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# Flawed Knighthood and Kingship in the Medieval Literary Tradition

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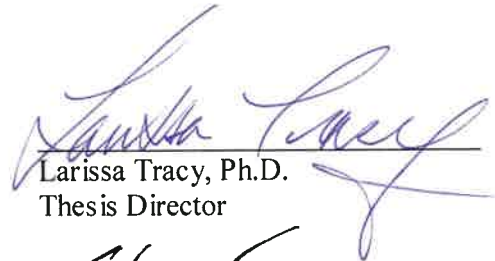
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## Flawed Knighthood and Kingship in the Medieval Literary Tradition

### Introduction

Throughout the corpus of medieval literature, especially fourteenth-century romance, chivalry plays a significant role as a social construct for gauging both successful and disastrous kingship. For kings like Henry II, Richard I, Edward III, Richard II, Henry IV, and Edward IV, the literature of the time offers insights on the difficulties of chivalry and kingship in representation and practice. Production of vernacular chivalric romance literature evolved considerably in the thirteenth and fourteenth-centuries in England. Geoffrey Chaucer's fourteenth-century *Knight's Tale*, and the anonymous *Stanzaic Morte Arthur* and *Alliterative Morte Arthure* offer a stinging critique of chivalry potentially aimed at Richard II, branded a tyrant by his enemies. Highlighting both the flaws in kingship and knighthood, Chaucer's tale reveals the consequences of picking and choosing which parts of the chivalric code to follow. Nearly one hundred years later, Sir Thomas Malory's *Morte Darthur* (c. 1471) and the fifteenth-century ballad *A Gest of Robin Hood* follow the failures and triumphs of kings and their supposedly chivalric knights.

The unrest of Richard II's rocky reign in England from 1377 until his deposition in 1399 echoes in the *Knight's Tale* and several other contemporary romances. The later *Gest of Robin Hood* similarly responds to the civil strife of the Wars of the Roses. *The Gest* looks back at the reign of Edward III as a period of "good law" corrupted by greedy officials and churchmen. The knights in this literature are a negative reflection of failed kingship through their often violent, or irrational behavior. Thomas Walsingham, chronicler of Richard's reign, describes knights rendered useless on the battlefield because of their involvement with women. Chaucer's Palamon and Arcite fit Walsingham's description, finding themselves in dire circumstances as they

abandon their loyalties for a woman. Similarly, the only knight in the *Gest* is unable to defend himself, by no fault of his own, and this deficiency leads to his capture by the sheriff, a corrupt official of the king. Robin Hood's tempers his outlawry with chivalry when he aids the knight, a common theme in the ballad tradition recounting the tales of the outlaw where he behaves more like a noble than brigand. The *Gest* offers insight into the effects of both strong and corrupt kingship, juxtaposing noble officials alongside Robin Hood.

These relationships between knight and king can be read alongside literature written by knights defining ideal chivalric behavior such as Geoffroi De Charny's *A Knight's Own Book of Chivalry* of fourteenth century, and the thirteenth-century *Book of the Order of Chivalry* written by Ramon Lull. For English kings the literature of the time offered insights on the difficulties of chivalry and kingship in representation and practice. Literature operates as *speculum regis*—mirrors to princes. Works like the *Knight's Tale*, the *Stanzaic Morte Arthur*, the *Alliterative Morte Arthure*, Malory's *Morte Darthur*, and the *Gest of Robyn Hode* critique the fractious behavior kings and their knights.

### ***Chivalry and Kingship***

Traditionally a literary construct invented by twelfth-century poets at the behest of courtly patrons, chivalry was created with a particular purpose in mind: to serve as a model of ideal behavior. As Richard Kaeuper writes, chivalry “sought to achieve new or renewed order in basic areas of life, political, social and intellectual. Rulers and intellectuals worried over the disruptive violence to which males were prone” (*A Knight's Own Book of Chivalry* 2). The unruly nature of knights got out of hand, and the solution to altering this was a specific code of behavior for them to follow.

These guidelines for knights were set out in chivalric handbooks, including those written by Ramon Lull (*Book of the Order of Chivalry*) and Geoffroi de Charny (*A Knight's Own Book of Chivalry*). Lull was a knight himself and had the first-hand experience to temper his manual. This personal experience is unique when set next to romantic literature. While Chaucer and Malory were soldiers as well, their texts are warnings of the consequences of poor behavior rather than guidelines. Lull likely understood the difficulties knights faced when following these guidelines. However, Lull still presents the ideal rather than the reality in his text, giving kings and knights an aspirational goal. According to Noel Fallows, Lull's manual "is considered a classic theoretical manual – if not the classic theoretical manual – at the core of our understanding of medieval knighthood" (1). Lull acknowledges the need for a clear standard of behavior. He writes that, "There once was no charity, loyalty, justice or truth in the world. Enmity, disloyalty, injustice and falsehood came into being, and because of this there was error and confusion amongst the people of God, who were created so that God be loved, known, honoured, served and feared by man" (40). The unruly nature of knights stemmed from a lack of these iconic knightly characteristics. With no guidance or expectations, the knights' behavior was unchecked. Geoffroi, a French knight writing in the fourteenth century, was "the chivalric embodiment of his colorful and violent age" (Kaeuper, *A Knight's Own Book of Chivalry* 1). Geoffroi lived the life of a knight until the very end when "At the peak of his fame he died a hero's death under the swords of English and Gascon enemies at the decisive battle of Poitiers (1356)" (1). Geoffroi's reputation makes his manual one of the most reliable sources of chivalric behavior available to knights. Like Lull, Geoffroi's reputation qualifies his manual as a representation of the chivalric ideal.

Historically, the age of chivalry falls between 1100 and the beginning of the sixteenth-century—the launching of the first crusade and the Reformation. The term “chivalry” derives from the French *chevalier*, which refers to a knight on horseback. The *Oxford English Dictionary* catalogues the evolution of the term by reference to “the position and character of a knight, knighthood.” What began as a simple word to describe the cavalry evolved into a standard of behavior. Lull and Geoffroi assign a variety of qualities to the practice of chivalry, namely generosity, honor, prowess, loyalty, and courtesy. One of the first authors to display these features was Chretien de Troyes in his twelfth-century romance. Chretien de Troyes, unlike Geoffroi and Lull, was not a knight but a twelfth-century poet. His writing reflects the desire of Marie de Champagne, his courtly patron, to see ideal chivalry embodied in knightly characters. This is different from Lull and Geoffroi, as they do not claim to embody the behavior of their texts - they simply offer ideal guidelines. Despite the ideal behavior portrayed in literature, there is an important distinction between literary chivalry and real-world chivalry. One of the most important characteristics of real-world chivalry was behavior in war. Matthew Strickland argues that the warfare portrayed in medieval romances is important because it is “in behaviour in war that the essence of chivalry and its most fundamental manifestations lie” (17). Despite the examples in chivalric literature, knights struggled to follow the code. However, without strong kingship as an example, it was unrealistic to expect knights to display any sort of ideal behavior.

Chivalry, and its relationship with kingship and English identity, arose out of the chronicle traditions during the “long twelfth-century”—1066 until 1217. Once the Normans conquered England, there was concern for English kingship and identity. According to R.M. Thomson, William of Malmesbury, Benedictine monk and English historian during this period, felt that “what mattered most...about the Conquest was that it ended, or at least severely

damaged, a great tradition” (113). The Conquest destroyed Anglo-Saxon culture, and as an heir to that tradition, Malmesbury was compelled to preserve its history in his account of the Conquest. This became a part of the rich tradition in England where chroniclers, such as Geoffrey of Monmouth in his *Historia regum Britanniae (History of the Kings of Britain)* (c. 1138), tried to link England with a pre-Conquest ancient past. Monmouth and other chroniclers filled the various gaps in the records which in turn may have led twelfth-century chroniclers to unknowingly include forgeries in their texts. Robert Bartlett explains that, “the monks and clergy of the long twelfth-century, looking back over earlier times, could explain a break in their traditions in various ways. They could even make a virtue of such a break, by turning it into a heroic tradition of its own kind” (21). Much of Geoffrey’s work was invented or embellished to create a national identity for England. Perhaps the most important king chronicled in Geoffrey’s work is the legendary King Arthur, who he created as a warrior king in the mid-1130s around the beginning of the civil war between Stephen and Matilda. Not only does Arthur’s appearance in this chronicle link the great king with England and create one of the greatest heroes in medieval romance literature, it also establishes a history of chivalry in England. Chivalry was not a singularly English concept. The construct was widespread throughout medieval Europe. By linking Arthur’s court to England, Monmouth presents England as the pioneers of chivalry. Orderic Vitalis noted the social disorder that created this need for a historic chivalry in England, an English monk working in Normandy, who reacted against Norman propaganda by inserting the *Life of St. Guthlac* into his account of the Norman Conquest (van Houts 123). Orderic wrote his *Ecclesiastical History*, which included Monmouth’s prophecies of Merlin, to counter two generations of Norman historical propaganda. Orderic’s history is an account of how society was taking shape around him in the aftermath of the Conquest. Kaeuper writes that, “Orderic reveals

an almost obsessive concern for order and the elusive goal of a more peaceful society” (13). Orderic was concerned by the same social disorder that made chivalry a solution, and it was because of this disorder that chivalric manuals were necessary.

