The Boethian Influence on the "Alliterative Morte d'Arthure"

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THE BOETHIAN INFLUENCE ON
THE ALLITERATIVE MORTE ARTHURE

A Thesis

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Suzann W. Voigt

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ABSTRACT

The Alliterative Morte Arthure today has more mystery and debate about it than consensus. One of the most interesting studies in the field uses Boethian concepts of will and alienation to illuminate Arthur's curious reversal of fortune. Russell A. Peck's fascinating article, "Willfulness and Wonders: Boethian Tragedy in the Alliterative Morte Arthure," depicts King Arthur's fall from Fortune as the result of a willful choice at the Battle of Sessoine. But despite Peck's novel investigation of the Boethian influence on the poem, his study is incomplete.

A careful review of The Consolation of Philosophy reveals a more pervasive influence on the Alliterative Morte Arthure than Peck recognizes. In fact, the Boethian interpretation of the Pauline doctrine of the two natures of man establishes Arthur's dual nature from the very beginning of the poem; Boethian notions of divine reason, wandering, and correct internal values serve as a framework for the erring nature of Arthur and his knights from the beginning to the end of the poem.

The dual nature of King Arthur raises the poem beyond politics and contemporary concerns and it becomes relevant to all men living under the chivalric system. The chivalric division between public knight and private man leads to a critique of the entire medieval culture; it is a culture built on the brittle façade of chivalry rather than the good conscience and virtue that Lady Philosophy advises. So the poem is not only a political treatise for rulers; it also provides a model of erroneous courtly behavior and Christian frailty. It comments on the delicate fabric of medieval chivalry with a call for Christian vigilance and an exhortation toward internal values.
The Alliterative Morte Arthure today remains a mystery; the state of scholarship is more one of debate than of consensus. Critics generally disagree about the date, the author, and the genre; others argue whether the poem is a work of praise or a work of condemnation. But the most important puzzle that readers must resolve about the Alliterative Morte Arthure is the character of Arthur, and whether he is portrayed as a glorious king or as a tragic figure who makes a willful error. Russell A. Peck's fascinating article, “Willfulness and Wonders: Boethian Tragedy in the Alliterative Morte Arthure,” argues that Arthur's character changes diametrically from good to bad. Peck depicts Arthur as a glorious king who rises in fortune until he makes a tragic error at the Battle of Sessoine. Arthur's battlefield arrogance at Sessoine, Peck says, indicates a shift of allegiance from Providence to Fortuna, and his subsequent misfortunes stem from this tragic and willful error. The article traces Arthur's path of Boethian error from the moment he makes his fateful choice at Sessoine; Peck concludes his argument by showing that Arthur's increasing inhumanity and brutality after Sessoine are manifestations of his sudden and willful embrace of Fortune.

Despite Peck's imaginative investigation of the Boethian influence on the Alliterative Morte Arthure, his study is incomplete. A careful review of The Consolation of Philosophy reveals a more pervasive influence than Peck recognizes; in fact, the poet uses a Christian interpretation of Boethian philosophy to frame an extensive critique of the medieval notion of chivalry. By placing the Alliterative Morte Arthure in the Boethian context, we can see that its picture of Arthur is neither wholly good nor diabolically evil;

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1For instance, George Neilson contends in Huchown of the Awle Rvale that the poem dates from 1365 and that the author intended to flatter King Edward III and to honor his court; but Roy J. Pearcy places the poem later in “The Alliterative Morte Arthure ... and the Death of Richard I” and argues that the poet is criticizing King Richard I for his ambitious military campaigns and his unholy cruelty at war. William Matthews, in The Tragedy of Arthur, says the poem is critical of Edward III's futile campaigns in France, and he links Arthur to militaristic leaders like Alexander and Edward III.
2Both Maureen Fries and Lee W. Patterson see Arthur as responsible for his fall but they differ in the effect of that fall. In “The Poem in the Tradition of Arthurian Literature,” Fries sees the poem as a special kind of tragedy, but in “The Historiography of Romance ...,” Patterson sees Arthur as the agent of renewal.
3Matthews also deals extensively with the influence of Boethius on the Alliterative Morte Arthure, but as Peck mentions in his notes, Matthews “does not devote attention to questions of will.”
neither is it a portrait that shifts dramatically from faith to faithlessness. Instead, from beginning to end, Arthur is torn apart by the opposing forces at war within himself. This psychomachiac portrait of Arthur recalls the Christian notion about the dual nature of man which is split between service to God and satanic rebellion. Arthur's character is split into separate halves of private soul and public king; and instead of living according to principles dictated by his spiritual center, Arthur rather concentrates on the externalized feats of wonder and power that mark the knight. According to Boethius, this misdirected focus on externals manifests itself in the ungodly traits of a beautiful but worthless façade, irrational behavior, and wandering. Arthur's split nature is evident from the very beginning of the poem; it leads him away from his rational mind, it leads him away from his natural home, and it leads him away from his inner spiritual life. Because Arthur's actions are so different from the vaunted reputation of the renowned king, the poem questions the validity and usefulness of a chivalric system which demands so much glory. Thus the Alliterative Morte Arthure, like much other medieval literature, focuses on the problems of integrating external values, such as chivalric fame, into personal codes of honor and valor.

These dichotomies between Arthur's public persona and his private man, or between his reputation and his inner self, also plague his knights. Like Arthur, they cherish a wide celebrity while at the same time they demean it with hideous war crimes and thoughtless slaughter. The Alliterative Morte Arthure, by describing Camelot as thus fragmented, critiques the culture that rests uneasily on the pinnacle of chivalry. Medieval society has invested so much significance in the outward show of its inner life that the essential core finally loses its relevance; the code of chivalry becomes meaningless and medieval soldiers fight without moral or spiritual restraint. When Arthur and his knights fall from grace, it reflects the fate of all men who ignore their internal or spiritual development. Within the Boethian context which describes the symptoms of stunted development, the poem becomes a commentary on the dangerous instability of medieval culture with a call for Christian vigilance and an exhortation toward internal values.
The Consolation of Philosophy provides a framework for Arthur's character and for the course of his deviation; it actually outlines the pattern of error that results in Pauline doctrine when the base man overcomes the philosophic spirit. Boethius' faults are that he has forgotten his true nature, that he has wandered, both from his philosophical roots and from his natural environment, and that he has sacrificed his internal values for an external façade. Boethius' narrator is fortunate; he repents of his errors and becomes reunited with his central values before the end of the treatise and the author's death. We will see that Arthur's progress on this course, unfortunately, is not as successful. Arthur follows his unbridled impulses down a destructively willful track and can not withstand the temptation of his flesh. He forgets his divine nature both as a man and as a king, he wanders from his duties and from his homeland, and he turns from his inner core and embraces the external show that medieval society recognizes.

The Consolation of Philosophy begins describing Boethius' precarious journey of willfulness by referring to the Pauline concept of the old man. At the very beginning of the Consolation, the character Boethius laments, "For elde is comen unwarly upon me, hasted by the harmes that I have, and sorwe hath comaunded his age to ben in me" (I. i. 13-15). Because Boethius is a man of middle age and he describes the "elde" as sudden and induced by his misfortunes, he is not speaking literally of old age; he is rather echoing a metaphor Paul used almost 500 years earlier. Paul says his soul is the site of a battle between a good inner nature and an exterior and inferior one:

> For that which I work, I understand not. For I do not that good which I will; but the evil which I hate, that I do . . . For to will, is present with me; but to accomplish that which is good, I find not. For the good which I will, I do not; but the evil which I will not, that I do . . . For I am delighted with the law of God, according to the inward man: But I see another law in my members, fighting against the law of my mind, and captivating me in the law of sin, that is in my members. Unhappy man that I am, who shall deliver me from the body of this death? The grace of God, by Jesus Christ our Lord. Therefore, I myself, with the mind serve the law of God; but with the flesh, the law of sin.
> Romans 7: 15-25.

4Like Peck, I am using Chaucer's fourteenth-century translation of The Consolation of Philosophy to maintain the historical context of major philosophical ideas in the Alliterative Morte Arthure.
5All Biblical references come from the Douay/Rheims version printed in 1914.
This passage personifies the struggle of the two natures within the believer -- the outer or fallen Adamic nature and the inner divine nature received through conversion and new birth. The exterior nature of Paul represents that part of man that continually rebels against God. Elsewhere, Paul uses different metaphors, the old and the new man, to represent the two laws. When he addresses the Christians at Ephesus, he advises them to put off the old man and to put on the new, spiritual nature: “[P]ut off, according to former conversation, the old man, who is corrupted according to the desire of error. And be renewed in the spirit of your mind: And put on the new man, who according to God is created in justice and holiness of truth” (Ephesians 4: 22-24). Paul gave similar advice to the Colossians: “[strip] yourselves of the old man with his deeds, and putting on the new” (Colossians 3: 9-10). So Paul presents a picture of an inner spiritual man who struggles to overcome the powerful seduction of his sinful and rebellious exterior nature. He sees men as divided between their old, or rebellious nature and the new nature that God creates in them by conversion. Like Paul, Boethius fights against the old man of earthly desires and fleshy nature, and like Paul he regrets the sorrowful effect of the old nature. Before he even begins his examination of the problems plaguing the narrator, Boethius thus establishes an essential division in his soul; Boethius continues by personifying the Pauline split nature with Lady Philosophy representing man's inner spiritual center and the narrator representing a man who is erroneously focused on the temporal and false values of the world outside him.

