthur has set out to meet Lucius before confessing his love for the queen. But Wace offers conflicting descriptions of Mordred, writing that Mordred is "not true" due to his desire for Guinevere but also that he is a "marvelously hardy knight" of whom "much good was spoken."¹⁰² With the exceptions of Lazamon and Malory, each of whom makes Mordred an unrepentant sinner, Mordred is either chosen as Arthur's steward because he has earned the affections of his peers or because he has demonstrated the ability to act honorably. In the alliterative *Morte Arthure*, Arthur chooses Mordred, not only because Mordred is his nephew, but also on the basis of the instruction Arthur has given him as a member of his household: "Thou art my newew full ner, my nurree of old, / That I have chastied and chosen, a child of

¹⁰¹ Geoffrey ix.13.

¹⁰² Mason, *Roman* 79.

my chamber.”¹⁰³ In the stanzaic *Mort Arthur*, Mordred is chosen by Arthur’s men on the basis of his trustworthiness: “...Sir Mordred the sekerest was / Though men the reme throughoute sought, / To save the reme in trews and pees.”¹⁰⁴ Though Mordred does break the trust of Arthur and his knights in each case, Mordred is frequently given the opportunity to act as the custodian of Britain because he has proven himself to be worthy of that duty.

When Mordred is given the rare opportunity to demonstrate his loyalty to the king, he is cast as a disturber of the peace before the fact. Mordred’s role in the stanzaic *Morte Arthur* is a case in point. The first time Mordred is mentioned, he is referred to as someone who knows how to stir up trouble: “...Mordred, that mikel couthe of wrake.”¹⁰⁵ The scene in which Mordred enters the stanzaic *Morte Arthur* is significant, as it sets the stage for the civil war that arises between Lancelot and Arthur that takes up the middle third of the poem. In brief, Mordred and Gawain, along with his brothers Agravaine and Gaheriet, are discussing Lancelot’s treasonous affair with Guinevere. Agravaine and Mordred are for exposing Lancelot and Guinevere’s adulterous relationship, but Gawain is against challenging Lancelot, not so much because he thinks a lid should be kept on the affair, but rather because Lancelot is too mighty a knight to oppose. Sure enough, when Mordred and Agravaine, accompanied by twelve knights, confront Lancelot and Guinevere in bed together, Lancelot manages to kill Agravaine and escape. Mordred, believing discretion to be the better part of valor, flees the scene and reports Agravaine’s death to Gawain.

¹⁰³ Benson, *Alliterative* 689-90.

¹⁰⁴ Benson, *Stanzaic* 2518-20.

¹⁰⁵ Benson, *Stanzaic* 1675.

What is most striking in this scene is that, while Mordred and Agravaine are the inciters of civil discord, Lancelot and Guinevere's adulterous relationship is the primary cause. Always already the villain, Mordred is not portrayed as the valiant knight who, as distasteful as it might be, successfully catches Lancelot and Guinevere in the act of their affair. Rather Mordred is the cowardly knight who flees the scene to report what he has learned rather than face dying upon the edge of Lancelot's fearsome blade. This is not to say that Mordred is in the right for plotting against Lancelot and the queen. But the very moral ambiguity of the scene underscores the inscription of trouble-making on Mordred's character prior to the bedroom scene. It is this presumption of Mordred's culpability that allows the anonymous stanzaic poet to shift the blame onto Mordred for the civil war that erupts in the aftermath of Lancelot's escape and subsequent rescue of Guinevere.

The idea that Mordred's villainy is established independently of his villainous actions does much to explain the lack of motive Geoffrey supplies him in the *Historia*. In terms of Mordred's birth, Mordred's villainy is solidified under the presumption that Scots and Picts are capable of treachery. The threat the Scottish and Pictish people pose to British unity goes to the heart of the imperial enterprise that is laid out in the formation of the British Arthurian narrative. The unity of the empire relies upon the complete subjugation of the conquered territories. Ultimately, the theme of unity upon which the Arthurian empire is built is the means of its destruction. At Mordred's instigation, the Scots and the Picts are some of the first peoples to revolt. While clearing Mordred of any wrongdoing does not seem a worthwhile project, Mordred's character can be understood as the focal point that reveals unrest among Arthur's imperial subjects. In the *Historia*, the army Mordred leads against Arthur consists of Scots, Picts, Irish and "anyone else whom [Mordred] knew to be filled with

hatred for his uncle.”¹⁰⁶ Similarly in the alliterative *Morte Arthure*, the peoples of Argyll, Ireland, South Wales, and Denmark, along with the Picts, all of whom Arthur is said to have conquered at the beginning of the poem, are among those who ally themselves with Mordred. Tellingly, as Arthur informs his men of Mordred’s treachery, he does not refer to the rebels who join with Mordred as full subjects of the empire but as foreigners who fight with his own people: “They have sembled on the se seven score shippes, / Full of ferrom folk to fight with mine one!”¹⁰⁷