Just as there were manuals for knights to follow to achieve the chivalric ideal, there were also guides for kings—the *speculum regis*, or mirrors for princes. These instructional texts outlined good kingship, and the behavior that led to a successful reign. Out of the twelfth century came the important texts written by Malmesbury, the *Gesta Regum*, *Gesta Pontificum*, and the *Historia Novella*. Through these texts, Malmesbury discusses what those who were ruled expected out of their rulers (Weiler 5). According to Björn Weiler,

William of Malmesbury’s concept of kingship consists of a relatively formulaic set of duties: Maintaining the peace; defending the realm; practicing piety, found, endowing or re-establishing monastic houses, ensuring that not a whiff of simony poisoned the English Church; and upholding justice, usually through the swift and decisive punishment of criminals, but also by combating witchcraft and adultery. (7)

Alongside these duties, the king was also expected to set an example. Malmesbury frequently indicated that successful kingship “by a ruler’s ability to inspire his subjects to imitate his actions and disposition” (8). This becomes a focal point of creating a chivalric community. The behavior, while largely directed at knights, needed to start with the king. A successful king’s virtuous would be reflected in those he ruled. Though Malmesbury was writing in the twelfth century, these expectations for monarchs took hold through the Middle Ages. He was writing specifically for royal patrons, so it is likely that these texts made their way into the hands of rulers. These texts were vital for a chivalric tradition to exist, because they outlined the



expectations of strong kingship, and without strong kingship there can be no expectation for strong knights.

Chivalry began to flourish in the aftermath of the Norman Conquest and the cultural changes it brought to England. At the beginning of the twelfth century, England experienced an intellectual awakening. Nigel Saul writes that,

Chivalry, tempered and refined by the new mood of the twelfth century, transformed the knight from a mere warrior into an idealised figure...Influenced by the twelfth-century cultural awakening, the culture of chivalry was richer, subtler and more diverse than the culture of earlier centuries. (*Chivalry in Medieval England* 38)

This reimagining of chivalry could not take place without kings setting an example of behaving concerning these ideals. Lull writes that, “Since the king, the prince and the lord of the land must be knights – for if they do not have the honour that pertains to a knight they do not deserve to be princes or lords of the land” (80). Without strong kingship, the order of knights would not stand.

Henry II (r. 1154–1189) inherited the English throne after a troublesome period England known as the Anarchy. The Anarchy, which consisted of a civil war between Stephen and Matilda, took place between the years 1135 and 1154. Once Henry took the throne, he had anxieties over his legitimacy to the throne. The king of France regularly challenged him on this matter (Aurell 381). Nicholas Vincent writes that, “we should not forget that Henry II had been just as keen to cultivate the memory of his Norman as of this Anglo-Saxon forebears. As an Angevin, the son of a mere count of Anjou, he was neither English nor Norman by birth and emerged from a milieu some way below the exalted status of dukes or kings” (196). Henry was very aware of the importance placed on kingship and English identity. He used this to his advantage and promoted the Arthurian legend and “by portraying himself as the modern

embodiment of Arthur, Henry II may have sought to bask in the reputation of Arthur as a conqueror of Ireland and the dukedoms and counties of western France” (202). Chroniclers often criticized Henry for the circumstances surrounding his marriage to Eleanor of Aquitaine, as she was already married to the French King, Louis VII, when their courtship began. Despite some negative views of Henry, there were those who held the king in high regard. Jean Flori writes that, “He had been the guarantor of public order, the guardian of properties, and liberties of the Church, the defender of the orphans, widows, and the poor, and generous in almsgiving; and he had honoured ecclesiastics; in all this, he had conformed to the model of the Church held up before kings and, later, knights, so that it has come to be thought of as the chivalric ideal!” (222). Many of the accounts of Henry’s reign are favorable and present him as a successful king, but it was not until his son, Richard I, inherited the throne that chivalry was deliberately infused into kingship.

Eleanor of Aquitaine, Henry’s wife, was also responsible for the burgeoning interest in chivalry and courtly love in their various courts in both their French territories and England. Eleanor grew up in her grandfather’s Aquitaine court that was steeped in early forms of these traditions. Ralph Turner writes that,

At the same time that poetry at the court of Eleanor’s grandfather was defining “courtly love”, it was also contributing to a new understanding of “chivalry” at Poitiers and at other princely courts. In Eleanor’s early childhood, the Old French and Occitan terms that would evolve into the modern “cavalry” and “chivalry” still applied primarily to skill with horses and weapons, the qualities of knights, military professionals fighting on horseback, men in those days often of non-noble rank. (27)

During Eleanor's lifetime, these terms changed and eventually "knight" and "noble" became synonymous and "individuals of either status were expected to exemplify chivalry and courtesy as members of a single superior caste standing above the common people" (27). Eleanor later held onto these ideas and during her reign as queen, she and her daughter from her first marriage to Louis VII, Marie de Champagne, cultivated the ideas of chivalry and courtly love. Eleanor is credited with encouraging an innovative and growing interest for the popularity of chivalric romance literature. Her actions certainly affected her son Richard I, who ruled England from 1189 until his death in 1199. Richard was raised by a mother that emphasized chivalry, a practice he continued during his own reign. However, Richard was not immune to the difficulties surrounding the application of chivalry and he struggled to find balance between his duties.

Richard was known for his achievements as a knight more so than as a king, particularly his military prowess and his participation in the crusades. However, this involvement in the crusades meant that he spent a good deal of time away from his throne. It was because of this absence that Richard emerged as "the embodiment of chivalry at the period of its growth, when it was becoming aware of itself" (Flori 222). By leaving the day-to-day aspects of his royal administration to his lieutenants, Richard was able to go about his escapades. In addition to his participation in the crusades, Saul writes that, "Richard strengthened the identification of the knightly class with his own values: he authorised the reintroduction into England of tournaments. Tourneying had been viewed disapprovingly by Henry II, who had banned the activity in England on the grounds that it encouraged disorder" (*Chivalry in Medieval England* 35). Tournaments became one of the most recognized practices of the chivalric lifestyle, and they are evident throughout medieval literature in texts such as Chaucer's *Knight's Tale*, the Arthurian tradition, and even the Robin Hood ballads. However, Richard's father was correct in his

concerns that the tournaments encouraged disorder. Richard, like many other kings, failed to recognize the flaws in the chivalric code of behavior, and this encouraged his knights to participate in behavior that contradicted this code. Richard's rule is one of the first nonliterary instances that reflects the difficulties of actively practicing chivalry and being an effective king. Richard is often praised for his part in the crusades, but this behavior ultimately left England without a king for many years allowing for corrupt officials, namely Richard's brother John, to take control. Though the circumstances surrounding Richard's absence were not entirely in his control. Captured and ransomed during the Third Crusade, Richard ultimately bankrupts England. Richard's rule is one of the first real-world instances that shows the difficulties in balancing the requirements of a chivalric code and kingship. The *Stanzaic Morte Arthure* and *Alliterative Morte Arthur* reflect this as Arthur's kingdom falls because of his absence as king.

After Richard's death in 1199, knighthood underwent significant. The war-filled era in which chivalry and knighthood developed was over, and England entered into a "remarkably peaceful period, perhaps the most tranquil of the Middle Ages" (Saul, *Chivalry in Medieval England*, 60). The most direct effect of this time of peace in England was the drastic drop in the number of knights. With fewer wars to wage, there was no need to have knights in surplus. While the knights were smaller in number, their social ranking was on the rise. No longer equal with simply free men, knights began to assert their position in the aristocracy (65). While knights were altering the conditions of their occupation in the thirteenth-century, the monarchy was going through its own changes as well. Edward I took the throne in 1272, and he began to fashion his court after the legends of King Arthur. Saul writes that,

Edward was attracted to Arthur in part by general chivalric sentiment: the cult of the mythical king was a component in the international knightly culture of the day. He was

also attracted, however, by considerations of political expediency. Arthur's Britishness could add some legitimacy to his attempts to create a new British kingship in the wake of his absorption into the English state of the last independent Welsh principality. (78)

Arthurian ideals had already taken hold in England at this time. Under Richard I's reign, Arthur and Guinevere's supposed remains were exhumed at Glastonbury Abbey, cementing a link between the legendary king and England. Because Edward modeled his kingship after King Arthur the middle years of his reign earned him a reputation as one of Europe's strongest leaders (84). Edward's distinguished renown encouraged knights to model themselves after him. Despite the dwindling number of knights throughout the thirteenth-century, Edward was able to convince many knights to join his ranks.

Middle English texts produced at the end of the thirteenth-century are English adaptations of Anglo-Norman texts. They were specifically written in English, with an English flavor to warn against the potential for tyranny. They celebrated strong, just kingship and this continued through the beginning of the fourteenth-century with literary heroes such as Havelock the Dane and King Horn. This tradition continued through Edward III's reign in the fourteenth-century. He was a strong king, so there was no reason to criticize him. This came to an abrupt end when his grandson Richard II took the throne in 1377. At the end of Richard's reign there was a transition in the literary tradition, and kingship became the object of criticism and ridicule rather than the celebrated position it was in the thirteenth-century.

### ***Literature, Chivalry, and Kingship***

Chaucer's *Knight's Tale* and the implications of good kingship for the reign of Richard II are the focus of Chapter One. Richard's reign was plagued with challenges from the very

beginning. Often referred to as the “boy king”, many of Richard’s troubles as king stemmed from the young age at which he took the throne. This could point to the beginning of Richard’s difficulties with chivalric values, as his manliness is often questioned by critics of his reign. Christopher Fletcher writes that aside from Edward II, Richard maintained the reputation as the most-unmanly king of the later Middle Ages (3). Beyond the reputation his age imposed, Richard is often “portrayed as temperamentally opposed to fighting, keeping his distance from chivalric culture” (3-4). Many of the texts portraying the king, however, were biased and based on the political events surrounding Richard’s reign. The Kirkstall Abbey Chronicles, for instance, recorded the turmoil of Richard kingship, which resulted from the king being at odds with his barons for the majority of his time on the throne. The young age at which he inherited the throne implied that the decisions coming from the king were largely influenced by a group of advisors. As the king matured, he opted to ignore the advice of his barons sparking resentment within the nobility. Theseus reflects this same behavior in the *Knight’s Tale*.