The Consolation uses biology as a model to explain how men should integrate their two natures: Lady Philosophy says men should unite their inner essence with their external shell to form one complete system just as plants do. She describes the intricate and miraculous way in which roots and bark work together for nourishment and protection. While the pith feeds the bark, the bark in turn defends the pith: “… that thilke thing that is ryht softe, as the marye is, that is alwey hidd in the sete al withinne, and that is defended fro withowte by the stidfastnesse of wode” (III. xi. 118-121). Like the plant, men have a
soft and vulnerable interior that should sustain and determine his exterior frame; furthermore, men defend their fragile inner essence against the ravages of the world with protective armor. Both armor and essence must work together, in mutual support, until the two form one entity. Thus, Lady Philosophy says it is good for a man to be united into one living organism, or into one essence: “Thanne mosthow graunten . . . that oon and good be oo same thing” (46-48). So Lady Philosophy strongly advocates the mutual support of exterior life and internal values as a necessary part of health and life, and she proves it with her analogy to the thriving plant which nourishes and protects its life-giving core.

The Alliterative Morte Arthure poet explores this same complex phenomenon of the division in man through allegory; in fact, the poem expresses its significant commentary through allegorical figures that Arthur encounters in battle. As C. S. Lewis explains in The Allegory of Love, romance literature often uses allegory to advance its messages and to illustrate the internal struggles of its main characters. He says the battle scenes in romance literature are the external personifications of the fight occurring within the character. Lewis cites Chrétien de Troyes as the most important medieval allegorist and uses the famous incident of hesitation in “The Knight of the Cart” as an example of personified abstraction within a knight: here Chrétien represents Lancelot’s indecision as “a debate between Reason which forbids, and Love which urges him on” (30). W. R. J. Barron concurs that romance uses allegory to depict a character’s division in English Medieval Romance. He notes that “the hero’s struggles with obstacles” are actually a metaphoric vision “of his inner struggle to control impulses which would lead him away from self-fulfillment” (40-41). Because medieval society most often judged the spiritual state by its external evidence, the inner struggle is manifest in literature by divisions between a man’s true feelings and the false show he gives to his neighbors and to his lord.

Boethius’ visionary use of allegory and Christian doctrine is powerful material for the Alliterative Morte Arthure; Arthur actually personifies the Pauline man that is split
between faith and rebellion. Indeed, the very opening of the poem shows Arthur as an ambiguous rather than a purely glorious figure. The poet describes the legendary accounts of Camelot's knights as "theire awke dedys" (13). Though Peck glosses "awke" here as "glorious," editor Valerie Krishna translates it as "perverse, strange" (Krishna, 217); and she adds in a note, "Literally, 'untoward.' This is the poet's first hint of an ambivalent attitude toward Arthur and the Round Table" (163). Although the Oxford English Dictionary confirms Krishna's interpretation by defining "awke" as "perverse in nature or disposition" in the second entry, the OED also justifies Peck's meaning by listing "rare" in its third entry. So the poet establishes very early the complex nature of Arthur and his knights; his ambiguous usage does not introduce these characters in strict portraits as heroes or villains, as some other medieval literature does, but it introduces most powerfully the possibility of both.

The poet's explicit depiction of Arthur's Pauline nature occurs in the first dream sequence, where a dragon fights and defeats a bear. A close examination reveals, as Göller has argued, that the dragon and the bear are two sides of Arthur's divided personality and together they represent the danger that lies hidden within his soul. Like the old and new forces that war in Paul's soul, the dragon and the bear fight allegorically in Arthur's subconscious. The wise philosopher who interprets the dream names the bear as the enemy of Arthur. He says the bear is a token of "the tyrauntez that tournemente thy pople" (824), or it is a giant against whom Arthur must fight "In syngulere battell by youre selfe one" (826). But the dragon is equally terrible. It is introduced in Arthur's dream as "dredfull to beholde," and it has "Come dryfande ouer the depe to drenschen hys pople".

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6 All references to the Alliterative Morte Arthure in the text are to Valerie Krishna's edition.
8 In "The Dream ..." Karl Heinz Göller argues that the dream is a symbolic allusion to evil, and that Arthur is both the dragon and the bear. Göller says Arthur becomes monstrous by destroying his people and flouting the laws of God and chivalry.
(760-761). But because Arthur uses a dragon on his flag, this dragon is the king himself, who becomes dreadful and eventually threatens his own kingdom. Although the philosophers that Arthur consults recognize the dragon as “thy seluen it es” (817), they fail to acknowledge that the dragon is fully as fearsome as the enemy bear and they do not warn Arthur of the danger he carries within himself.

The dragon even resembles Lucifer, the arch-enemy of the sovereign God. The dragon, with its “venymous flayre flowe fro his lyppez, / That the flode of the flawez all on fyre semyde” (772-773), breathes fire and destruction. It further mimics Lucifer when it soars to the heavens and takes a flaming plunge to the earth. As Isaias records, Lucifer soars into the clouds trying to usurp God: “I will ascend into heaven, I will exalt my throne above the stars of God . . . I will ascend above the height of the clouds, I will be like the most High” (Isaias 14:13-14). The dragon in the dream traces these same movements: “Thane wandyrys the worme awaye to hys heghttez / Commes glydande fro the clowddez and cowpez full euen” (798-799). So the dragon, which is a picture of Arthur, reveals his rebellious nature in its physical resemblance to Lucifer, in its desire to ascend to the heavens, and in its potential to endanger Britain. Arthur must not only fight the bear, but he must also struggle with his internal nature, that part of himself that resembles Satan.

Arthur's struggles thus are not only against physical enemies, but rather against his subconscious will to defy God. The subconscious will surfaced in Arthur's dream as the dragon, and it is again allegorized as the giant in Arthur's battle at Mont Saint Michel; for the giant against whom Arthur wrestles represents his own old man. Paul identifies the enemies of the spirit: “For our wrestling is not against flesh and blood; but against principalities and powers, against the rulers of the world of darkness, against the spirits of wickedness in the high places” (Ephesians 6: 12). Arthur's evil will is expressed allegorically when he becomes physically and morally linked with the giant and shows the power of his rebellious will. In the earlier dream sequence, both the bear and the dragon are frightening specters as they battle one another; they are almost indistinguishable in their
awful appearance and destructive behavior. The same process occurs when Arthur battles the giant: both combatants become entangled and confused, and we recognize that Arthur is fighting one side of his own personality. In the course of the Mount Saint Michel episode, the hero has literally embraced the villain, and they come to share essential qualities. Like two lovers embracing, the warriors unite in a blur as they tumble down the hill:

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Yitt es the warlow so wyghte, he welters hym vnnder,
Wrothely thai wrythyn and wrystill togederz,
Welters and walowes ouer within these buskez,
Tumbeliez and turnes faste and terez thaire wedez;
Vntenderly fro the topphe thai tiltin togederz,
Whilom Arthure ouer and otherwhile vndyre;
Fro the heghe of the hyll unto the harde roche,
They feyne neuer are they fall at the flode merkes.
(1140-1147)
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This fast-paced view of Arthur as he moves first over and then under the giant as they fall from the hill crest to the hard rocks below is a review of the image of Arthur and the dragon. Both allegorical monsters represent evil, and when Arthur confronts them, either in sleep or in combat, their faces dissolve and melt into his own.

The physical unity of Arthur and the giant clearly represents moral unity (or immoral unity), as throughout the poem Arthur displays more and more villainous traits of the giant. One similarity is that both gather beards of defeated enemies as symbols of their power. The old lady on the Mount explains that the giant has come to collect Arthur's beard: “Forthy hurdez he here, to owttraye hys pople, / Till the Bretons kyng haue burneschte his lyppys, / And sent his berde to that bolde wyth his beste berynes” (1010-1012). Arthur himself uses the same method to subjugate the Roman senators and their people when they surrender. His knights take the prisoners to the barber where they are shaved and made humble: “They schouen thes schalkes schappely thereaftyre, / To rekken theis Romaynes recreaunt and yolden” (2330-2334). So Arthur begins to resemble the giant in arrogance and cruelty even while separated from him. Clearly this behavior is
more appropriate to a tyrant or a brutal warlord; it is not the reasoned action of a benevolent
king.

Arthur's brutality is so far from proper knightly behavior that, as the poem progresses, he becomes morally closer to the giant's code of behavior. For instance, Arthur orders his knights to take no prisoners in order to avenge Sir Kay: "take kepe to th
selfen / That no captayne be kepyde for non siluer, / Or Sir Kayous dede be cruelly
vengede" (2262-2264). But these instructions run counter to Arthur's earlier implied link of warfare and ransoming hostages. When Arthur delivers his ultimatum to the Roman emperor, Arthur announces that Lucius has to prove "whatt ryghte that he claymes, / Thus to ryot this rewme and raunsone the pople" (1275-1276). So Arthur implies that ransom is part and parcel of warfare; but clearly the hostages must be safe and well to fulfill this expectation. Here, his order to take no prisoners is a chilling step toward barbarism and away from the tenets of chivalry and humanity. Victorious knights should seize the opportunity to grant Christian mercy to their defeated enemies; but Arthur rejects this chivalric opportunity and forbids his knights to bestow grace. So Arthur fully embraces the atrocity of the giant in his disregard for chivalric values.

Arthur's moral unity with the giant is also reinforced by recreating the giant's raw savagery toward children. The old lady at the Mount recounts the savage cannibalism and lechery of the giant: "He sowppes all this seson with seuen knaue childre . . . Siche foure scholde be fay within foure hourez, / Are his fylth ware filled that his flesche yernes" (1025, 1031-1032). Although Arthur does not duplicate these actions exactly, he does threaten the lives of children. For instance, after he defeats Sir Lucius' army, Arthur commands his knights to kill all the hostages if the Romans do not pay their rents and ransoms on time: "Take sesyn the same daye that laste was assygnede, / Or elles all the ostage withowttyn the wallys, / Be hynggyde hye appon hyghte all holly at ones" (3588-3590). It is interesting to note that the hostages are children: "Of this vndyrtakyng ostage are comyn, / Of ayers full auenaunt awughte score childrenne, / In toges of tarsse full
richelye attyryde” (3187-3189). Arthur's savagery is evident here as he considers children as mere tools of war; they become only a tactical advantage.