Though the geopolitical concerns of the stanzaic *Mort Arthur* are of a civil war in England, the effect of Mordred’s scheme to usurp the crown is much the same as in earlier works. When Mordred falsely reports Arthur’s death, the people are not very much grieved:

All they said as them thought:
‘Arthur loved not but warring
And such thing as himselfe sought;
Right so he took his ending.’¹⁰⁸

There is little room to doubt Mordred’s guilt for his actions in the events leading to the final battle, here at Salisbury Plain rather than Camlann. Word spreads far and wide “That Sir Arthur had all the right, / And Mordred warred on him with wrong.”¹⁰⁹ But Mordred’s motivations for usurping the throne are once again difficult to pinpoint. On the one hand, Mordred seems obsessed with obtaining Guinevere, going so far as to besiege her in the Tower of London, where she has locked herself against him. In this manner, Mordred’s desire strongly mirrors Lancelot’s, who at first wishes to continue his relationship with

¹⁰⁶ Geoffrey *xi.2*

¹⁰⁷ Benson, *Alliterative* 3577-8.

¹⁰⁸ Benson, *Stanzaic* 2974-7.

¹⁰⁹ Benson, *Stanzaic* 3154-5.

Guinevere even after the disastrous war between his forces and Arthur's. On the other hand, Mordred seems bent on establishing a kingdom of his own. In a parley with Arthur's men, Sir Lucan suggests that Arthur will name Mordred as his successor. Mordred additionally demands control of Kent and Cornwall. Mordred's naming of these two kingdoms is significant. The Kentish lands are the lands that Vortigern gave to Hengist and Horsa in exchange for Hengist's daughter. Cornwall is the region most closely associated with the Arthurian tradition. Perhaps Mordred's failed attempts to possess Guinevere and Arthur's kingdom are variations on a theme. In any case, the civil discord that occupies the majority of the stanzaic *Morte Arthur* seems to begin and end with Mordred. Mordred is involved in the plot to discover Lancelot and Guinevere together in bed, and Mordred's usurpation of the crown is the event that takes the focus off of Arthur's war against Lancelot. In this context, Mordred's actions seem to overshadow those of Arthur and Lancelot in their bitter fight, though, it must be said, Arthur seems to follow the repeated promptings of Gawain, who wants revenge against Lancelot, believing that he has slain Gaheriet and Gaheris, Gawain's brothers. But the scenes in which Mordred takes part occupy a relatively small portion of the poem. Mordred's connection to these events thus appears to be the anonymous stanzaic poet's attempt to transfer blame for the civil war from Lancelot, Arthur, and Gawain to Mordred, as well as to supplement the moral ambiguities of the war with Mordred's treachery.

CHAPTER 5. VIOLENCE AND PEACE

The discussion of Mordred's development has thus far been concerned with the idea that Mordred's treacherous characteristics have been transferred upon him. The question that presents itself is why this transference occurs. The answer may partly lie in the historical and geopolitical conditions in which the various writers of the British Arthurian narratives found themselves. Of all of these writers, Geoffrey of Monmouth occupies center stage as the first to impose the seeds of treachery on Mordred's character. Closely related to Mordred's perfidy are the deeds and misdeeds of the Scots and Picts as well as those of the various peoples who inhabit the eastern and northern sections of the British Isles. The pressure the Picts, Scots, Irish, and Saxons exert on the Britons can partly explain the transfer of negative character traits onto Mordred in the *Historia* and, to varying degrees, the other works concerning the British Arthurian tradition that have been discussed throughout this project.