The *Alliterative* and the *Stanzaic Morte Darthur*, contemporary to Chaucer’s *Knight’s Tale* will be discussed in Chapter Two. These texts, written during the same century, portray Arthur in two very different ways. The anonymous authors rehabilitate Arthur from the French texts into a more heroic, chivalrous king. The *Alliterative* recreates the war king of Monmouth’s text, and for the most part ignores the French tales. The *Stanzaic* on the other hand, deals primarily with the love affair between Lancelot and Guinevere that fractures the fellowship. However, the *Stanzaic* does not damn Arthur, instead he is nearly blameless in these events. He is a strong king brought down by the treachery of men around him, not by his own fault.

Chapter three focuses on Thomas Malory’s *Morte Darthur*, which adapts the fourteenth-century *Alliterative* and *Stanzaic*, as well as earlier Arthurian texts. It was in the midst of the

Wars of the Roses, that Malory wrote his iconic adaptation of the legend of King Arthur. Continuing an ongoing tradition, he presents a chivalric community of knights led by their adored King Arthur. The War of the Roses, a series of dynastic wars over the English throne between the Houses of Lancaster and York, occurred in the aftermath of the Hundred Years War. The various claims to the throne date back to Richard II's deposition in 1399. Michael Hicks writes that,

the Yorkists traced the Wars back to the deposition in 1399 of King Richard II, a legitimate king, and his wrongful replacement by Henry IV who 'unrightfully entered upon the same'. Thus the tribulations of the following 62 years. Edward IV asserted that back in 1399 the new king should have been Edmund Mortimer, the grandson of Edward III's second son Lionel, Duke of Clarence (d. 1368), to whom the Crown 'by law and conscience belonged', and from whom it should have passed to the house of York. (14)

Henry VI, grandson of Henry IV, was eventually overthrown in 1461 by Edward IV, who claimed to be the rightful heir to the throne. In a time of civil strife in England, Malory presents King Arthur and his knights as a stark contrast to the turmoil in England. In *Morte Darthur*, Malory traces the fall of a king who began as a great ruler and slowly loses the chivalric qualities that originally built his legacy, leading King Arthur and his knights into destruction.

The fifteenth-century text, the *Gest of Robyn Hode* occupies a unique place in this discussion because, unlike *The Knight's Tale* and the English Arthurian romances, Robin Hood is not a king, and not even a knight. However, he operates as a chivalric character in his devotion to the knightly class, particularly the king. The king of this ballad is often considered a literary portrayal of Edward III. Edward was the king of England before Richard II, and he is often considered a good king. The character of Robin Hood stands out amidst the characters of the

Arthurian tradition and Chaucer's *Knight's Tale*, because of his status as yeoman. His status as yeoman is debatable as far as a social status goes, but he is not the iconic chivalric knight that is depicted throughout medieval literature. However, despite this Robin Hood is one of the more chivalric characters throughout these texts.

The texts for this thesis were chosen because of the iconic characters they portray as chivalrous. Chivalry was a literary construct, but these texts reveal that chivalry was hard to achieve even on paper. These kings, knights, and yeoman struggle to be the chivalric examples they should be. The authors of these texts, rather than present perfect chivalric characters, show the often impractical, and unachievable, nature of chivalry.



## Chapter One: *The Knight's Tale* and Richard II

Late-fourteenth century England was a time of turmoil and upheaval. Plague, war, religious strife embodied in papal schism, class mobility, and political turbulence threatened to undermine the very fabric of the nation. In *The Canterbury Tales*, written between the years 1388 and 1400, Geoffrey Chaucer highlights the fractures in fourteenth-century England. *The Canterbury Tales* is a collection of twenty-four tales told by pilgrims as they make their way to Canterbury to visit the shrine of Thomas Becket. At the invitation of the Host, Harry Bailly, the Knight tells the first story – a tale involving the great King Theseus and the valiant knights, Arcite and Palamon. However, the teller of this tale and his chivalric characters are not all that they seem. Chaucer satirizes the Knight for his anachronistic portrayal of Theseus and these knights, who are highly esteemed and yet fall short of the chivalric values found in Lull and Geoffroi's manuals. Chaucer's portrayal of Theseus mirrors Richard II, king of England from 1377 until his deposition in 1399 and murder in 1400. The Knight's inability to judge the characters of Theseus, Arcite, and Palamon undermines the chivalric system they represent, revealing the difficult nature of chivalry and its often unattainable real world practice.

Chaucer grew up more privileged than the common man in England, though at the time of his birth, social mobility was more fluid due to the low population caused by the plague. F.R.H. Du Boulay writes that Chaucer's "origins were mercantile, his position modest, his ambitions even a trifle eccentric in the artistic solitariness. But he was not a hired craftsman who came in at the back door and downed his ale with the life-long servants" (476). Chaucer's circumstances eventually led him to Richard II's court, where he was privy to information that colored his writing of *The Canterbury Tales*. Beyond his critique of kingship, much of Chaucer's

work is targeted towards the corruption of the Church and the reach of this corruption's influence.

Chivalry as a code of behavior was nurtured by the Church, connecting chivalry and a king's divine right to the throne. Because of this belief, God would not choose a king to rule England that was not also chivalrous. Richard, however, was not chivalrous or a strong king for most of his reign. Saul writes that at the time of his coronation, Richard II was believed by his people to be "set apart from other mortals. He was God's anointed. He was not, as early medieval monarchs had considered themselves to be, the equivalent of a priest; but he was nevertheless endowed by the Almighty with special powers" (*Richard II*, 26). The coronation ceremony was a formal acknowledgement of Richard's status as more than just mere mortal. Divine approval from God was an acceptance by the king that he would act in accordance with God's will and the chivalric code. Ernst Kantorowicz tries to explain this divide between Richard as man, and Richard as God's anointed with the theory of the King's Two Bodies. The essence of the theory is that the king resides in two bodies – the body politic and the body natural. The body natural is the king's mortal body that lives and dies on earth, and the king's body politic is an immortal, spiritual body that is divinely descended to earth. This addresses the question of succession, and how a king can be divinely chosen if he inherits the throne. Kantorowicz explains that "legally testator and heir were considered one person...Hence, the continuity of the king's 'body natural' was secured" (330). He goes on to explain that, "the royal birth itself manifested the Prince's election the kingship, his election by God and divine providence. That a person succeeded to the throne of his ancestors by hereditary right was something 'which can be done by none except God'" (330). Richard was believed to be divinely appointed to his position

as king. Despite this, Richard's actions contradicted the belief that he should be fit to rule. These contradictory actions are reflected by Theseus.

On numerous occasions in the *Knight's Tale*, Theseus acts in a manner that contradicts his ability to rule. He subjugates women, lashes out with violence rather than justice, spends money needlessly on lavish expenses, and he refuses to accept blame for consequences caused by his actions. Theseus' behavior throughout the *Knight's Tale* reflects the ramifications of a king acting inappropriately in his role, and the Knight's inability to realize this is a dangerous revelation of the effect that unjust behavior from the throne has on those in its service. This behavior is a reflection of the practices exhibited by Richard II during his reign.

In 1387, a group of barons known as the Appellant Lords led by the dukes of Gloucester, Arundel, and Warwick, attempted to gain control of the throne by accusing those closest to the king of treason, and forcing their imprisonment. Conflicts between Richard and the Appellants plagued the rest of Richard's reign as he fought to recover and maintain control of his throne. The initial takeover in 1387 by the Appellant Lords sought to check the tyrannical tenancies Richard had developed. They told the king "he must correct his mistakes and rule better in the future" (Saul, *Richard II*, 189). The events of 1387 changed the path of Richard's reign. He spent the rest of his life in fear of deposition, resulting in his tendency towards violence against those who opposed him. Saul writes that, "Kirkstall commented on his treatment of the nobility: Richard, he said, had caused the deaths of the duke of Gloucester and the earl of Arundel, and had exiled the dukes of Hereford and Norfolk and the archbishop of Canterbury: so it was hardly surprising that these men had plotted his downfall" (436). The continued conflict between Richard and the Appellant Lords made the king paranoid and irrational, "He had suffered a blow to his prestige which was to leave him psychologically scarred for life" (190). His paranoia and

his eventual revenge against the Appellants created unrest within the kingdom and a lack of trust from his people in his ability to reign as king. Richard lost control and his kingship suffered greatly.

Richard's behavior prior to and after the events of 1387 ultimately caused his downfall. A period of about seven years after Richard regained control from the Appellant Lords harbored few substantial events, but "throughout the twelve years he already sat on the throne he had been in tutelage to older relatives and friends of his father or humiliated and thwarted by a baronial caucus" (Hutchinson 130). The king never fully recovered from the events of his youth, and the aftermath followed him to his deposition. At the end his reign, Richard had to fight harder to maintain his crown, but after years of battling with the forces opposing him, Richard conceded. Saul writes that, "the agreement of September 29th marked the effective end of his long struggle against fate. For nearly two months he had watched the life-blood of his kingship drain away. The leadership that he had given since returning from Ireland had been mediocre and erratic, and his behavior in public had alternated between the anger and the despairing" (436). Richard was well aware of the plots to usurp him. This knowledge, rather than inspiring him to act in a way befitting his position, caused him to lash out more excessively. Richard's behavior was volatile enough that critics speculate about the possibility of mental illness. However, as there is no solid evidence to this claim, it is more likely that the king was simply unfit for his position. Saul explains the king's personality as "best seen as narcissistic. He experienced acute difficulty in relating to the external world. Only his own needs and his own feelings seemed real to him... The result of this disorientation was that he showed severe defects of judgment and lacked a normal capacity for objective thought" (464). Richard lacked the capabilities of a great king. His

interests rarely breached his own selfish needs despite warnings from his advisors, and as a result, his kingship was full of humiliation and unrest.