Arthur is especially vulnerable to the influence of his savage subconscious mind because he does not heed Paul's warning that the warfare is spiritual, not physical. Paul augments his description of spiritual warfare by identifying the only effective defense. Instead of relying on external protection, Paul counsels a spiritual defense: “Put you on the armour of God, that you may be able to stand against the deceits of the devil” (Ephesians 6:11). Because Paul identifies his enemies as the spirit worlds and darkness, he says only godly spirits can withstand them. He details the elements of this godly defense:

Stand, therefore, having your loins girt about with truth, and having on the breastplate of justice, and your feet shod with the preparation of the gospel of peace. In all things taking the shield of faith, wherewith you may be able to extinguish all the fiery darts of the most wicked one and take unto you the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the spirit (which is the word of God). By all prayer and supplication praying at all times in the spirit . . . (Ephesians 6:14-18)

Like Paul and Paul's faithful disciples, Arthur suffers from attacks of the spirit and he needs the spiritual armament of faith and salvation in his fight against the giant; but Arthur does not turn to his spiritual side and he proves unable to repel these attacks from this active internal evil. King Arthur chooses instead the elaborate armor of earthly warriors:

... Sir Arthure hym selfen
Wente to hys wardrop and warp of hys wedez,
Armede hym in a acton with orfraeex full ryche,
Abouen on that a jeryn of Acres owte ouer,
Abouen that a jesseraunt of jentyll maylez,
A jupon of lerodyn, jaggede in schredez;
He brayedez one a bacenett, burneschte of syluer,
The beste that was in Basill, wyth bordurs ryche;
The creste and the coronall enclosed so faire
Wyth clasppis of clere golde, couched wyth stones;
(900-909)

The detail involves Arthur's physical armament and shows that Arthur is ignoring his spiritual preparation. Bereft of Paul's spiritual power and faithful defense system, Arthur's brutal nature rises and approaches the giant's moral standard. Instead of investing in his good nature, Arthur gives free reign to the evil within his subconscious mind and he nearly loses the battle for his soul at Mont Saint Michel.
As he faces the giant, Arthur's only supernatural preparations come from an external source; he relies on a type of magic by wearing a helmet adorned with pure gold and jewels (906-909). While the coat of mail protects Arthur from physical battle, the jewels in his helmet are supposed to protect him from the magical power of his opponent. When the magical jewels first appear at the New Year's feast, Krishna notes that medieval mysticism held that jewels had magic power against poison, “Precious stones were believed to be a protection against poison in the Middle Ages” (Krishna, 168). Indeed, the poet explains the power of the jewels at the feast: “Crafty and curious, coruen full faire, / In euerilk a party pyghte with precyous stones, / That nan enpoysyn sulde goo preuely thervndyre, / Bot the bryght golde for brethe sulde briste al to peces, / Or ells the venym sulde voyde thurghe vertue of the stones” (211-215). So Arthur does not look toward God, but instead he dresses his external shell in magical armor against the giant's evil force. Arthur is using an inappropriate and ineffective means to combat the darkness of his soul: only spiritual defenses can defeat the powers of darkness that Paul described. Although Arthur eventually won his protracted engagement with the giant, he comes dangerously close to losing this episode of single combat. Indeed, Arthur's foe even succeeds in crushing “The creest and the coronall, the claspes of sylver” (1108) that are Arthur's badges of sovereignty. Clearly, without proper spiritual development, the king and his kingdom are vulnerable to the insidious spirits of evil.

Arthur's misplaced trust in the external armor and jewels, or his complete lack of spiritual awareness, indicates the course of his deviation. Like Boethius, who was concerned with his prison and the external effects of the accusations against him, Arthur is erroneously focused on his outside matter. Lady Philosophy discusses the worthlessness of external goods, and comments that men who are empty or rotten inside seek to put on an outward mask of good. She scolds, “Is it thanne so that ye men ne han no proper goode iset in yow, for whiche ye moten seken owtward yowre goodes in foreyne and subgyt things” (II. v. 127-130). She concludes that man can not hide his filth, or that shining
praise can not cover a marred core: “For yif a wyht shyneth with thinges that ben put to him (as thus, if thilke thinges schynen with which a man is aparayled), certes thilke thinges ben comended and preyed with whych he is aparayled; but natheles, the thinge that is covered and wrapped under that dwelleth in his felthe” (II. v. 165-171). Lady Philosophy uses the plant allegory again to illustrate her internal focus. She notes that nature does not use excessive apparel: “For with ful fewe thinges and with ful lytel thinges nature halt hir apayed” (II. v. 81); and she knows that the forest is beautiful without any external or unnatural acts to increase its inherent splendor. Unfortunately, men forget this important lesson and they try to improve their appearance with alien appendages; they thus turn things “up-so-down” (132) by replacing the valuable, spiritual core with the worthlessness of an outward show.

In contrast to Arthur’s enfeebled combat, the Biblical figure of David wins a triumphant victory over Goliath because of his healthy spiritual core. David is a superior exemplar of medieval chivalry, not only because he is a model king and a godly man, but also because he is a mighty warrior. Indeed, David appears in the Alliterative Morte Arthure as one of the nine worthies, or one of only nine men in human history who are worthy of emulation. David is the sixth worthy in Arthur’s dream of the wheel of fortune; and although he falls after his sin with Bethsheba (the “mayden so mylde” [3323]), still he is esteemed as “One of the doughtyeste that duellede in erthe” (3321). In opposition to David’s spiritual worthiness, Arthur’s elaborate external preparations are virtually worthless. Indeed, Arthur does not call out to God as David did, and he makes no spiritual preparations at all. In the Old Testament account, David eschews armor and faces Goliath armed only with faith in God: “Thou comest to me with a sword, and with a spear, and with a shield: but I come to thee in the name of the Lord of hosts, the God of the armies of Israel, which thou hast defied” (I Kings 17:45). Most significantly, Arthur is relying on his own strength and the strength of his earthly armor; unlike David, who uses faith and prayer, Arthur does not depend on the might of the power of the Lord. He does not offer
prayer to God, or seek to know God's divine intent at this time. He conducts a brief reconnaissance of the area of battle, and he gathers what information about the enemy that he can; but he does not pray or submit to God's will. He does not even offer a hint of acknowledging Christ's presence on the field of battle until halfway through the event. Like a stunted plant, Arthur is only feeding the external shell and is depriving his innards of sustenance and growth. Most importantly, Arthur's chivalry is hollow beneath his armor.

Arthur follows his battle by attributing his victory to God, as David does, but Arthur's thanksgiving seems contrived and belated; coming only after the battle, Arthur's meagre praise demonstrates his peaked spirituality. David claims God's victory even before he faces Goliath: "The Lord who delivered me out of the paw of the lion, and out of the paw of the bear, he will deliver me out of the hand of this Philistine" (1 Kings 17:37). Then later as he faces Goliath, David predicts his triumph in God's name: "... and the Lord will deliver thee into my hand, and I will slay thee, and take away thy head from thee" (1 Kings 17:46). For Arthur's battle, however, the first mention of God's help comes in the middle of the battle when the poet, not Arthur, observes, "thurghe the crafte of Cryste," the strike of the "carle" failed (1107). Later, as if in afterthought, Arthur thanks God for his grace, "For it was neuer manns dede, bot myghte of Hym selfen, / Or myracle of Hys Modyr, that mylde es till all" (1210-1211). So if David is the medieval model of a successfully anointed sovereign, Arthur fails miserably. The effect leaves Arthur bereft of spiritual defenses against the savage side of his Pauline split. The result of the Mount Saint Michel episode reveals that King Arthur has neglected the spiritual development and armor that would shield his soul from the giant's onslaught.

Arthur's exterior focus appears dramatically in the rich excessiveness of the early banquet scene. The poet dedicates more than 50 lines to describe the guests' meal and King Arthur's regal dress, then adds a touch of Arthur's mock modesty and outright bravado to intensify this depiction of Arthur's arrogance. The feast begins with rich food and even more sumptuous platters. Boar heads are served on silver, "Bareheuedys that
ware bryghte, burnyste with syluer” (176), and other fine fare includes “Flesch fluriste of
fermyson with frumentée noble ... Pacokes and plouers ... herons in hedoyne ... Grett
swannes ... Tartes of turky ... bowes of wylde bores ... brestez of barowes ... clarett and
creete ... Osay and algarde and other ynewe; / Rynische syne and rochell ...” (180-203).
The food is served by richly-attired townsmen: “All with taghte men and town in togers
full ryche” (178); and the room and implements are similarly rich: “The Kyngez cope-
borde was closed in siluer, / In grete goblettez ouergylte, glorious of hewe ... Sexty
cowpes of suyte fore the Kyng seluyn, / Crafty and curious, coruen full faire, / In euerilk a
party pyghte with precyous stones” (206-212). And Arthur himself is dressed in exquisite
finery: “And the Conquerour hym seluen, so clenly arayede, / In colours of clene golde
cleede, wyth his knyghttys, / Drissid with his dyademe on his deesse ryche, /Fore he was
demyd the doughtyeste that duellyde in erthe” (216-219). This is an extremely excessive
show of food, wine, implements, and clothing. The ostentatious display does not reflect
great credit on Arthur's humility or his hospitality; rather, it reveals his pride and his
aggressive combativeness. To compound his prideful error, Arthur follows the excessive
fare with an affectedly modest tone. The juxtaposition of pride and false humility reveal
even more starkly the depth of Arthur's error. He says to the Roman ambassador: “
‘enforce yow the more / To feede yow with syche feble as ye before fynde’ ” (225-226),
trying to depreciate the incredible display that the poet lingered over. Arthur’s attempt at
false modesty is offensive, and it is highlighted by coming just after the extensive
description of the court's rich food. The contrast of the elegant description and Arthur's
“feble” one casts a harsh light on his behavior and his hospitality. This arrogant display of
pride and excess is not a positive picture of Arthur, but it is rather another example of his
early rebellion against God.