In *History on the Edge*, Michelle Warren constructs a model for looking at Arthurian literature in and out of Britain from 1100 to roughly 1300 that may be adapted for the purposes of the present discussion. Warren is primarily concerned with the figure of Excalibur and the sword in general as a response to border pressure at the edges of the various kingdoms within Britain as well at the boundaries of the island itself.¹¹⁰ Crucial to Warren's arguments are the colonizing audiences for whom the several writers of British Arthurian literature were writing. Geoffrey, of course, is writing primarily for the Anglo-Normans who have come to power in his lifetime. The division of the Norman household around the time Geoffrey completes the *Historia* between 1135 and 1138 also plays a role in at least the several dedications that accompany the finished text. Robert Wace, a subject of the

¹¹⁰ Warren *xi-xii*.

Anglo-Norman empire from the isle of Jersey, completes his *Roman de Brut* just as Henry II has assumed command of the empire following nearly two decades of growing civil unrest under Stephen's rule. One of the most important issues that would partly mark Stephen's reign as a failure and Henry's as largely successful would be how each monarch dealt with Scotland and Wales.

Stephen came to power under questionable circumstances. Henry I, who died in 1135, had named his daughter Matilda his successor. This was unpopular for two reasons. Firstly, the idea of a female ruler did not sit well with the English nobility, though Henry's barons, including Stephen, swore to acknowledge Matilda's right to the crown provided that Henry died before producing a male heir. More importantly, Henry married Matilda to Geoffrey, the Count of Anjou, which would have put a Frenchman on the throne upon Henry's death. Many of Henry's supporters, who were of Norman descent, were strongly opposed to the union. "The Norman barons, many of them also English barons, reacted violently to the prospect of being ruled by their traditional enemy, the Count of Anjou."¹¹¹ With the help of his brother, Henry of Blois the bishop of Winchester, as well as the support of the landed gentry, Stephen took advantage of Matilda's absence in Anjou upon Henry's death to have himself crowned king in London as 1135 was drawing to a close.

Stephen was regarded as a soft king, and his enemies took advantage of this perception. In 1138, Robert the earl of Gloucester, who by then had given his support to his half-sister Matilda,¹¹² staged a rebellion against Stephen. This revolt was timed to coincide

¹¹¹ Christopher Brooke, *From Alfred to Henry III* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1969) 166.

¹¹² Robert was an illegitimate child of Henry and seems to have been denied the throne at least in part on this basis.

with an attack on Northumbria by King David of Scotland, who was attempting to increase his territories. In addition, Matilda's husband Geoffrey had invaded Normandy. Stephen would successfully repel both Robert and David, the latter at the Battle of the Standard in Yorkshire, but Matilda herself would land at Arundel and join forces with Robert the following year. Under ever increasing threat, Stephen ceded the territory of Northumbria to David and concentrated on fending off Matilda, a task which occupied Stephen for much of his reign. Matilda would even capture Stephen and temporarily rule in 1141, but she proved to be unpopular. Renewed efforts by Stephen's supporters would lead to Robert's capture. Matilda would exchange Stephen for Robert, bringing her short reign to a bitter conclusion.

Unlike the weak-minded Stephen, Henry II, the son of Matilda and Geoffrey, was a strong and sometimes ruthless leader. Henry forced Stephen to sign the treaty of Wallingford in 1153, thus securing his claim to the throne.¹¹³ In addition to the tough reforms he instituted during his reign,¹¹⁴ Henry would take back Northumbria, Cumbria, and Westmoreland from the then 15-year old Scottish King Malcolm in 1157. Henry also attempted, less successfully, to gain a hold on Wales in 1157, 1158, and 1165 and invaded Ireland in 1171 "where he temporarily consolidated the conquests already made by Richard de Clare, [second] earl of Pembroke."¹¹⁵

¹¹³ "Henry II (1154-1189)," *Britannia: Monarchs of Britain*, 27 Mar. 2005 <<http://www.britannia.com/history/monarchs/mon26.html>>.

¹¹⁴ *Monarchs of Britain*; Brooke 176.

¹¹⁵ "Henry II, King of England," *Bartleby.com*, 22 Mar. 2005 <<http://www.bartleby.com/65/he/Henry2Eng.html>>.