However, Richard does not seem to have aspired towards a more chivalrous appearance that may have helped him gain popularity among his subjects. The virtues of chivalry – justice, loyalty, generosity, and honor – are traits that may have gone a long way in improving Richard’s reputation. John Gower wrote in his chronicle that, “The king, an undisciplined boy, neglects the moral behaviour by which a man might grow up from a boy. Indeed, youthful company so guides the boy that he has a taste for nothing useful, unless it be his whim . . . They abet the boy king in his boyish ways, whereby he wields the authority of virtue the less” (*The Complete Works of John Gower* 563-4). This is a critique of Richard’s council just as much as it is a critique of the king himself. This is reminiscent of the contrast between Chaucer’s Knight and the Squire from the “General Prologue” of the *Canterbury Tales*. The Squire is described as “A lovyere and lusty bachelor...He was fresh as the month of May. Wel he koude sit on hors and faire ryde./ He koude songes make and wel endite/Juste and eek daunce, and weel purtreye and write” (*GP* 80 & 94–96). While the squire has skills such as horseback riding and jousting that are quintessential to the chivalric romances, he is still inexperienced and frivolous. There is an expectation that though he is young, he will learn from his mentor the Knight and eventually adapt to the chivalric lifestyle he is pursuing. Richard, as king, was also expected to grow and adapt from the young boy he was when he inherited the throne to the king he needed to be for England, yet many of the sources from that time note that this change did not occur, or the king did not gain enough maturity during his time on the throne. Just as Richard’s behavior was noted in the chronicles, it was also mirrored in the contemporary literature of the fourteenth-century – like the *Knight’s Tale*.

The Knight tells one of the stories that best represents the behavior of the king. Chaucer wryly presents this narrator as a chivalrous knight; however, his description in the *General Prologue* and his tale reveal a different truth. The initial description of the Knight's character in the *General Prologue* is satirical, shading the nature of what this Knight deems chivalrous.

Despite the characteristics that state the Knight is,

...a worthy man

That fro the tyme he first bigan

To riden out, he loved chivalrie,

Trouthe, and honour, freedom and curteisie (*GP* 43-46)

the rest of the description contradicts these initial proclamations because he is slovenly and disheveled:

Of fustian he wored a gypon

All bismotered with his habergeon,

For he was late ycome from his viage,

And wente for to doon his pilgrymage. (*GP* 75-78)

This soiled armor reveals the true nature of the Knight. A knight wanting to ensure his honor stays intact would take the time to clean his armor before travelling with mixed company. The dirty armor also indicates the Knight may have done something nefarious, and did not have the time to clean his armor before running off to seek pardon at Canterbury. Laura Hodges argues that, "In medieval romances, epics, and chivalric biographies, the depiction of a knight in soiled clothing is so unchivalric as to mark him either as the butt of satire and humiliation, or as a villain" (274). *The Gest of Robyn Hode* presents dirty armor as the disheveled Sir Richard is nearly unrecognizable as a knight, and he is ashamed of his appearance. Chaucer's Knight shows no

remorse or embarrassment for the state of his attire. He possibly wears his armor in the hope that the opportunity for violence will reveal itself. Kaeuper notes that, “Legal record show us that the knightly violence so prevalent in chivalric literature was (in somewhat more prosaic form, but without loss of essential enthusiasm) practised in everyday life, with serious consequences for public order” (*Chivalry and Violence* 110). This craving for violence was encouraged by the chivalric code, which praised the crusades and the knights who joined them. It was not uncommon for this recommendation to get out of hand, and for violence to be one the most defining characteristics of knights.

The dirty armor reinforces the claim that the Knight is ignorant of what his status should represent. Rather than romanticize the appearance of the Knight like the author of the *Stanzaic Morte Arthur* when he describes Arthur’s knights “With sheldes brode and helms sheen” (ll. 51), Chaucer does not present a knight in shining armor, but offers a more realistic description of a knight’s armor, that would bear the wear and tear of battle. By rejecting the romantic, chivalric knight, Chaucer creates a narrator for his story that reflects the unfortunate reality of knighthood, and the flaws of the chivalric system. Chaucer is not judgmental about the Knight’s qualities; he just presents them in a way that his audience can deduce that this is a satirical presentation. A fourteenth-century audience would be familiar with the nature of chivalry and the knights that followed this code, and they would recognize that this is not a quintessential romance.

The *General Prologue* undermines the Knight’s reliability as a narrator and his inability to recognize the faults of those with noble status is indicative of his own flaws. As a member of the nobility, the Knight is the butt of ridicule as much as Theseus. The Knight’s failure is a result of the flaws in the system of knighthood that come from unstable kingship and the lack of accountability for knights. The unruly and unchecked behavior of knights forced the construction

of chivalry. However, chivalry never amounted to much more than a construct, as it was never an enforced ideal. Knights were expected to read, or have listened to, literature that answered questions like “What violence is licit or even sanctified? What violence is considered destructive of necessary order? Who has the power to decide these questions and how are such decisions actually secured?” (Kaeuper 12). The behavior of Chaucer’s Knight suggests he lacks the education that comes from reading the literature of chivalry. Knights that have read the literature “show that they have read it by using it in their own writings, and they show by their actions that they have read it and are bringing it into their own lives” (Kaeuper 33). The Knight reveals that he has not read, and is not familiar with, the literature and his attempt, and failure, to create chivalric characters in his tale suggests that he has a loose understanding of the construct.

The Knight’s story of Theseus is about two knights, Palamon and Arcite, taken prisoner by the king. In their captivity, they both fall in love with the same woman from afar, Theseus’ sister-in-law, Emelye. The knights attempt to escape their bondage so they can fight for the love of this woman. Chaos ensues; Theseus recaptures them both and allows them to fight for Emelye’s love in a duel that ends in tragedy. Arcite dies because Theseus insists on a trial by tournament. This lust for violence starts at the beginning of the tale and does not recede until Theseus tries, and fails to justify himself at the tale’s end. The Knight, in an attempt to immortalize Theseus, actually emphasizes behavior that contradicts the characteristics of chivalry in his description of the events. The Knight’s actions suggest that he is unfamiliar with what a king acting in accordance with the chivalric code would look like. The failure of a king to act chivalrously has a negative effect on the throne and expands to the nobility. The Knight, as a member of this nobility, cannot recognize the failures of a king, so he cannot be expected to recognize his own failures as a knight. The Knight believes he is telling a tale about chivalry and



courtly love, but the reality is that this story is more about the failures of the two constructs. The Knight can not recognize unchivalric aspects of his own life and so, fails to tell a positive chivalric romance. Chivalry was not as well practiced as romantic literature presents. Chaucer's Knight reflects the reality of knights who have failed to realize that they have misrepresented the ideal nature of chivalry.

Chaucer's Knight is a unique character among chivalric literature due to his position as a narrator of what he believes to be a chivalric romance. Part of Chaucer's satire is that the Knight actually tells a classical romance with classical characters. This offers two sides of the problem of chivalry – both real-world and literary. The Knight represents real-world chivalry, because even though he is a character of literature, his character is a real-world knight telling a story. Chaucer's Knight is either ignorant of these ideals or uninterested in living up to them. If the Knight is ignorant, he again fails to be chivalric by speaking on matters he does not understand. Geoffroi de Charny writes that “And be careful not to be too guileless, for the man who knows nothing, neither of good nor of evil, is blind and unseeing in his heart, nor can he give himself or others good counsel” (71.23.35-38). By either pretending to be knowledgeable, or genuinely believing he is, the Knight's naïve presentation of the character of Theseus mirrors the behavior of Richard II.

Chaucer's unchivalric Theseus is reminiscent of the erratic and often violent behavior of Richard II leading up to his deposition in 1400. The Knight says Theseus is a king who conquers with “his wisdom and his chivalrie” (KT, ll. 865). Theseus is a well-known figure in mythology for his bravery, but not for his chivalry. The tales of Theseus are dated prior to Chaucer and would have circulated in England before *The Canterbury Tales* was published. Some critics argue that Chaucer has a negative view of Theseus and this why he adds “to those traits of

character in Theseus which were ignoble or cruel” in the *Knight's Tale* (Webb 289). Chaucer's perception of Theseus is not as relevant as the already existing reputation of the king outside of Chaucer's writing. Chaucer's satire is twofold: first, the Knight inaccurately applies chivalry to an age where it is anachronistic. Theseus was a Greek king, and so chivalry would have been a foreign concept to him. The second part of this is that the Knight believes he is portraying these characters as chivalric, but the reality is that Theseus and the knights more often represent the opposite of chivalry.

The religious focus of the Knight's tale is on pagan gods which contradicts an incredibly important part of the inherently Christian Code of Chivalry. As Lull writes,

It is the office of the knight to uphold and defend the Holy Catholic Faith, for which God the Father sent his Son to become flesh in the glorious Virgin, our Lady Saint Mary, and for honouring and preaching the faith he suffered many travails and many wrongs in this world and a cruel death. Thus, just as our Lord God has chosen the clergy to uphold the holy faith through scripture and reason, preaching the faith to the Infidels with such great charity that they are willing to sacrifice their lives for it, so the God of glory has chosen the knights to conquer and overcome by force of arms the Infidels who contrive every day to destroy the holy Church. Therefore, God grants honour in this world and the next to those knights who are the upholders and defenders of the office of God and of the faith through which we shall be saved. (44).