Lady Philosophy links the problem of preferring these false exterior values to the
error of seeking hollow fame. She notes that because fame is not eternal, it is temporal;
and because it can only exist on earth, it is trivial. Contrarily, true values and a good conscious are timeless and will win real glory in heaven.

And forthi is it that althowgh renoun of as longe tyme as evere thelyst to thinken were thowt to the regard of etemite, that is unstaunchable and infynyt, it ne sholds nat oonly semen lytel, but pleynlyche ryht nawht. But ye men, certes, ne konne don nothings aryght, but yif it be for the audience o f poeple and for idil rumours, and ye forsaken the grete worthinesse of conscience and of vertu, and ye seken your gerouns o f the smale wordes of straunge folkes.

So even the greatest fame that is subject to the finite limitations of man is far inferior to eternal spiritual attributes. She condemns false fame unequivocally, noting that some people gain a good reputation unworthily: “For manye han had ful gret renoun by the false opynioun of the poeple” (III. vi. 7-8). So Lady Philosophy finds no redeeming value in fame; she notes how easily fame can replace the true values that men like the medieval chevaliers should cultivate, and terms it deceivable and foul.

Arthur's focus on fame is evident, like his other deviations, from the very beginning of the poem; it emphasizes the evil of his search for glory by describing his court in terms very similar to the Biblical account of the tower of Babel, which stands as an example of rebellion against God. The Book of Genesis records that “the earth was of one tongue, and of the same speech” (11:1), and the people decided to build a city and a tower at Babel to reach to heaven: “And they said: come, let us make a city and a tower, the top wherof may reach to heaven: and let us make our name famous before we be scattered abroad unto all lands” (Genesis 11:4). Fame also motivates the Knights of the Round Table, as we learn when the narrator says they were famous throughout many lands, and that they most feared losing this glory: “chefe ware of cheualrye and cheftans nobyll ... Doughty in theire doyngs and dredde ay schame” (18 & 20). The Roman ambassadors also report that Arthur does not value gold or fine wine, but he treasures only glory: “Ne of welthe of this werlde bot wyrchipe allone” (541). So Camelot and Babel share a love of fair renown and make no mention of the inner values that must support a glorious reputation.
The legacy of Babel continues when hollow language begins to represent the hollow valor of the knights. Arthur's initial war council occurs in the "geauntes toure" (245), an implied reference to the Biblical account of Babel as well as to the murderous giant that both David and Arthur struggle with. So this important discussion occurs in the domain of subconscious savagery and in the shadow of the tower of rebellion; these elements characterize Arthur's council as evil, and we soon discover that he manipulates language to achieve his martial goals. Indeed, Arthur's expertise with hollow language allows him to incite his lords to war while maintaining the image of a dove. Rather than seeking peace through truth or compromise, Arthur favors misleading and deceptive language. He takes advantage of Sir Cador, who opens the discussion by happily embracing the prospect of war. Arthur immediately quashes the brash outburst and says he will seek a truce: "I moste trette of a trew towchande thise nedes, / Talke of thies tythdands that tenes myn herte" (263-264).

Readers expect Arthur to continue with this mediating tone, and indeed he never explicitly espouses war. But Arthur does shift tone and emphasizes the insult and anger he feels at the senators' surly summons and their disrespectful words: "His senatour has sommonde me and said what hym lykyde, / Hethely in my hall, wyth heynyous wordes, / In speche disspyszede me and sparede me lyttil— / 1  myght noghte speke for spytte, so my herte trymblyde!" (267-270). Then Arthur launches into a fiery justification for war:

I have title to take tribute of Rome;
Myne ancestres ware emperours and aughte it them seluen,
Belyn and Brene and Bawdewyne the Thyrde;
They ocupyede the empyre aughte score wynntyrs,
Ilkane ayere aftyre other, as awlde men telles;
Thei couerde the capitoile and keste doun the walles,
Hyngede of theire heddys-men by hundrethes at ones.
(275-281)

The nobles and knights respond on cue, seemingly unaware of how deftly their king has led them to the war path. Sir Aungers eagerly reiterates the arrogant incursions of the Romans in Scotland and everyone promises support of troops and materiel. So Arthur first
behaves as a peaceful man seeking a compromise with the unreasonable emperor of Rome, then he magnifies the insult to his court, and finally he whips his men into war to avenge their honor and also to avoid paying Roman taxes. This handy speechifying is a stark contrast to the figure of Arthur as a victimized underdog who defends himself and his lands against the Roman Empire, such as the figure found in one source of the *Alliterative Morte Arthure*, Geoffrey of Monmouth's *The History of the Kings of Britain*. Most importantly, the knights of Camelot and the people of Babel placed value erroneously on the empty echo of reputation without the support of truth. So the two images of Babel and Camelot combine to suggest an unholy gathering and a mistaken focus; and just as God confounded the people of Babel, Camelot will receive its due discipline.

King Arthur's knights fall victim to the seduction of fame and devote themselves to increasing their renown rather than to developing their values. This search for glory is actually what motivates the Knights of the Round Table in the course of battle. First, Arthur remarks that these knights should not be known for their fear, and then he admonishes them to remember their renown while they fight. Cador tells his comrades, “So me Criste helpe, / It ware schame that we scholde schone for so lytyll” (1718-1719); or that they should be ashamed if they are scared for such a small thing as confronting the Roman Empire. When Cador encourages his comrades a moment later, he says, “Thynk on the valyaunt prync e that vesettez vs euer / With landez and lordcheppez ... That has vs ducherés delte and dubbyde vs knyghttez / Gifen vs gersoms and golde and gadwynes many / ... Thynke on riche renoun of the Rounde Table / And late it neuer be refte vs fore Romayne in erthe” (1726-1732). So Cador does not focus on the humanity that they should retain during their battles, but he reminds them of their riches, their titles, and their land; and he tells them to fight for the renown of their group. Clearly these men have abandoned their chivalric ideals and are embracing the temporal blessings they can gain on earth. Like their erring leader, the Knights of the Round Table are in danger of losing their spiritual lives.
Arthur's disastrous focus on the external elements of life shows that he has forgotten the personal values that should frame his ideals and give meaning to his reputation. Boethius also concerns himself only with the state of his public life and accordingly with the walls of his prison; his misery stems from these misplaced concerns. Lady Philosophy directs his attention back to the meat of his lessons and to the inside, or "the sentense of my bookes" (I. v. 46). She reminds Boethius that he was made in God's image, which includes divine reason; she says man is a divine beast "by meryte of his resoun" (II. v. 133), but that Boethius has forgotten the ability to reason which is a special gift from God. By not acknowledging his link to God, he expresses that he is ignorant of his own nature. Lady Philosophy terms the lack of reason as a fall, "[they]... han yfalle from the possessioun of her propre resoun" (V. ii. 34), and argues that after the fall men are driven to darkness: "For after that they han cast awey her eyen fro the lyht of the sovereyn sothfastnesse to lowe thinges and derke" (V. ii. 35-38). In another place, Lady Philosophy says that a man remembering his nature is noble, but conversely that forgetting his nature brings him lower than the beasts: "swyche is the condysyoun of alle mankynde, that oonly whan it hath knowinge of itselve, than passeth it in noblesse alle oother thinges; and whan it forleteth the knowinge of itself, than is it browht bynethen alle beestes" (II. v. 153-158). So Boethius' misery stems from his own fall from reason; when men forget their nature they become, almost by default, bestial.

Arthur falls into the same spiritual error as Boethius by rejecting the gift of reason and showing animalistic rage; indeed Arthur often allows anger to overtake his reason. One of Arthur's episodes of irrational rebellion occurs just after he hears the demands of Sir Lucius from the Roman ambassadors; Arthur is enraged and his face looks as fierce as a lion: "The Kyng blyschit on the beryn with his brode eghn, / That full brymly for breth brynte as the gledys, / Keste colours as Kyng, with crouell lates, / Luked as a lyon, and on his lyppe bytes" (116-119). Arthur here forgets the grace of divine reason that Boethius
says makes men different from the beasts. He responds emotionally, and thus displays the loss of his own nature.

Arthur makes a similar transformation after the sage interprets the dream of the wheel of fortune and advises Arthur to repent and to beg for mercy. The sage says that Arthur's dream foretells disaster based on Arthur's "vnresonable dedis" (3452), and tells Arthur to "mekely aske mercy for mede of thy saule" (3455). The sage thus identifies Arthur's behavior as "vnresonable," so literally without reason and thus outside of God's divine image. But instead of amending his errors or repenting of his ruinous works and asking for mercy, Arthur returns to his ranting. He storms out, "with breth at his herte" (3465). The rage in his heart indicates again that the seat of his thought is wrong; it is an abomination in the sight of God, who has ordained a different, more divine, nature for Arthur.