The first fully literate king after the Norman Conquest,¹¹⁶ Henry commissioned Wace to write the *Roman de Brut*. Though Warren cautions that no evidence has been brought to light to suggest that Henry ever read Wace, his “political, military, and literary activities in the 1150s provide a compelling context for Wace’s legitimization of force.”¹¹⁷ Arthur’s forceful rule can be seen in his construction of the Round Table. As Warren comments, Arthur “orders the table himself in order to avoid excessive rivalries among his men... The Round Table thus forcefully domesticates the multiple and conflicting influences brought home from abroad.”¹¹⁸ Though Warren sees the symbol of the Round Table mostly in terms of Henry’s tight grip on his kingdom, the Round Table may also be read as criticism of Stephen’s failure to successfully control the numerous barons squabbling over land during his reign. Along this same line of argument, several scholars have suggested that Geoffrey of Monmouth’s sketch of Mordred may refer to Stephen. Neil Thomas, for instance, speculates that “the fall of the Arthurian kingdom through the dissension of Arthur’s nephew, Mordred, may be an oblique comment on the Matilda/Stephen quarrel and a warning against the tragic dangers of political schism.”¹¹⁹ Though there are undeniable similarities between Mordred and Stephen, there are several problems with this theory, not the least of which is that it ignores Mordred’s Welsh origins as well as the Scottish heritage with which Geoffrey endows Mordred. Nonetheless, political schism certainly appears to be an issue that concerned Geoffrey.

¹¹⁶ Brooke 175.

¹¹⁷ Warren 140.

¹¹⁸ Warren 163.

¹¹⁹ Neil Thomas, “Arthurian Evidences: The Historicity and Historicisation of King Arthur,” *Durham University Journal* 87.2 (July 1995) 386.

Set against the backdrop of the *Historia* is Geoffrey's own geopolitical makeup. To begin with, Geoffrey is presumably born in Monmouthshire, which is situated on the southeastern border between Wales and England. As scholars have frequently indicated, at the very least Geoffrey had strong connections to Monmouth. Geoffrey signs himself as "Monmouth" twice in the *Historia*, once in *The Prophecies of Merlin* (ca 1135), and once in *The Life of Merlin* (ca 1150).¹²⁰ Beyond this, Geoffrey relocates Arthur's plenary court to Caerleon. Many scholars feel, however, that Geoffrey may have been of Breton stock.¹²¹ Textual information that is seen as evidence of Geoffrey's ancestry is his alleged favoring of the American Britons in the *Historia*. Additionally, Geoffrey's signs seven Oxford charters as Geoffrey Arthur. The latter is believed to be the name of Geoffrey's father, a name which was rare though not unknown in Wales during Geoffrey's lifetime but much more common in Brittany.¹²² Warren is more cautious, noting that, as territory on the fringes of the Norman Empire, Monmouth would have been populated by British, Welsh, Norman, and English peoples. Thus, Warren writes that "the interactive and often improvised identifications at work in a colonial border culture like twelfth-century Monmouthshire impede the deduction of ethnicity from politics or blood relationships."¹²³ Nonetheless, Geoffrey's connection to Monmouth remains an important part of his *Historia*.

Monmouth and much of Wales is the scene of conflict throughout Geoffrey's lifetime. The uprisings of the Welsh King Owain Gwynedd, for example, are well attested. The

¹²⁰ Curley 1.

¹²¹ Curley 2.

¹²² Curley 2.

¹²³ Warren 25.

violence in Northern Wales may have indirectly affected Geoffrey himself. Geoffrey was named bishop of Saint Asaph around 1151, but it is believed that he never traveled to his bishopric before his death in 1155. In addition, Monmouth itself would play a part in the civil war between Stephen and Matilda. Though Geoffrey had been at Oxford for quite some time, Caerleon was the scene of an insurgence led by the Welsh prince Morgan, who successfully expelled King Stephen's men and assumed the kingship of Glamorgan.¹²⁴ The Earl of Gloucester, who was also Geoffrey's patron, took notice of these events and formed an alliance with the Welsh against Stephen.¹²⁵ In this context, the *Historia* has been viewed as an appeal for peace. Hugh MacDougall, for example, argues that one of Geoffrey's goals was to "subde[e] the social animosities of the Bretons, Anglo-Saxons, and Normans and [draw] them together into a single nation."¹²⁶ Similarly, Warren discusses the subtext of Geoffrey's dedication as an invitation to Robert to correct "the bloody implications of Briton history."¹²⁷

The violent rebellion at Caerleon provides a compelling context for Geoffrey's message of peace in the *Historia*. Geoffrey removes Caerleon from its recent past and relocates it in a fictional past where he is at liberty to write a new history that is free of the threat of violence. At no time in the *Historia* is Caerleon in any imminent danger. The major battles Arthur fights in Great Britain take place at Lincoln and York far to the north, and Bath and Camlann in the South. Further, Caerleon is the site of Arthur's triumphant coronation. The event is inserted into the narrative after Arthur has conquered Britain and much of

¹²⁴ Warren 25.