The Knight is on a Christian pilgrimage to a Christian site, but he seems unaware of the contradictions of telling a pagan tale that mixes Greek and Roman mythology and weaves in the qualities of English knights who would have been Christian. This addresses the religious issues occurring in England at the time. In medieval Europe, from 1378 until 1417, there were two

popes. The issues that caused this were both political and religious, damaging the position of the pope in the eyes of the people. The people could not trust God's representative on Earth if there were two men claiming this right. This created a problem with the belief of the English people that their king ruled with divine right – meaning that he was chosen by God. The character of Theseus in the *Knights Tale* is not a Christian character, thus he and his people worship pagan gods. The Knight removes a vital belief in kingship in the fourteenth-century, reflecting the uncertainty of Richard's reign in regards to religious matters – Theseus was not divinely chosen by the Christian God as Richard was. Beyond Christian beliefs, Theseus breaks another important chivalric value – the treatment of women.

Theseus treats women unchivalrously from the beginning of the tale. The Knight's ignorance on this matter is seen in his reference to Theseus' defeat of Minotaur as he tries to put him on a pedestal for his bravery and heroism, when in reality the tale reveals the heartless side of the king. The story of "The Minotaur, which that he wan in Crete" (KT, ll. 980), is a known literary reference within the *Knights Tale*. The story chronicles Theseus' slaying of the Minotaur. However, the Knight neglects to include the part of the story where Theseus makes Ariadne, daughter of King Minos, fall in love with him for her help to defeat the Minotaur, and then abandons her once his goal is accomplished. Chaucer revisits Theseus' mistreatment of Ariadne in *The Legend of Good Women*, which tells tales of virtuous women. Chaucer calls him a "traytour" in this poem (*Legend of Good Women*, ll. 2174). However, the Knight's mention of the Minotaur reminds Chaucer's audience that the womanizing Theseus of Greek mythology is the same Theseus in this tale. In chivalric literature, knights are charged with the protection of women, and to never take advantage of them. Theseus' wife, Hippolyta, is no more than a spoil of war. He conquers her people, and then forces her into marriage. She is an object to be used at

his pleasure. Emelye does not fare much better. She, just like Hippolyta, is one of Theseus' pawns. He uses her, and the affection Arcite and Palamon have for her, for his own pleasure. Theseus' selfish attitude feeds these actions and spills into other areas of his reign, often making his decisions cruel and unjust.

Theseus' tendency for impetuous judgment and excessive violence is similar to Richard. When Theseus catches Arcite and Palamon fighting up to their ankles in blood he threatens them with torture. He says to the two knights,

This is a short conclusion.

Youre owene mouth, by youre confessioun,

Hath dampned yow, and I wol recorde;

It nedeth nought to pyne yow with the corde. (*KT* 1743-46)

Because the knights have already confessed Theseus says there is now no reason to torture them; torture contradicts the tenets of English common law, which guaranteed a trial by jury rather than torture. While Theseus is not in England, and the justice system in Greece varies from that familiar to this English knight, the anachronistic setting of this story gives Chaucer more room to criticize without directly revealing the target of his satire. The Knight's willful disregard in telling the story has been built from the beginning of the *Canterbury Tales*, and the Knight 'mistakenly' applying English concepts to a Greek setting masks Chaucer's criticism of the king's inclination to use torture rather than trial. Despite the laws regarding torture, it was noted in the chronicles of Richard's reign that he did employ the practice on at least one occasion. Chaucer could not directly criticize the king, especially Richard, who was known for his short temper. By placing his English knights in an anachronistic setting, Chaucer avoids directly condemning the king.

In the few medieval instances where torture was used, it was not used lightly and only at the discretion of the king. John Bellamy writes that, “Only when the accused stood mute in court, refusing to plead, was a form of torture used” (67). Richard, as King of England, could only legally have a prisoner tortured by *lese majeste*. He may not have openly advocated the use of torture, but like Theseus, there is evidence that he did not oppose to the practice when others acted in his name. Larissa Tracy writes, “Theseus represents a figure of authority, but one that is willing to resort to torture if necessary in a rash moment of anger” (*Torture and Brutality* 235). This inclination towards torture indicates Theseus’ short temper, a temper that Richard shared. In the case of a friar, who relayed a possible assassination threat, Richard turned the deed over to John of Gaunt who then handed the friar over to men in his service in order to remove any association from the king. Richard’s temper clouded his judgment, which led to his abuse of *lese majesty* ultimately resulting in the friar being “subjected to the most excruciating torture, breaking his limbs and tormenting him with fire” in an attempt to extract the names of those the friar was working for (Saul, *Richard II*, 131). In contemporary literature, such as the *Stanzaic Morte Arthur* (c. 1400), kings recognize that torture is the last resort, and even then, it is less than ideal. King Arthur tortures squires for the truth about the murder of a knight and this, as Tracy writes, “potentially taints King Arthur and his justice” (“Wounded Bodies” 5). Theseus’ threat to “pyne yow with the corde” is another instance of his poor leadership. A fourteenth-century audience would have been aware of the legal issues surrounding torture and the rare circumstances in which it would be employed. Theseus’ casual mention of torture suggests a lack of respect for the discretion that should be used when the interrogation method is practiced. Theseus has lost control of Arcite and Palamon, and his threat of torture is a last resort to regain

his governance over the two knights. Not only is he threatening to use an outlawed practice, he is also revealing a weakness in his authority.

Richard and Theseus show a willingness to use torture in certain circumstances, which suggests that they do not respect justice, contradicting the vows Richard took in his coronation ceremony. Saul explains that, “[Richard] was given the sword for the protection of the kingdom, the scepter, ‘the rod of the kingdom’ and instrument for the correction of error, and the ring, ‘the seal of holy faith’ and symbol of his pastoral responsibilities” (*Richard II* 26). During this coronation Richard symbolically accepted three of the charges of chivalry, as well as kingship. With bravery he is expected to protect his kingdom, with wisdom he is supposed to be fair and just in his judgments, and lastly he is supposed to be a symbol of faith for his people to follow. These expectations were part of what should be a chivalrous kingship. His failure to act in accordance with these beliefs only pushed him further away from the chivalric ideal. In his critique “Terry Jones’s *Richard II*”, Saul speaks of Richard’s deposition articles that claim that, “the king placed himself above the law...it was alleged that he showed no interest in upholding the rightful laws of the realm but preferred to act according to his own arbitrary will...” (49). Theseus’ takes justice into his own hands rather than submit Arcite and Palamon to the justice of the law. Theseus’ system of justice is flawed, and ultimately ends in a death that he did not foresee, and must then justify

Unlike Richard and the situation with the friar, Theseus spares Palamon and Arcite, listening to the pleas of his sister-in-law, Emelye. Rather than torturing them and then executing them, he lets them settle their feud with a tournament. This tournament, meant to serve as a generous favor to the knights from Theseus, is no more than justice served through violence. The violence from the tournament is as gruesome as Richard’s friar, but it is hidden under the guise

of sport. Tracy discusses the implications of Theseus forcing Palamon and Arcite to fight in a tournament, quoting Richard Firth Green's statement from "Palamon's Appeal of Treason in the Knight's Tale" that "A legal system that is prepared to contemplate men fighting to the death on so slim a pretext as a disputed contract is one that provides but minimal protection against the incursions of anarchy – and anarchy [...] lurks darkly in the wings of the Knight's Tale" (113). Tracy notes that Chaucer's audience may have been privy to the anarchy rising in England and been aware that "these transgressive figures reveal the potential for lawless brutality within their own community" (*Torture and Brutality* 230). Theseus and Richard abuse the power of the crown by using violent means of justice that violate English laws. Tracy explains that,

While trial by battle declined over the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the Court of Chivalry developed in fourteenth-century England as a distinctly aristocratic way of dealing with serious crimes. The duel of chivalry emerged under Edward III and became very fashionable during the reign of Richard II when it was usually (but not always) fought by 'aristocratic combatants' over allegations of treason. Article 27 of the Deposition Articles against Richard II alleged that he had used the Court of Chivalry as an 'instrument of oppression.'" ("Wounded Bodies" 6)

Neither Richard nor Theseus maintain or encourage justice; instead, they blur its lines. The laws surrounding justice were created so that people would have the comfort of knowing that any accusation against them would see a fair trial. By removing this staple of the justice system, Theseus creates discontent among his people.

The Knight's presentation of the tournament reflects the tradition that was prevalent in England during this time. After the plague hit England several decades earlier, overall morale was low. The plague wiped out a significant fraction of the English people. The tournaments

were meant to improve morale and give the English people something to take their minds off their bleak circumstances. The tournament in the *Knight's Tale* however, is just a bloody show, but the violence of the tournament is not the only transgression that comes from Theseus' creation of the event. Palamon and Arcite round up one hundred knights to fight each other in fifty weeks time for the right to marry Emelye. Theseus creates this tournament at a great expense, as he builds the best arena in existence for the two outlaws. The Knight describes the construction in his tale saying,

I trowe men wolde deme it necligence  
 If I foryete to tellen the dispence  
 Of Theseus, that gooth so bisily  
 To maken up the lystes roially,  
 That swich a noble theatre as it was  
 I dar wel seyen in this world ther nas. (*KT* 1881-1886)