But Arthur has forgotten not only his human nature, but also the proper nature of a king -- that is, one who acknowledges God as the monarch who rules him. Lady Philosophy uses an extended metaphor of the kingdom of God to teach men how to rule and how to submit. She says that Boethius is a citizen of God and that only Boethius' own will can remove him from the seat of his house:

> For yf thow remembre of what contre thow art born, it nis nat governed by emperours, ne by governement of multitude, as weren the contres of hem of Athenes; but oo lord and oo kynge (and that is God that is lord of thy contre) . . . Hastow foryeten thylke ryhte old lawe of thi cite, in the whiche cyte it is ordeyned and establysshed, that for what wyht that hath lever fownden therein his sete or his hows then elleswher he may not be exiled by no ryht from that place? (I. v. 17-32)⁹

Unlike the democracy of Athens, Lady Philosophy says, the earth is ruled by the will of the single king of earth, but men must exercise their will and remain seated in God's country. Unfortunately, Boethius has forgotten the sovereign rule of God; he has left God's kingdom and is now subject to fortune: "And for thow hast foryeten by whiche governementes the world is governed, forthy wenestow that thise mutacyouns of fortune

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⁹The original text does not mention God in this passage; this is one reason I chose a translation that is contemporary with the language and the concepts of the Alliterative Morte Arthure.
fleten withowte governour" (I. vi. 82-85). Without the certainty of God's rule over his daily life, Boethius thus cleaves to fortune and becomes her subject.

John of Salisbury provides a medieval update for the Boethian notion of sovereignty and applies Lady Philosophy's teaching directly to kings. John wrote in *Policraticus* IV that “all power is from the Lord God, and has been with Him always, and is from everlasting. The power which the prince has is therefore from God, for the power of God is never lost, nor severed from Him, but He merely exercises it through a subordinate hand” (4). So medieval subjects viewed their rulers as empowered by God, and the king's obedience to God was as important as their obedience to the king; indeed, their loyal fealty depended on the monarchial submission to God Himself.

King Arthur, however, forgets the rule of God on earth, and he forgets that his power comes only from God. Instead of submitting faithfully to God's sovereignty, Arthur tries to rule alone. The first time he does it is in his reply to the Roman ambassadors when he goes too far attributing his success and his glory only to the Knights of the Round Table. Although it is wise to acknowledge the help and skill of his lieutenants, he fails to acknowledge God: “And latte me neuer wannte yow, whylls I in werlde regne; / My menske and my manhede ye mayntene in erthe, / Myn honour all vtterly in other kyngys landes; / My wele and my wyrchipe, of all this werlde wyche” (399-401). Arthur also replaces faithful trust in God with a dangerous submission to fortune -- even at the beginning of the text. At a war council, Arthur announces that he will conquer foreign lands, “yif aventure it schewe” (642), or if fortune wills. He repeats this mistake during the wars with Rome when he says he will defeat a certain duke, “if destyny suffre” (2401). But Arthur's most foolish act of forgetting occurs when he takes his troops near Rome and begins to usurp God's ruling power over the church. First he accepts a bishop's fawning title as sovereign and lord over the pope and the city of Rome: “Bot a seuenyghte daye to thay ware all semblede, / And they schulde sekerlye hym seee the Sonondaye therafyte, / In the ceté of Rome, as soueraynge and lorde“ (3182-3184). Then Arthur slips into
Christ's holy throne by seeking to be crowned king of Rome on Christmas day: “We will by the Crosse Dayes encroche theis londez, / And at the Crystynmesse Daye be crowned theraftery” (3212-3213). He also claims that he will wage a holy war to avenge the death of Christ, “To reuenge the Renke that on the Rode dyede” (3217), but he forgets that only God determines justice for the death of His Son. So Arthur forgets his sanctified power first by trusting his knights instead of God, then by trusting fortune or fate, and finally by trying to replace God as the head of the church and as the divine judge. His ambitious designs significantly transgress the submissive and faithful attitude of a godly king.

So, quite contrary to Peck's description of a glorious king and his renowned knights rising in fortune and triumph until Sessoine, Arthur rather is a picture of the Pauline nature running amok even throughout the first portion of the poem. In its middle section, the poet details the various skirmishes and battles that Arthur and his knights fight in France and Italy; actually, these battlefields reveal graphically the effects of Arthur's spiritual wasteland. Arthur's Pauline nature rules him, and he leads his knights into errors of chivalry and acts of barbarism. It is vital to note that Arthur's error which causes his ultimate defeat is depicted primarily in images of wandering: he turns away from his home and gives away his duties.

The Consolation of Philosophy explicitly condemns the wanderer with a biological analogy that characterizes departure as unnatural. Lady Philosophy, using once again the metaphor of the plant, teaches that each herb or tree will thrive in the dwelling that is most appropriate to its nature:

Now loke upon thise herbes and thise trees. They wexen first in swyche places as ben convenable to hem, in whyche places they ne mowen nat sone dyen ne dryen, as longe as her nature may deffenden hem. For som of hem waxen in feeldes, and som in mountaignes, and oothre waxen in marys, and oothre cleven on roches, and summe waxen plentifuluous in sondes, and yif that any wyht enforce him to beren hem into oothre places, they wexen drye. For nature yeveth to everything that that is convenient to him, and travayleth that they ne dye nat, as longe as they han power to dwellen and to lyven. (III. xi. 99-113)
She says that plants will prosper and multiply so long as they are not transplanted by force or will. Similarly, relocating or departing from one's natural dwelling brings a dry and lifeless spiritual existence. Continuing the biological analogy, men will suffer like uprooted trees when they separate themselves from their nourishing homeland. Exercising their free will, men may “forget” their natural habitat and leave their homes; but this action disrupts the natural order of God and has dire spiritual consequences.

Arthur himself reveals that he is aware of the dangers of travelling. When he meets Sir Craddock disguised as an unknown hermit, Arthur warns him of the dangers abroad and his words indicate that the highways are treacherous. He says, “Here es ane enmye with oste undire yone vynes: / And they see the, forsothe, sorowe the betyddes; ... Knaues will kill the and keppe at thow haues” (3480-3484). Although he is literally speaking about crossing an active war zone, still his words also carry a general warning against roving bands of highway robbers that is relevant to any medieval man travelling alone; his words also reflect the problems inherent in the action of leaving your home and your trusted circle of friends and relatives. Arthur here proves that he recognizes the fragile and vulnerable state of wandering men.

But Arthur embarks on his ambitious campaign despite these concerns about safety; indeed, his eager response to Lucius’ demands suggests that he harbors a purpose that is entirely separate from the ostensible defense of his kingdom. In fact, Arthur uses these demands as a strategic opening to launch a war of aggression against Rome. If Arthur is only concerned with defending Camelot, he could have refused to pay the tribute and then dared Lucius to invade Britain; this way Arthur would be fighting on his own soil and his men would be defending their very homelands. This type of warfare is easier to support logistically with armament and food, and it is easier to support nationally with propaganda and rhetoric.⑩ Defensive warfare is also closer to the tenets of the chivalric code, which

⑩The Roman army always established defensive forts and extensive battlements along the edges of their frontier to serve as an offensive support base; indeed, remnants of these Roman walls and strategic forts still
protects the church and state against evil and ambitious invaders. As a defender of Britain, Arthur should have ensured the safety and security of his realm by taking slow and considered steps to direct equal and decisive combat, or to reinforce his battlements. But instead Arthur chooses to launch what twentieth-century soldiers call a first strike, and he will eventually degenerate to committing atrocities. This opportunistic reaction reveals that he is more concerned with ambitious conquest than he is with the welfare of his homeland. He announces his plan to attack with an insulting and aggressively violent reply:

I sail at Lammese take leue and loge at my large
In delitte in his laundez, wyth lorde ynewe,
Regne in my realtee and ryste when me lykes,
By the reyuere of Reone halde my Rounde Table,
Fanne the fermes, in faithe, of all the faire rewmes,
For all the manace of hys myghte and mawgre his eghne!
(421-426)

Because the aggression of the reply exceeds the need for it, the episode raises the question of intent. Perhaps Arthur has always intended to invade Rome and only now seizes the opportunity to appear to be provoked. When Senator Peter unknowingly provides justification for Arthur's private agenda, Arthur successfully hides his ambition, he abandons his duty and his home, and he takes off in a cloud of false indignation.

Arthur literally forgets his place and wanders into direct confrontation with Rome. When Sir Lucius broaches the subject of competing accounts and land rights, Arthur seizes the opportunity to mount his own campaigns. But Arthur is not defending his kingdom; he is rather indulging his forgetful self and allowing himself to leave his natural home. When Arthur gathers his war council and outlines his campaign plans, he says, “I am in purpos to passe perilous wayes, / To kaire with my kene men to conquere yone landes” (640-641). So he acknowledges that his purpose embodies danger; but most importantly Arthur admits that he wants to conquer foreign, or improper, lands. One of Sir Lucius' nobles links

exist today in Britain and throughout Europe where Rome successfully extended its border. But Arthur lacks that type of support structure for his war. In fact, in the Alliterative Morte Arthur, Arthur's forces resemble the marauding Anglo-Saxon tribes that invaded Britain in the fifth century.
wandering and error when he uses “error” to describe Arthur's attempt to occupy the land: “That thus in his errour ocupyes theis rewmes” (1662-1663). But Arthur does not even acknowledge the possibility that he is exceeding the bounds of spiritual and moral propriety; in fact, Arthur's vaulting ambition leads him to claim sovereignty over the world. He says that he intends to be the Lord of Lombardy, “Thus in Lorayne he lenges, as lorde in his awen, / Settez lawes in the lande, as hym leefe thoghte” (3092-3093); then he becomes absolutely corrupt when he envisions ruling the whole earth and saving Christianity: “The Emperour of Almayne and all theis este marches, / We sall be ouerlynge of all that on the erthe lengez! / We will by the Crosse Dayes encroche theis londez ... Syne graythe ouer the grette see with gud men of armes , / To reuenge the Renke that on the Rode dyede” (3210-3217). So Arthur fully succumbs to his Pauline nature by leaving his natural dwelling. His error is compounded by the vaulting ambition that he displays and his inability to recognize his unnatural state. It is very clear that Arthur has not only abandoned his nature, but he has abandoned his natural dwelling and literally lost his roots.