¹²⁵ Warren 27.

¹²⁶ MacDougall 7.

¹²⁷ Warren 27.

Europe. Further, the event occurs prior to Arthur's battles against Lucius and the Roman Empire and then Mordred and his band of rebels. Arthurian's coronation at Caerleon is thus bounded in time by violence but remains in a continuum outside of the bloodshed that permeates the *Historia*.

The details of Arthur's coronation are themselves noteworthy. Arthur is conducted to the ceremony first, accompanied by two archbishops; the four kings of Britain, each of whom bears golden swords; and a choir "chanting in exquisite harmony."¹²⁸ Guinevere is similarly led to a second church, accompanied by the same four kings, who now hold white doves, and all the married women of Caerleon. Organ music and singing of the highest caliber follow Arthur and Guinevere's processions. The many knights Arthur has invited to attend his coronation are so enraptured that "if the whole day had been spent in celebration they would not have been bored."¹²⁹ After services, the festivities move to Arthur and Guinevere's palaces, where the noblemen and women in attendance are served by a multitude of knights and servants. The triumphant processions, the harmonious organ music and singing, and the merry feasting symbolize joyous and peaceful celebration. Arthur's coronation is thus marked by the peaceful union of all of the nations within his empire.

As the scene of Arthur's coronation, Caerleon becomes the center of Arthur's empire. Geoffrey indicates Caerleon's importance by providing a brief sketch of the region's topography and by calling attention to the noteworthy landmarks within the city. Caerleon, Geoffrey tells the reader, is pleasantly situated near the River Usk. The Usk runs into the Severn Sea which borders the southern coast of Wales. The city therefore has ample

¹²⁸ Geoffrey *ix.13*.

¹²⁹ Geoffrey *ix.13*.

harborage for Arthur's vast fleet of ships. The city itself has at least two royal palaces, as well as two churches and a college. One of the churches, according to Geoffrey, functions as the third metropolitan see of the whole of Britain, making Caerleon an acceptable setting for Arthur's coronation. The college offers Arthur the invaluable service of divining the heavens for any celestial events that may have an impact upon the coronation ceremonies. These topographic and structural features denote Caerleon's status as a center of wealth and cultural sophistication. Geoffrey's motive for elevating Caerleon to this position is clear. Caerleon stands as a splendorous city comparable to the great cities of other empires. Geoffrey's chief target here is Rome. Geoffrey draws a parallel between the architecture of Arthur's royal palace and the palaces of Emperor Leo¹³⁰: "by the gold-painted gables of its roofs it was a match for Rome."¹³¹ On this basis, Geoffrey's redrawing of Caerleon as a metropolitan center in Arthur's fictional past can be seen as an attempt to anchor Caerleon's position in the Arthurian tradition.

Geoffrey's attempt to remove Caerleon from its violent history and to relocate the city in a fictional past where Caerleon could serve as the peaceful center of Arthur's united empire may partly explain the movement of Mordred's character from the position of Arthur's rival to that of a traitor. As Geoffrey shifts Caerleon from its tenuous position as a fortress on the border of Southeastern Wales to the unassailable position of the center of Arthur's Empire in the *Historia*, Geoffrey also reconfigures the geopolitical landscape of the Arthurian tradition. Geoffrey attempts to overwrite Cornwall's position as a center of the Arthurian narrative. Cornwall is no longer the setting for Arthur's plenary court. Further, Cornwall becomes a

¹³⁰ For an interesting discussion on Leo's role in the *Historia*, see Ashe, *DKA* 93.

¹³¹ Geoffrey *ix.12*.

territory embroiled in civil war on at least two occasions in the *Historia*. Uther Pendragon attacks Gorlois the Duke of Cornwall, because Uther desires Gorlois's wife Ygernia, but also because Gorlois insults Uther by leaving the latter's court without first asking permission. Much later, Arthur and Mordred meet upon the field of battle at Camlann as a result of Mordred's treachery. But Arthur is conceived when Uther penetrates Tintagel castle in disguise through Merlin's sorcery. The events that lead to Arthur's birth and death, therefore, are marked both with civil discord and acts of deception.