The arena was a mile around in circumference, walled with stone, and completed with two marble gates. This is an extreme amount of trouble and money to go through for two men taken prisoner after Theseus' subjugation of Thebes. The tournament satisfies only Theseus' childish need for savage entertainment. Geoffroi explains that kings, "were, therefore, chosen to spend their wealth on all kinds of good works so that they were not reproached for making ill use of it" (75.25.23-25). The tournament is not the kind of good work that Geoffroi refers to, because it does not benefit Theseus' people. While Theseus gives no real reason for his behavior, Thomas Luxon exonerates him, arguing, "Theseus is led to consider Palamon's and Arcite's predicament as his own; he remembers the folly of his own youth and finds 'resoun' to excuse the lovers on that ground" (106). Empathy is Theseus' excuse for creating this lavish tournament, yet the



tournament is built only for Theseus' entertainment, not for the benefit of the knights. Chris Given-Wilson makes a similar claim about Richard's use of resources. He states that, "resources were much more freely available to the king than they had been in the 1380s, but Richard squandered them on courtly splendor in order to boost his revenues and reward his followers in the style which he considered appropriate" (122). Knowledge of Richard's expenditures was not limited to just his court, and it was common knowledge that Richard, like Theseus, threw expensive tournaments to impress those visiting his kingdom. Richard Barber explains that "[i]n September 1390 Richard II held a tournament in London...at which sixty knights held the lists against all comers" (296). While Chaucer does not comment on the public's reaction to Theseus' creation of his arena, it was a public event and people would have been able to deduce for themselves the expense involved. Saul paraphrases the author of *Richard the Redeless*, an anonymous poem critiquing the reign of Richard II, saying that, "The king should uphold the law and imprison evil doers, and not waste his money on dancing and wine; for, if he continued to treat the law with levity, assuredly he would come to an unhappy end." (*Richard II* 436). While Theseus does not spend his money on dancing and wine, his expenses are just as frivolous. His priorities are not about the needs of his people, but rather his own need to regain the control he lost over Palamon and Arcite when they defied his orders, undermining his authority.

At the end of the *Knight's Tale* as Arcite lies dying as a result of the tournament, and Emelye must now marry Palamon, Theseus takes center stage and gives a speech to attempt to justify his actions that ultimately led to these tragic events. Theseus' speech reads,

Thanne is it wysdom, as it thynketh me,  
 To maken vertu of necessitee,  
 And take it weel that we may nat eschue,

And namely tha tot us alle is due.  
 And whoso gruccheth ought, he dooth folye,  
 And rebel is to hym that al may gye.  
 And certainly a man hath moost honour  
 To dyen in his excellence and flour,  
 Whan he is siker of his goode name;  
 Thanne hath hay doon his freend, ne hym, no shame.  
 And gladder oghte his freend been of his deeth,  
 Whan with honour up yolden is his breeth,  
 Than whan his name appalled is for age,  
 For al forgeten is his vassellage.  
 Thanne it is best, as for a worthy fame,  
 To dyen whan that he is best of name. (*KT* ll. 3041-3055)

This small portion of the speech tries to make Arcite's death seem like a blessing, rather than the unnecessary tragedy that it is. Theseus even goes as far as to say that the man that questions Arcite's death also questions fate, and is thus a fool. Theseus masks the tragedy he caused with flowery language, which is not dissimilar to the language Richard began to require in his court. Saul writes that,

The motives which led Richard to promote the use of the new vocabulary were probably twofold. In the first place, there was obviously a self-referential element in his thinking. In promoting the use of the new language Richard was satisfying his own deeply-felt instinct for theatricality. From the time of the Peasants' Revolt to the closing days of the reign his public behaviour was characterized by a tendency to self-assertion and self-

dramatization. He had a fondness for flattery, and his ego fed on the attentions of others; moreover, he put himself at the centre of every courtly or public ritual. (“Vocabulary of Kingship” 861)

Richard’s desire to be at the forefront of every public event was not unreasonable for a king, especially a king that needed to win back the favor of his people, however, Richard’s theatricality made it a spectacle. Richard wanted to be viewed as God-like, and this is where his affinity for formal language began. Theseus, on the same note, takes on the role of explaining Arcite’s death to his people as though he speaks for the gods himself. Ultimately, Theseus’ speech has no real purpose, and only serves as an attempt to place the blame of the events on fate rather than himself. This final speech is the culmination of Theseus’ unjust actions throughout the tale. The speech does not exonerate him but further damns him for the part he plays in Arcite’s death.

### ***Conclusion***

Throughout the tale, Theseus resorts to the unsavory methods he uses on Arcite and Palamon because he is losing control. His actions, rather than present him in a favorable light, solidify just how far these events have gotten from his control. When Theseus threatens Arcite and Palamon with torture he reveals just how much control he has lost over the two knights. To further prove his authority he uses the guise of a tournament to mask his attempt to regain what he has lost, but this decision only leads to death. Theseus’ speech at the end of the tale is his last attempt to show his authority, but his speech further establishes his lack of control. Chaucer’s warning is that reacting with violence and rash actions does not make a king strong, but reveals the depth of his weakness. The Knight telling the story genuinely believes that Theseus is a great

king, and fails to realize the implications of Theseus' actions. The Knight reflects the effect poor kingship can have on those serving the monarch. If the Knight were serving a strong king, he would recognize that Theseus' actions are unjust and cruel.

Chaucer's *Knight's Tale* highlights the troubling behavior of Richard at the end of the fourteenth-century. This behavior was driven by paranoia that followed Richard through the majority of his reign, causing him to act irrationally and ultimately leading to his label as a tyrant. Richard was one of Chaucer's benefactors, and as a member of Richard's court, Chaucer supported the king despite his behavior. Theseus reflects the difficulties of Richard's reign and his irrational behavior, but Chaucer is not damning the king. The *Knight's Tale* warns of the consequences of weak kingship. Once printed, Chaucer's text would have been available to his patrons, especially the king. If Richard could recognize the unjust behavior of Theseus, then he would be able to recognize his own behavior that reflects those same characteristics.

Richard's behavior started a period of unstable kingship in medieval England, and the literary critique of this was not unique to Chaucer. In the same century, the anonymous authors of the *Alliterative Morte Arthure* and the *Stanzaic Morte Arthur* respond to concerns similar to Chaucer's. The two poems present contrasting sides of King Arthur, but each text reveals flawed kingship that results in dissolution. The emergence of literature working as a mirror of kingship is a result of a period of instability in the monarchy that begins with Richard's reign, and continues through the fifteenth-century.

## Chapter 2: The *Alliterative Morte Arthure* and *Stanzaic Morte Arthur*

In a drastic contrast to Chaucer's Theseus, the contemporary authors of the *Alliterative Morte Arthure* and the *Stanzaic Morte Arthur* present King Arthur as a good and just king, whose failure is not of his own making but because of the betrayal by those he trusted. Just as there are texts that predate Chaucer's Theseus, there are Arthurian texts written earlier than the fourteenth-century— and they did not always present Arthur in this favorable light. The *Alliterative* and *Stanzaic*, English texts, refashion Arthur from a French tradition that degrades him as a king. While the exact dates of the texts are unknown, Tracy argues that, “Both texts were likely written at a time of crisis in England, when the monarchy was threatened by the plots of disgruntled nobles against an immature, reactionary king: Richard II” (“Wounded Bodies” 2). These texts, while adapting the existing tales of King Arthur, emphasize two different aspects of the tradition. The *Alliterative* focuses on the imperial warrior king of Geoffrey of Monmouth, and the *Stanzaic* adapts the French plot of Lancelot and Guinevere, making Arthur's failure as a king more sympathetic.

The author of the *Alliterative* emulates the chronicle tradition that was so prevalent in the Middle Ages. Larry Benson and Edward Foster write that, “his fondness for precise dates, his use of real place names, and his comparative lack of interest in the supernatural lend his poem the air of chronicle rather than romance. So does his lack of interest in matters of love and courtly manners” (2). The Arthur of the *Alliterative* is not undone by Lancelot's betrayal with Guinevere (or Waynor) because it never occurs. However, matters of loyalty are still major factors in Arthur's fall. The focus of the tale is on chivalry and the battle and military prowess that come with that more than it is on the softer aspects of romances. By focusing on realistic accounts of

Arthurs reign, the *Alliterative* presents a more relatable king. Arthur is undeniably human, and has human flaws that leads to his unfortunate demise.

The *Alliterative* opens its tale with a list of Arthur's accomplishments, setting the stage for the rest of the poem. Twenty lines are devoted to cataloguing the various successful campaigns that Arthur and his men have gone on. The bond between Arthur and his knights is one of the major strengths of the *Alliterative*. Christine Chism writes that, "More almost than any other English poem, the Alliterative *Morte Arthure* dwells on the bonds of chivalric love that bind Arthur's men together into a cross generational engine for chivalric excellence, which assembles itself through the practice of battle" (70). This focus is reminiscent of Geoffroi's chivalric manual. More than Lull, Geoffroi emphasizes prowess in battle and the importance of reputation. Because the battles are the focus of the *Alliterative*, the civil war that occurs between Arthur and Mordred is much more devastating than it is in Malory's adaptation. The battles are what bring Arthur and men together and forge their chivalric bond, and it is a battle that ultimately destroys them. They are undone by the very thing that brought them together.

Arthur is a strong king that induces fear in his enemies in the *Alliterative*. The first part of the poem begins with Lucius sending men to Arthur's court to demand tribute be paid to him. Arthur refuses, and views this as an attack on his status as sovereign king, for if he were sovereign, then he would not owe tribute to anyone. Arthur and his men decide that this calls for war and they begin their plans to attack Lucius. The men that brought the matter of the tribute to Arthur are immediately apologetic, as they endure the wrath of Arthur

The king blushed on the berene with his brode eyen,

That full bremlly for brethe brent as the geldes,

Cast colours as the king with cruel lates

Looked as lion and on his lip bites.

The Romanes for radness rusht to the erthe,

For ferdness of his face as they fey were; (ll. 116-121).