Arthur's brand of warfare indicates the vast distance he has travelled from the spiritual intent of chivalry; he brazenly violates its most basic tenets. For instance, he freely bombards churches and hospitals, and levels towns until the townspeople wail pitifully:

The Kynge than to assawte he sembes his knyghtez,
With somercastell and sowe appon sere halfes;
Skyftis his skotiferis and skayles the wallis,
And iche wache has his warde with wiese men of armes.
Thane boldly thay buske and bendes engynes,
Payses in pylotes and proves theire castes;
Mynsteris and masondewes they malle to the erthe,
Chirches and chapells chalke-whitte blawnchede.
Stone steppells full styffe in the strete ligges,
Chawmbyrs with chymmes and many cheefe inns;
Paysede and pelid down playsterede walles —
The pyne of the pople was peté for to here.
(3032-3043)

His indiscriminate bombardment of churches is an incredible act in defiance of his chivalric oath, which rests on the foundation of Christ's church. Furthermore, his cold lack of
response to the pitiful, pained wailing of the people reveals that he has abandoned the call for mercy within the chivalric code as well. His terrible behavior continues in Tuscany, where he “turmentez the pople, / Wroghte wedewes full wlonke wrotherayle synges, / Ofte wery and wepe and wryngen theire handis” (3153-3155). Here he indulges in tactically worthless but terribly bloody skirmishes and again turns a deaf ear to the weeping and mourning citizens. He shows again that he has wandered, literally, from the heart and soul of chivalry. Most incredibly, King Arthur and his knights follow this wanton slaughter with a picnic. They find a luxurious vale where they revel with rich wine, and “This roy with his ryall men of the Rownde Table, / With myrthis and melodye and manykyn gamnes -- / Was neuer meriere men made on this erthe” (ll. 3173-3175). Clearly, Arthur has wandered as far as he possibly can from the original purpose and scope of his chivalric oath and his duties as a king. Like the uprooted tree, Arthur is separated from his spiritual roots and his ethical core has withered and dried away.

Medieval chivalry codifies the spiritual elements that knights must remember in the heat of combat, but Arthur and his knights stray far from the heart of the code. In English Medieval Romance, W. R. J. Barron describes the evolution of chivalry from “the personal service of vassal to overlord in war and peace” that was “formalized into lifelong fealty in return for the granting of a fief” (14). Feudal chivalry thus began as a practical matter, but it became idealistic with the intervention of the church. Barron recognizes the potential conflict in this system: “Late in the process, the Church added a gloss of sanctity to the dubbing ceremony ... Its approval served to strengthen the element of idealism in what was essentially a system of mutual self-interest” (14). So chivalry began as a kind of mercenary service to local warlords which became obscured with the imposition of spiritual values and standards. Soon knights had to perform their martial duties while also behaving like model Christians. The chivalric code demanded that chevaliers “protect the weak, right wrongs, and defend Holy Church” (14). The spiritual elements helped to create a division between the ideal tenets of justice and fair play on the one hand, and the reality of brutal warfare on
the other. Medieval society came to value only the external evidence of chivalric codes rather than placing value on the practical skills that ensure victory. But in real warfare, these codes often were counter-productive. The knight is trapped in this division of values, torn between spiritual chivalry and his bestial desire for victory.

The Knights of the Round Table suffer from this division of allegiance, and they follow their royal leader until they too give full reign to their evil nature. They show that they have forgotten their spiritual man when they ignore the basic tenets of the chivalric code, i.e. to protect the weak and to defend the church and state, and determine instead to win at all costs. The knights' behavior represents a split between the chivalric ideal and the real prospects of dirty war: their wholesale rejection of the chivalric code reveals that they, too, have abandoned the spiritual center of their code and they do not care to develop the internal values that support the chivalric code.

Perhaps the most dramatic example of the knights' fall from grace is Sir Gawain, who sets off an unnecessary series of bloody skirmishes after he rebels against the instructions of his lord and impetuously beheads Sir Gayous, uncle of Lucius. Gawain's many episodes of uncontrolled passion indicate a flawed character, and this is very apparent at the critical event of the beheading of Sir Gayous. His wild temper and the heedless action combine to reveal the depth of Sir Gawain's state of error. Sir Boyce is in command of the mission to deliver a simple message for Lucius to leave France, but Gawain usurps that command and takes prominence at the Roman camp; he is the first knight to speak there. Furthermore, he does not heed Arthur's instructions to use "crewell wordez" (1271); Gawain goes beyond cruel words, and in fact he uses provocative and insulting language. Gawain calls the emperor "cukewalde" (1312) and he wishes for the emperor the "cursynge that Cayme kaghte for his brothyre" (1311). He also calls the emperor a heretic and an oaf: "fals heretyke that Emperour hym callez" (1307), and "myche wondyre haue I / That syche an alfyn as thow dare speke syche wordez" (1343-1343). When Sir Gayous defends his sovereign and nephew with equally harsh words,
Sir Gawain kills him instantly: “Than greuye Sir Gawayne at his grett wordes, / Graythes
towarde the gome with grucchande herte; / With hys stelyn brande he strykes of hys heuede
/ And sterttes owtte to hys stede, and with his stale wendes” (1352-1355). So Gawain
wanders from obedience to his lord, and his actions betray his lack of chivalric
faithfulness.

This unbelievably rash and pointless act of beheading is only the prelude for the
angry and bloodthirsty portrait of Gawain that develops. During the initial series of
engagements between Arthur's knights and Lucius' army, Gawain grinds down his enemy
and inflicts grisly wounds: “Syr Gaweayne the gracyous full graythelye he wyrrkes: / The
gretteste he gretez wyth gryeslye wondes; / Wyth Galuth he gyrdez doun full galyard
knyghtez” (1468-1470). The imagery of a meat grinder evokes a bestial killing spree and
the description of the grisly wounds far exceeds the necessary use of force; together the
grinding meat and grisly wounds resemble a jungle mentality or a totally animalistic nature.
The portrait continues when Gawain meets Sir Priamus, who notes that Gawain has a
“prowde lates” (2536), or a haughty look. When the two knights battle one another,
Gawain becomes enraged and strikes with his sword out of his passionate rage: “Thane Sir
Gawayne was greuede and grychgide full sore; / With Galuth he gyrdez doun full galyardhe
strykes; / Clefe the knyghttes schelde clenliche in sondre” (2557-2559).

Gawain repeats his habit of angry fighting, confirming his bestiality. For instance,
when Arthur's forces engage the army of the Lorraine, “Thane Sir Gawayne was grefede
and grypys his spere” (2948); we can almost see him, gripping his spear in white-knuckled
rage. Anger overwhelms him again during the battle with Mordred: “Bot Sir Gawayne for
grefe myghte noghte agayne-stande” (3757); here he is so angry that he literally can not
stand still. The third incident is also the most critical, when Gawain goes berserk and
makes a mortal error. He first goes mad with rage and becomes unstoppable: “Bot alls
vnwyse, wodewyse, he wente at the gayneste, / Wondis of thas wedirwyns with wrakfull
dynttyts -- / All wellys full of blode thare he awaye passes . . . Thare myghte no renke hym
arest, his reson was passede” (3817-3825). Then, while under the influence of his uncontrollable rage, Gawain attacks Mordred and receives his mortal blow. The poet records that as the infuriated Gawain closes in to kill Mordred, “His hand sleppid and solde o slante one the mayles” (3854); Mordred can now make the final cut, “And the tother slely slynges hym vnder; / With a trenchande knyfe the traytoure hyym hittes, / Thorowe the helme and the hede, one heyghe one the brayne” (3855-3858).

The Alliterative Morte Arthure makes an explicit point of showing the difference between the esteemed reputation of the knights and the reality of their action in combat; the very profound difference points to the rotten core of the system. Again, Gawain leads the knights in these dishonorable acts. In fact, in the accounts of Gawain’s battlefield rage that we examined are confounded by the curiously flattering adjective clauses that describe the knight in action. When he uses Galuth to grind down the enemy with grisly wounds, the poet describes this warrior as “Gawain the gracious” (1468). When Gawain is under the influence of his uncontrollable rage and receives his death blow, the poet says that death has come to “the gude man or armes” (3858). The contrast of Gawain’s rage and the description of him as Gawain the gracious and as a good man of arms serves to highlight Gawain’s inhumane actions on the battlefield. The poet here intensifies Gawain’s brutality by contrasting it with these flattering phrases that define his false reputation.

The poet confirms Gawain’s direction away from the chivalric ideals with his later speech. Trying to galvanize his men to fight, Gawain tells them to fight so they might win fame: “We sall in this viage victoures be holden, / And avaunteed with voycez of valyant biernez, / Praysede with pryncez in presence of lorde” (2863-2865). This speech is reminiscent of Sir Cador’s speech in the giant’s tower that invoked the reward of titles, land, and fame as motivation to meet the Roman aggression. Gawain’s echo of Cador’s early sentiment proves that the knights, like Arthur, do not experience a transformation; instead both king and knights harbor their evil natures throughout the poem. These two most famous lieutenants use the lure of fame, at the beginning and at the middle of the
work, to motivate and inspire their fellow combatants. Although all these knights have presumably made their loyal oath to the order of chivalry, their behavior proves that their hearts are elsewhere.