Arthur's ultimate downfall in the *Historia* is not achieved on the battlefield. Though Arthur falls at Camlann, he prevails against Mordred, insomuch as Mordred no longer poses a threat to British unity. Arthur's forces are always victorious in battle, or at the least they are never defeated. Because of Arthur's military might, his reign can only be brought to an end through trickery and presumed infighting. This poses a special problem for Geoffrey. Geoffrey has been at pains to portray Caerleon and, by extension, the Welsh people, as an example of how British unity and peace within the empire may be achieved. A scapegoat is needed to bring about Arthur's downfall, but Geoffrey is loath to assign blame to the Welsh. In the *Arthuriad* itself, the Welsh rarely if ever commit foul acts against the empire. The same cannot be said elsewhere in the *Historia*. Geoffrey settles on Mordred as Arthur's traitor. But Mordred is a Welsh character in the *Annales Cambriae* and in the *Bonedd y Saint*. Geoffrey knows of Mordred from the *Annales* for certain. He may have at least heard the story of the noble Gwentish Medraut that is recounted in the *Bonedd y Saint*, but there is no way of knowing this. In either case, Geoffrey chooses to call Medraut by his Cornish name, Modred. Though Geoffrey's renaming of Mordred may be a coincidence, the move is consistent with the other instances already mentioned in which Geoffrey shifts conflict onto Cornwall. But

Geoffrey imbues Mordred with a Pictish heritage. A simple reason may be that the Scots and Picts frequently play the part of sewers of discord throughout the *Historia*. But such a simple answer ignores the complex geopolitical composition of the narrative. Perhaps more importantly, political unity cannot be established as long as the Scottish and Pictish peoples are considered outsiders. Yet Geoffrey writes of a united empire in which Briton and Scot alike take part in the joyous celebration of Arthur's coronation. The Scots and Picts are thus part and yet not part of Arthur's Empire. Mordred, the knight from the border kingdom of Lothian in the *Historia*, exists at the interstices of Geoffrey's plea for peace within a united empire and the threat of bloody conflict from without.

CHAPTER 6. CONCLUSION

Throughout this study, I have explored the question of how Mordred comes to be portrayed as a traitor in the British Arthurian context. In conducting this study, I have primarily been concerned with Mordred's development within the broad geopolitical framework of the Arthurian narrative. Central to this examination has been Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae*, which forms the basis for much of Mordred's development both in terms of his treachery and his political background. Until Geoffrey writes the *Historia*, Mordred is little more than a nebulous figure vaguely associated with Arthur in the Welsh tradition. Beyond the *Historia*, motives are developed for Mordred's treacherous actions, but Geoffrey's sketch of him remains largely in-tact.

It is my hope that this study has shed light on how aspects of Mordred's treachery point to the political complexities that undergird British constructions of the Arthurian myth. Naturally, many questions remain. This study has primarily focused on Mordred's development in the early British Arthurian works. Even so, Wace and Lazamon's vision of Arthur's rise and fall were very different from Geoffrey's, if for no other reason than because they were writing for very different audiences. In particular, the Arthur of Lazamon's *Brut* appears more ruthless in establishing his empire than in Geoffrey or Wace. In Lazamon's version of Arthur's coronation, the nobles of Arthur's empire are commanded to attend the ceremony on pain of death. How Wace and Lazamon view their positions in the Norman Empire, then, necessarily raises questions regarding the treatment of marginalized peoples in the literature of the time periods in question. The alliterative *Morte Arthure* is further still removed from the *Historia*, though the poem follows the so-called chronicle tradition begun by Geoffrey and mimicked by Wace and Lazamon. Lastly, the stanzaic *Morte Arthur* and

Malory's *Le Morte Darthur* are separated from the early works both by time and by tradition, as these works are more in line with the romance tradition of the French *Vulgate Cycle*.

As a rule, much more study on the development of geopolitics in the Arthurian tradition is needed. Scholars have only begun to ask questions concerning the culture of politics in the Arthurian context within the last two decades. Arthurian literature stands as some of the most important writing in England's history. Examining how others are narrated in Arthurian literature, then, offers the scholar a window into the history of the British Empire and its effects on marginalized cultures.

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