The Romans in Arthur's presence are brought to the ground in fear simply from the look they receive from the king. Arthur's reputation is such that they know to respect the king, and to fear his anger. In an effort to spare themselves, the Romans ask to be absolved on the grounds that they are only doing Sir Lucius' bidding. These men do not stick up for their lord, instead they cower in front of Arthur and ask for pardon, contrasting with the loyalty Arthur's men have for him. Arthur's treatment of these men who have offended his authority is unique when set against Theseus' treatment of Palamon and Arcite. Arthur would be within his rights to detain the Romans, but instead he treats them with respect. After they have relayed Lucius' message, Arthur says to them, "Forthy shall thou lenge here and lodge with these lordes/ This seven-night in solace to sjourne your horses,/ To see what life that we lede in these low landes" (ll.152-154). He puts these men up and takes care of their horses. They are not treated as prisoners. Arcite and Palamon are imprisoned in a tower, but these men are treated as though they are Arthur's knights. Arthur is a much more gracious and just king than Theseus, and he does not allow his temper to affect his actions. He is initially furious with these men and their message, but he is able to think clearly and not make rash decisions.

Part of the respect Arthur's men have for him comes from his presence at the front of their battles. Arthur does not sit at home while his men are off fighting in his name, and this makes him brave and heroic but it also creates problems. In order for Arthur to leave for these battles and quests, he must leave someone in charge of his lands Arthur leaves his nephew Mordred in charge, which ultimately proves to be a grave mistake. This is not dissimilar to

Richard I's participation in the crusades, and the impact this had on England. After a certain time, a king should be governing his people in his kingdom, not out on quests or fighting foreign wars. Steven Brusco argues that, "poet of the *Alliterative Morte Arthure* suggests that kings ought to concern themselves with matters at home in the kingdom, rather than aspiring to accumulate territories abroad to create an empire, which was an endeavor of uncertain outcome and extreme expense" (45). Arthur abandons his duty to govern his people to pursue his own war ambitions, but it is not Arthur's fault. In the same vein of Chaucer's Knight, Arthur is pursuing part of the chivalric code that charges knights to pursue prowess in battle. Arthur tries to fulfill his duty as king to set an example of knighthood for his men. This is one of the many flaws of the code, and it is the reason for Arthur's fall.

When Arthur leaves Mordred in charge of his kingdom, there is no immediate sense that he has made an error in judgment by doing so because he trusts his nephew. In fact, Mordred originally kneels before Arthur saying, "I beseek you, sir, as my sib lord,/ That ye will for charitee chese you another, /For if ye put me in this plitt, your pople is deceived" (ll. 681-683). Mordred asks Arthur to reconsider his appointment, and choose someone more qualified. He also does not want to be left behind as Arthur and his men go to war. Mordred wants to prove his own knightly quality on the battlefield and is stripped of the opportunity to do so. He does not begin as the traitor he is later presented as in Malory's text. Arthur is not at fault for Mordred's treachery, because the events that occur are outside of his control. At this point in the poem, there is no suggestion that Mordred will turn against Arthur and his knights. Arthur does not appear to be weak, like he does in Malory, because the malicious nature of Mordred is unknown. The author changes the storyline to make Arthur not appear to be a weak king unable to see the true character of his knights.



Arthur is a strong king that is undone by those around him. This is similar to the way some scholars view the reign of Richard II. In contrast to the viewpoints of many that believe Richard was irrational, violent, and immature, there is a vein of scholarship that places the blame on those surrounding the king. According to Craig Taylor, French chronicles believed “their Richard was a flawed but ultimately courageous figure, as seen in his military enterprises in Ireland, his compassion and loyalty towards his supporters, and his strength and resolution in the face of his ultimate fate” (211). The Appellant Lords justified their decision to usurp Richard and place his cousin Henry of Bolingbroke on the throne by claiming Richard was a tyrant. Many of the English chroniclers, such as Walsingham support this claim, but there is the potential for bias. The French chroniclers saw Richard in a more positive light. No matter what the truth was surrounding the Appellant Lord’s plotting, the fact that they did plot against their king is important when considering his behavior. Richard’s paranoia was justified, and this affected his actions as king. King Arthur, of course, did not have a group of men plotting to remove him from the throne, but it was still the actions of Mordred and those around him that led to the loss of Arthur’s throne and ultimately his death. This is not unique to just the *Alliterative*, and is a familiar theme in Malory’s final medieval adaptation of the legend.

Human flaws are one of the major themes in the *Alliterative*. Arthur and his knights are great, but the poet does not try to present them as perfect. There are very real flaws with the chivalric code that Arthur and his men fall victim to. Arthur’s desire to fight is what allows Mordred to usurp him, but the nature of chivalry is violent and Arthur is doing right by that code. Geoffroi even “praised war as the ultimate chivalric enterprise” (Kaeuper 159). Arthur’s knights follow him into battle for the same reasons, as well as their sworn loyalty to their king. Arthur’s ability to judge the knights surrounding him is different in the *Alliterative* than it is in many of

the other Arthurian text, such as the *Stanzaic* or Malory's later adaptation of these texts. Overall, Arthur's knights are loyal to him with the exception of Mordred. The affair between Lancelot and Guinevere in the French texts is completely absent from the *Alliterative*. Lancelot does not betray Arthur, further emphasizing the loyalty and respect Arthur's men have for him. The *Stanzaic*, however, uses the affair as one of its major plotlines.

The *Stanzaic* is undeniably more romantic than the *Alliterative*. The poem begins with the tale of Lancelot and Guinevere and then goes forward into the Death of King Arthur. The affair between Lancelot and Guinevere is "superimposed on the basic plot" (Benson and Foster 3), and becomes one of the driving forces leading Arthur and his knights to the end of their fellowship. The *Stanzaic* follows the relationship between Lancelot and Gawain, who ultimately become each other's foils. These two tales are Thomas Malory's main sources for his two books in the *Morte Darthur*. Malory also uses the French tale *La Mort Artu*, but it appears that when the English and French versions differ, Malory usually favors the English text. By focusing on the affair between Lancelot and Guinevere, the author of the *Stanzaic* makes the battle at the end of the tale occur because of Mordred's treason, but also because of the feud between Lancelot and Gawain. In the *Alliterative*, the feud between the two knights does not occur because the events that force their animosity are all tied to the affair. The Lancelot and Gawain feud creates another angle to critique Arthur's kingship from. He loses control of two of his knights, and because he is stuck in an impossible situation his unable to diffuse the situation.

The poet of the *Stanzaic* brings up the question of Arthur's honor at the very beginning of the tale. The poem opens with a scene of Arthur and Guinevere in bed together where the queen turns to him and says, "Sir, your honour beginnes to fall,/ That wont was wide in world to sprede,/ of Launcelot and other all, / That ever so doughty were in deed" (ll. 25-28). The text

immediately presents an Arthur that contrasts the warmongering king of the *Alliterative*. His court is slowly disintegrating. Not because of Arthur's actions as a king, but because after the quest for the Sangrail "Four yere they lived sound" (ll. 15). There is nothing for Arthur and his knights to do to find renown and keep their honor. In order for Arthur to establish his honor again, Guinevere suggests that he hold a tournament.

Guinevere plays a much larger role in the *Stanzaic* than she does in the *Alliterative*. The affair between her and Lancelot creates the fractures between the knights. The existence of the affair in the *Stanzaic* weakens Arthur as a king, which is perhaps why the author of the *Alliterative* left it out entirely. Arthur is portrayed as a king with no control over his queen, and then he loses control over his knights. However, in the *Stanzaic*, the author does not appear to blame Arthur for any of the ill-fated events. Arthur's fall is a tragedy that he had no way of avoiding. There is only one episode where Arthur makes a decision that is directly against the tenets of English common law, which bring into question the strength of his reign.

In the episode of 'The Poisoned Apple' Guinevere is put on trial after a knight falls dead from poison after a feast she has throne for the Round Table. Already aware of her treasonous affair with Lancelot, the knights assume she is guilty of this crime immediately. Guinevere is exonerated in a trial by combat, but Arthur is still left to uncover the guilty party. Arthur does this by resorting to torture;

The squiers then were taken all,  
 And they are put in harde pain,  
 Which that had served in the hall  
 When the knight was with poison slain.  
 (It might no lenger be to laine)

How in an apple he did the gall,  
 And had it thought to Sir Gawain. (1648-55)

Arthur's methods are successful in revealing the guilty squire, but this stains his reputation. There is a parallel between this instance of torture and the threat made by Theseus in the *Knight's Tale*. Arthur resorts to this practice because he is losing control of his kingdom. The fellowship is beginning to fracture from the beginning of the tale when Lancelot is absent and no one can find him. By focusing on the affair between Lancelot and Guinevere, the author of the *Stanzaic* highlights the impact the fellowship has on the strength of Arthur's reign. It is when this fellowship begins to fall apart that Arthur turns to outlawed practices.

### ***Conclusion***

In both of these texts, Arthur is a good and (usually) just king. He is captive to the events unraveling around him. Arthur has his flaws, but those flaws speak to the fallible nature of men. In the *Alliterative* Arthur's flaw is his lust for battle. As a king, Arthur should stay and govern in his kingdom, but when his honor is offended by Lucius he is compelled to prove himself. Arthur's men are loyal to him, and so they follow him on this quest – leaving the kingdom in the hands of Mordred. Aside from this flaw, Arthur is a good king. He is chivalric, but that fosters his desire for war. In the *Stanzaic*, Arthur is again a good king. He is undone by the affair between his wife and his favorite knight, Lancelot. This affair starts a chain of events, forcing Arthur to make impossible decisions, including the torture of the squires. These kings, unlike Theseus, are not corrupt but their decisions do lead to the end of their reign.