Gawain serves as the exemplar of Camelot's chivalry in the poem, and his anger and disobedience establish the type of warfare the knights wage in Europe. After the beheading incident, the Britons engage increasing numbers of Romans in attack and counter-attack until the Romans have 10,000 soldiers on the field, until each side takes noble prisoners, and until each suffers immense losses. In all, “fyfty thosaunde on felde of ferse men of armez” (1537), and they fall dead for no purpose at all: King Arthur's knights do not hold any land and they do not break the will of Emperor Lucius to wage war. Most importantly, this series of battles establishes the basic form of conflict between Arthur and Lucius as a mix of guerrilla war, or brief and unresolved encounters, and ambush. This type of warfare is essentially different from the type that Arthur envisioned, the “Com for his curtaisie, and countere me ones. / Thane sall we rekken full rathe whatt ryghte that he claymes” (1274-1275) that more closely resembles the dictates of the chivalric code. The climate of combat is thus established as perverse and truly turned away from chivalry at this very early point of conflict.

Gawain thus sets the tone for the rest of the Knights of the Round Table; indeed, from this point, they engage in warfare of dubious honor. Rather than creating Sir Gawain's terrible portrait as a singular anomaly, the poet repeats it for the other Knights of the Round Table. The poem follows the same pattern of depicting these knights' most horrible acts and coupling that action with astounding phrases. For instance, during Sir Cador's engagement with the Roman army, the Britons stage an ambush that is so successful that they can freely massacre the wounded: “Thare myght men see the ryche ryde in the schawes, / To rype vpe the Romaynez ruydlyche wondyde; / Schowttes aftyre men, harageous knyghttez / Be hunndrethez they hewede doun be the holte eyuys, / Thus oure cheualrous men chasez the pople” (1876-1880). Arthur's knights are said to be
ripping up the Romans, who were already savagely wounded, without giving them the opportunity to surrender or to ask for mercy. In addition, these merciless Britons are called powerful men (1877) and chivalrous men (1880). Another instance of this odd combination occurs during the battle against the Lorraine army when Arthur's forces fiercely repel an attack. They manage to make a counter-attack: “Than the renkes renownd of the Rownd Table / Ryffes and ruyssches down renayede wreches; / And thus they dreuen to the dede dukes and erles, / All the dregh of the days, with dreedfull werkes” (2912-2915). These are the renowned men of the Round Table, and they are behaving like a mob by carving through the enemy forces and running them down with dreadful deeds. This effect is repeated toward the end of this battle sequence when the Britons charge: “Thanoure cheualrous men changed theire horsez, / Chases and choppes down cheftaynes noble, / Hittes full hertely on helmes and scheldes, / Hurtes and hewes down haythen khnyghtez; / Ketell-hattes they cleue euen to the scholdirs” (2989-2993). So now these famous chevaliers are chasing and chopping, hewing down enemy knights, and cleaving helmets to the shoulders. Their irrational actions betray the woeful state of their hearts and their parched souls. Surely these men are guilty of forgetting their nature, wandering from their spiritual roots, and abandoning their valuable central core; they are in reality a dire comment on the state of chivalry in the fourteenth century.11

The Alliterative Morte Arthure provides an unlikely foil for these barbarous knights. The infidel Priamus is a model knight who, although a heathen, successfully fulfills the Christian standards of chivalry. He meets Gawain in battle and recognizes a cruel look in the knight's eyes: “Thowe sail be my presonere, for all thy prowde lates” (2536). During their episodic combat, Gawain characteristically grows furious with rage and lashes out with Galuth: “Thane Sir Gawayne was greuede and grychgide full sore; / With Galuthe his

11In “Reality versus Romance ...” Göller argues that the poet contrasts romantic scenes with gruesome reality to create a “death knell” on chivalric idealism. Göller condemns the king who fails to recognize this reality.
gude swerde grymlye he strykes" (2556-2557); in contrast, Priamus has the presence of mind to halt the senseless battle as Gawain is in danger of bleeding to death. He says to Gawain, “Thow arte towchede; / Vs bus haue a blode-bande or thi ble change, / For all the barbours of Bretayne sall noghte thy blode stawnche; / For he that es blemeste with this brade brande blyne schall he neuer”” (2574-2578). So Priamus acts with the mercy that is due to a disabled opponent and that was conspicuously absent during the extended Briton raids through France and Italy. Then when Gawain poses as a knave, Priamus responds with grace and courtesy: “Giffe his knaifes be syche, his knyghtez are noble” (2632). Priamus thus displays a humble demeanor that sets off Gawain's proud look and his false identity as a knave. Priamus the heathen thus proves a better chevalier than the Knights of the Round Table; in this encounter with Gawain, Priamus behaves much better than do the knights throughout the European campaigns.

The Knights of the Round Table continue their progressively unchivalrous behavior, and their perversion of chivalry becomes even more apparent as their demeanor differs radically from Priamus' example. For instance, King Arthur's knights engage in incredible moments of peace and relaxation following some of their most bloody battles. During the initial series of conflicts following Gawain's rash act at Lucius' camp, the knights are covered with blood. They “righten theire brenys, / That ranne all on reede blode redylye all ouer” (1525-1526); yet the messenger who informs Arthur reports, “Sir, here commez thy messangerez with myrthez fro the mountez” (1532). The messenger feels only cause for rejoicing over the mangled slaughter and has no moment of meditation or recognition of the immense sorrow that necessarily follows combat. In the same situation with Gawain, Priamus chose to heal his wounded opponent, he did not gloat over his victory as his foe died. The state of the knights' hearts is confirmed in other cases. During the battle when Arthur kills Lucius, his knights engage in fierce fighting. The Roman nobles suffer: “Braste with ranke stele theire rybbys in sondyre; / Braynes forebrusten thurghe burnests helmes” (2271-2272), and the Britons are doing their worst: “They
hewede doun haythen men with hiltede swerdez / Be hole hundrethez on hye” (2274-2275). But immediately after this action, the men find a safe place to pause and regroup their forces; however, their actions go beyond the mere practical: “Thane releuis the renkes of the Rounde Table / Be the riche reuare that rynnys so faire; / Lugez thaym luflye by thaym lyghte strandez, / All on lawe in the lawnde, thas lordlyche byernes” (2278-2281). Instead of behaving as Priamus does by granting mercy to Gawain and turning to God in baptism when the combat is over, the Knights of the Round Table enjoy the pleasures of a spring day as if the combat had been a picnic. These men are not behaving in accordance with the strict religious dictates of the principles of knighthood, and so they fully embrace the unconscionable savagery of the animal kingdom and forget the sense of their early lessons in chivalry. They have given themselves over wholly to the dark side of the Pauline nature.

The third part of the poem occurs when Arthur returns to his homeland and attacks Mordred’s forces; it details the horrible effects of the misdirected king and his knights on their own shores. This section, Peck agrees, shows the results of the willful error that drives knights away from their spiritual core; I believe these results are the natural outcome of the Pauline nature that has so saturated Camelot even from the very beginning, and that led Arthur away from Camelot. When Arthur dreams of the goddess of fortune, the sage announces that troubles have entered Arthur’s kingdom during his extended absence. The sage says that wicked men who threaten the kingdom have “entirde in thyn absence” (3446), and that war is imminent “sen thou fro home turnede” (3451). So Arthur’s early wandering has directly opened the land to the ravages and despair of warfare: it is Arthur’s critical absence that caused Mordred’s revolt. The volatile effect of Arthur’s error brings the terrible destruction on his battlefields both abroad and at home; Arthur finally wanders into the chilling behavior of a medieval war criminal.

Indeed, Arthur’s brutal revenge against Mordred is framed by his evil nature, which surfaces again and again in various forms in the poem. We can see Arthur’s first enraged reaction when he hears about the rebellion at home and he responds in anger, even before
the events at Sessoine. Sir Craddock, disguised as a hermit, tells Arthur of Mordred's revolt; Arthur he vows, "By the Rode . . I sail it revenge!" (3559). Here Arthur not only lets rage overcome his reason, but he also blasphemes the crucifixion and usurps the role of judge. Only God can judge the actions of men on earth, and only He can exact revenge. The Bible records: "Revenge is mine, and I will repay them in due time, that their foot may slide: the day of destruction is at hand, and the time makes haste to come" (Deut 32:35). So the ensuing violence has a distinct cause in Arthur's rebellious nature and his Pauline split.

Sir Craddock, the unrecognized hermit in this episode, serves as another piquant foil for Camelot. In his brief portrait, Craddock illustrates a humble appearance, devotion to the church, submission to God, fair combat, mercy, and humility toward his liege lord. When Arthur meets him on the road, Sir Craddock is dressed in coarse and baggy clothes: "A renke in a rownde cloke with righte rowme clothes" (3470); in fact Craddock is on a pilgrimage to Rome: "I will passe in pilgrmage this pas vnto Rome" (3496). So Craddock's exterior appearance does not supplant or distract from the spiritual quality that he seeks from the church in Rome. It is an objective correlative of the internal life that will sustain him. He illustrates it clearly when he greets Arthur happily: "The gome graythely hym grette and bade gode morwen" (3476); Arthur's haughty reply, "lordelye ... of langage of Rome" (3477) is a stark contrast that emphasizes Arthur's state of error. After Arthur delivers his message on the hazards of travelling, Craddock replies with faith and mercy: "I sail forgyffe hym [his murderer] me ded, some Gode helpe, / Onye grome vndire Gode that one this grownde walkes. / Latte the keneste come that to the Kyng langes, / I sal encountire hym as knyghte, so Criste hafe my sawle" (3488-3491). So Craddock expresses mercy in forgiving a knight for killing him; he expresses faith in the sovereignty of God over all who walk on earth; and he expresses confidence in the code of chivalry when he says he will encounter his enemy as a knight. Then when Arthur, still maintaining secrecy, mentions the name of King Arthur, Craddock acknowledges his liege
lord: “Me awghte to knowe the Kynge: he es my kydde lorde” (3509). So in these few lines, Craddock sums up the traits that both Arthur and his knights have abandoned. Sir Craddock still retains the spirit of the code of chivalry and he is faithful to its tender, central core. Sir Craddock is a solid example of a true knight because of his virtues of mercy and forgiveness, because of his reliance on fair combat, and because of his sincere submission to God. Clearly, Sir Craddock is focused on his internal development and has not forgotten God.

Perhaps a more powerful model for Arthur is the figure of David, whose legendary actions again point out the Arthurian errors in the Alliterative Morte Arthure. When David's kingdom is threatened by a revolt led by his own son, Absolom, David turns only to God, and not to his anger and desire for revenge. Despite Absolom's elaborate treachery and his vast conspiracy with David's enemies, David does not respond with fury and rampant vengeance. Instead, he writes of his faith in God:

Why, O Lord, are they multiplied that afflict me? many are they who rise up against me. Many say to my soul: There is no salvation for him in his God. But thou, O Lord, art my protector, my glory, and the lifter up of my head. I have cried to the Lord with my voice: and he hath heard me from his holy hill. I have slept and have taken my rest: and I have risen up, because the Lord have protected me. I will not fear thousands of the people, surrounding me: arise, O Lord; save me, O my God. For thou hast struck all them who are my adversaries without cause: thou hast broken the teeth of sinners. Salvation is of the Lord: and thy blessing is upon thy people.

Psalm 3.

Unlike David, Arthur chooses to vent bestial anger and vengeance instead of divine reason and chivalric mercy; these choices indicate that he has not only forgotten his idealistic center but that he aspires to replace God on earth. After he and his knights wreak revenge on their own countrymen on the battlefields of Britain, Arthur, again, might have emulated David with a godly image of remorse. When David's forces defeat the insurgents, David asks a messenger twice about the safety of the young man, Absolom (2 Kings 18: 29 & 32). When he knows that Absolom is dead, David is deeply sorry: “The king therefore being much moved, went up to the high chamber over the gate, and wept. And as he went he spoke in this manner: My son Absolom, Absolom my son: would to God that I might die
for thee, Absolom my son, my son Absolom" (2 Kings 18: 33). So David again serves as a man worthy of Arthur's most diligent and faithful emulation.

The poet, however, gives us a man who continues in his willful sin. In dire contrast to David's contrite heart, Arthur can not respond with love and forgiveness. Instead, Arthur gives instructions to kill the heirs of Mordred and to toss their bodies into the sea: "And sythen merke manly to Mordrede children, / That they bee sleyghely slayne and slongen in watyrs" (4320-4321). Although Arthur has also called for a confessor and has dictated the successor to his throne, still this last murdering act implies that his soul is not healed. He is attempting to correct his sinful errors by Christian confession and by caring for his kingdom at the last minute, but the extermination of these infant pretenders-to-the-throne is an outrage. There are many examples of rulers banishing those relatives that may threaten a kingdom; but here Arthur chooses the most extreme solution. This choice reveals that he has not learned anything and his soul remains a dark place of rebellion.

One very disturbing instance of the effects of that spiritual rebellion occurs during the civil war, when the knights turn their savagery against their own countrymen. Here the poet vividly portrays the internal war with the wandering, rebellious spirit actually turning its savagery inward, against itself. Here the poem describes the knights as butchers as they chop and murder among the defeated and retreating foe: "Till a foreste they fledde and fell in the greuys, / And fers feghtande folke folowes them afyre, / Howntes and hewes down the heythen tykes, / Mourtherys in the mowntaygnes Dir Mordrede knyghtes; / Thare chapyde neuer no childe, cheftayne no other, / Bot choppes them down in the chace -- it chargys bot littyll" (4256-4261). These savage acts far exceed the force necessary to defeat the enemy at each engagement, and indeed often the enemy is already defeated and retreating. They also exceed the standards of justice and fair play set by the chivalric code; the guilty men begin to mimic their king and to resemble raging beasts rather than the divine image of God. Certainly, these men have wandered far from the knowledge that they are
endowed with divine reason, and they have truly sunk to the vicious level of bestiality that Lady Philosophy warns against. These knights display their common errors in the bestial nature of their actions.

The mood within England at the end of the war reveals the terrible cost of error on the kingdom and its citizens. The people attend masses and matins, and maidens dress in black to mourn these recent events: “Throly belles thay rynge and Requiem syngys, / Dosse messes and matyns with mournande notes . . . Ladys languessande and lowrande to schewe; / All was buskede in blake, birdes and othire” (4332-4333, 4338-4339). The poem thus departs from the standard romance genre ending, which normally includes a Christian renewal, a rebirth, or a new affirmation of faith; rather this poem ends in blackness and despair. The leaders of the land, all its nobility and its chevaliers, have embarked on a willful disregard of Providential order and have allowed their bestial nature to dominate over the gift of divine reason, and as a result they ran together into spiritual exile. Using Lady Philosophy's analogy of plant life, the realm's ordained outer layer, its protectors, have abandoned their nature and their land. They can no longer receive nurture from the land at their displaced location, and they can not protect it from afar. They have left the land a dry, spiritually dead place with no hope of redemption. This poem urges that all England remember its spiritual tenets and that its leaders learn to integrate the chivalric values into their actual behavior.
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Brewer, D.S. and A.E.B. Owen, eds. *The Thornton Manuscript*. London: The Scolar Press, 1975. A facsimile copy of of about 60 items in six sections penned by the scribe, Robert Thornton. The *Alliterative Morte Arthure* is one of the items in the list, which also includes the *Prose Life of Alexander*.

Finlayson, John. “Morte Arthure: The Date and a Source for the Contemporary References.” *Speculum* 42 (1967): 624-638. Finlayson proposes a later date and a less direct relationship between the poem and the reign of Edward III. He argues that the poet was more influenced by literature, and also perhaps by Edward III's revival of the Arthurian genre, but he was not using contemporary references.


Hamel, Mary. "Adventure as Structure in the Alliterative Morte Arthure." *Arthurian Interpretations* 3 (Fall 1988): 37-48 Hamel acknowledges the unresolved conflict of romance versus anti-romance genre for the poem and suggests the poet combined the plot tradition from the chronicles with the central structure of romance (the quest for adventure) to create a more powerful tragedy. The poet expanded certain well-known chronicle episodes with romance tones but ultimately undercut their romantic redemption.

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Hamel, Mary. “The ‘Christening’ of Sir Priamus in the Alliterative Morte Arthure.” *Viator* 13 (1982): 295-307. Hamel rejects the interpretation that Priamus asks for Christening from Gawain and the resulting theme of salvation and redemption. Instead she says Priamus was already a Christian, perhaps a schismatic, and that Priamus' situation reflects the complexities of the poem and the ambiguous truths that concerned the poet.

Hamel investigates the public records of Yorkshire and describes the typical country gentleman lifestyle of the probable scribe, Robert Thornton. She notes that his errors indicate that he is not a professional scribe, and she investigates the origins of his dialect.


Janssen argues that the Dream of Fortune contains the message of the poem “in nuce,” and that the poet meant to admonish the princes of his time. She says the poet created a king who brought about his own destruction through his wars of aggression.


Keiser argues that although the reign of Edward III in some way influenced the poet, Wace is the poet’s most probable source. He says the Alliterative Morte Arthure is not a specific commentary on Edward III.

Keiser confirms the identity of scribe Robert Thornton by resolving questions of education and opportunity for men of his class and geography.


Krishna takes the research of Milman Perry and Albert Lord and applies it to the alliterative verses in Morte Arthure. Krishna compares the syntax of Beowulf and the Morte Arthure with Parry’s original statistics by classifying line endings; she compares the density of straight formulas in Beowulf and Morte Arthure; and she analyses repeated kennings that lend thrift to Morte Arthure. Krishna concludes that Beowulf and Morte Arthure represent early and late phases in the evolution of oral composition.


Hamel’s out-of-print edition of the Alliterative Morte Arthure provides a very detailed introduction to the language and usage of the scribe.


Obst argues that the Priamus conversion symbolizes the superiority of Arthur’s empire over the ancient world. He argues that King Arthur’s sin was his failure to recognize the ambivalence of power; he could not balance war and Christian perfection. Obst argues that King Arthur is almost “perfect” in his fight against the evil represented by Mordred and Mordred’s children.


Patch traces the influence of Boethius through written records of his treatises and translations of his writings. Patch concludes that his influence was enormous, and that “Boethius’ answers became the answers for the Middle Ages.”
Ritzke-Rutherford defines formula, formulaic system, and cluster, and uses the concepts to analyze the battle scenes. She concludes that the clusters that appear in the Morte Arthure are similar to those of older alliterative poetry and may prove the continuity of the alliterative style.

Ritzke-Rutherford divides the poem into five sections, each with its major battle scene. She analyses each battle-scene in terms of structure and formula, and argues that the poet unifies the poem through structure and creates a new, anti-war message through older formulaic tradition.

Shoaf argues that every author uses exemplars, either intentionally or unintentionally by the traditional matter from which he emerges. He suggests that readers do not understand the figure of Arthur because they do not know the exempla which informs it. He presents several parallels between the life and career of the biblical King David and those of King Arthur, concluding that the figures of Arthur and David represent the dilemma of a good king doing their earthly best while ruling the best earthly kingdoms.

In his treatment of Boethius, de Wulf examines Boethius' life and the impact of his political change of fortune. Like Gilson, de Wulf discusses both Boethius' influence as a scientist and neo-Aristotelian as well as his powerful influence as a philosopher. De Wulf says Boethius became "a fitting representative" of the flourishing of art and philosophy in the Italian Ostrogothic civilization of the fifth century.

Ziolkowski rejects the pyramid structural interpretation of events (a-b-c-d-c-b-a) in favor of an a-b-c-d a-b-c-d repetition that links the entire first and last quarters of the poem. Ziolkowski argues that this structure is part of a larger pattern of ironic repetition and doubling. He concludes that other thematic problems of the poem can be resolved through examination of the narrative structure.
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