Theseus is an important contrast to the King Arthur of both the *Alliterative* and the *Stanzaic*. Theseus does not promote any part of the chivalric code that would make him a strong

king. He is not honorable, he is not just, and he fails to control those under him. Arthur is a good king, and he is chivalric. His failure is not completely weak kingship, but the code that is supposed to promote strong kingship. Arthur tries to embody the facets of chivalry, but the contradict the requirements of being king, and that is why he fails.

These texts begin a new precedent in the Arthurian legend that rebuilds Arthur as a great English king, and Thomas Malory continues this in the fifteenth-century. Malory borrows heavily from the *Stanzaic* for the last two chapters of his texts. The forbidden and treasonous romance between Lancelot and Guinevere takes the focus of the text, and ultimately leads to the end of Arthur and his fellowship. Malory's Arthur starts as the warmongering king from the *Alliterative* but as the tale progresses he becomes more comparable to the softer Arthur from the *Stanzaic*. Malory adapts both of these texts, and the texts from the French tradition to create his own version of the Arthurian legend.

### Chapter 3: Malory and *Morte Darthur*

Malory's Arthur begins as a strong character, thus contrasting with some of Malory's sources, specifically the French texts. In the French tradition, Arthur is a degenerate king who is entirely degraded. *La Mort le Roi Artu* is one of Malory's sources, and Arthur is often portrayed as jealous, angry, and hasty in his decisions. In order to recreate a sense of Englishness in *Morte Darthur* that was lost in the French texts, Malory has to rebuild the character of Arthur into a figure of kingship and chivalry. The beginning of *Le Morte Darthur* starts with the iconic legend of the sword in the stone. The civil unrest caused by the wars over the throne left England unsure of their rightful king. In *Morte Darthur*, Arthur must also fight for his right to the throne. The engraving in the stone that the sword resides in says that, "Whoso pulleth out this swerd of this stone and anyyld is rightwys king borne of all Englonde" (1.12.34-36). Arthur's ability to remove the sword from the stone, when so many much stronger than he could not, should establish his right to the throne of England. However, many of the English barons refuse to accept Arthur as king because of the simple fact that pulling the sword out of the stone does not establish a royal lineage. Raluca Radulescu writes that there is "similarity between the situation Malory depicts in his book and the political situation surrounding the ascension of Edward IV in 1461" (38). One passage of Malory's own creation reads, "Thenne stood the reame in grete jeopardy long whyle, for every lord that was myghty of men maade hym stronge, and many wende to have ben kyng" (1.12.11-13). Malory drew heavily from his sources to create his Arthurian adaptation, so any original lines bear significance. These particular lines refer to the unrest that existed in England with no one to claim the throne. Radulescu suggests that this passage

may be a reflection of events leading to the crisis which preceded Edward's coming to the throne, especially the problems caused by Richard Duke of York's claim to the throne

in the 1450s. But whether this apparent criticism of York indicates that Malory was a Lancastrian supporter or not, the passage definitely outlines the instability in the country before Arthur's ascent to the throne and provides one connection with fifteenth-century political language. (38)

The issues that Arthur must deal with in the aftermath of Uther's death are similar to the problems surround illegitimate kingship in the fifteenth-century.

Malory, much like Chaucer, had a background that shaped the writing of his major works. Much of the *Morte Darthur* was written while Malory was in prison, and this undoubtedly affected the content of his work. The characters in Malory's text often find themselves imprisoned, but it is always caused by misfortune or malice, not because they truly deserved to be punished. According the Roberta Davidson, those who do deserved to be punished with prison are usually killed outright or reformed (57). Chivalry and the importance of following a chivalric standard of behavior is a common theme throughout Malory's work. Elizabeth Pochoda writes that, "[f]or Malory, chivalry was to be the practical means for instituting and maintaining the governmental structure which fifteenth-century political theory called for" (32). Malory's revival of chivalry was necessary for the political and cultural interests of his time. This is ironic considering Malory's behavior, or what is believed to be a record of his behavior. There is no indisputable evidence that the Thomas Malory in the records is the same Thomas Malory that wrote *Morte Darthur*, however it is widely believed they are the same. In his introduction to his edition of Malory's work, Eugene Vinaver catalogues Malory's list of potential crimes. He writes that, "He was accused, but not convicted, of several major crimes alleged to have been committed in the course of eighteen months, from January 1450 to July 1451. These crimes included a robbery, a theft, two cattle-raids, some extortions, a rape, and

even an attempted murder” (xxii). This laundry list of accusations is nearly comical in relation to the great knights, and the ideal behavior Malory encourages through his text. Malory, who laments for a lost age of chivalry throughout *Morte Darthur*, may have been no better than those who failed to uphold chivalric values in his text.

While Malory tries to establish Arthur’s right to rule as England’s monarch, he also reveals another truth about kingship that was becoming increasingly clear in fifteenth-century England. Over the centuries, there have been various wars over who has the right to rule, and many have claimed a divine right to the throne. In the aftermath of the Wars of Roses, a right to rule did not necessarily make one fit to rule. This was true during the rule of Richard II, and was further validated in the following decades. By presenting Arthur as the rightful heir to the throne of England, Malory also reveals flaws that can result in the end of monarch’s reign. Laura Bedwell, argues that Arthur was not the just king that he is widely known as. His title as successful king comes from his rule during an age of peace, and when the opportunity for him to make decisions that affected his kingdom arose, he failed. She writes that,

The narratorial voice of the *Morte Darthur* generally expresses approval of Arthur in his role as king, but Arthur’s actions tell another tale, one that is not all positive. Arthur may be ‘Rex Quondam Rexque Futurus’, the hero of the golden age of Camelot, but he is not perfectly just. Instead, both Arthur and his knights regularly fail to uphold justice in the realm of Camelot—and the failure of justice leads directly to the destruction of the kingdom itself. (4)

Claims like these challenge the traditional view of Arthur as a strong English monarch that began with Geoffrey of Monmouth, and begin a different interpretation of Arthur that reveals his weaknesses as both king and knight that ultimately bring about the downfall of Camelot. What



Bedwell's claim does not consider is the unachievable demands of the chivalric code. Arthur as king cannot fulfill every part of the chivalric code, which was a very real problem. The expectation for a king to also act as a chivalrous knight were unrealistic.

In an ideal chivalric world, the roles of king and knight should work hand in hand. Many kings fulfilled one role or the other, but rarely both. Richard I, for example, spent most of his reign away crusading, ultimately leaving England without a monarch. On the other hand, Richard II failed in most of his military expeditions. Edward IV, who reigned during Malory's life and who Malory originally supported, struggled to find the balance between knighthood and kingship. Eric Simons explains that when "[f]ree from a hard, military life Edward, as is not surprising, behaved like the young man he was, spending money freely, eating enormously, feasting with his friends, and tasting to the full the pleasures of kingship" (105). Immaturity might have played a role in Edward's life off the battlefield. However, unlike Richard II, whose life was spent in a state of paranoia, Edward was still acknowledged for his "powerful will and keen brain" (105). There is one account of Edward holding a knife to the throat of Elizabeth when she refused his advances, threatening her if she did not yield to him (109). Clearly while he was successful on the battlefield, Edward struggled to act in a manner fitting a king or a chivalrous knight for that matter. These real struggles for kings are reflected in Malory's Arthur as he fails to uphold the chivalric code, leading to the end of his kingdom.

King Arthur is often a romanticized king, both historically and in literature. However, Malory's *Morte Darthur* reveals that in reality, Arthur's knights are much more chivalrous and knightly than he. Lull writes that "The office of knight is to maytene and defende his lord worldye or terryen for a kyng ne no hyhe baron hath no power to mayntene rygtwysnes in his men without aid and helpe" (29). There is a partnership between king and knight that promotes a

common interest. Lull also writes that, “kynges and princes which make provosts and ballyes of others persons than of knyghts done ayenst the office of chyvalry, for the kynght is more worthy to have the seignorye over the peple than any other man” (29). Keen argues that these passages from Lull that “highlight the knight’s role in governance indeed reveal the two sets of values, of knighthood and kingship, as more than just complementary: they are overlapping. They almost have to be, since it is an assumption that kings and great lords will and should be knights” (253-4). Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table are often attributed with heroic quests and deeds, but the knights prevail in these chivalric conquests, rather than Arthur. At the beginning of the *Morte Darthur*, Arthur is a knight – and a good one at that. However, as the story progresses Arthur’s role as knight begins to taper off and he leaves the questing and the journey for renown to others. Even when it comes to the rescue of his wife, it is not Arthur who comes to her aid, but Lancelot – and this leads to more problems as the story progresses. Geoffroi asserts that a king should “be the first to take up arms and to strive with all their might and expose themselves to the physical dangers of battle in defense of their people and their land” (77. 25.35-37). This is an instance where the difficulties of balancing the charges of chivalry with real life situations created insoluble problems. Arthur, as king, cannot go off on quests because he must stay and govern. The Arthur of the *Alliterative* fulfills this charge to lead in battle, but this does not end well. Similarly to the *Stanzaic* and *Alliterative*, Malory’s Arthur fails one way or another through no fault of his own, but through circumstances outside of his control.

While questing is a large part of the chivalric community among Arthur and his knights, their constant need to go on quests stems from the flawed chivalric code. This comes from their desire to find renown and prowess, which are both stressed in chivalric literature. It only becomes troubled when the desire to build these characteristics becomes more important than the

knights' desire to obey their king. 'The Quest of the Grail' reveals that Arthur's men have a need for constant battle and warfare, but it also reveals the already existing fractures within their fellowship. Shortly after beginning their journey, the knights split up. The text reads "And so on the morne they were all accorded that they sholde departe everych from other. And on the morne they departed with wepyng chere, and than every kynght toke the way the hym liked beste" (2.8.872.27-30). Of course, not all one hundred and fifty knights needed to go together, but that does not explain why every knight of the Round Table felt compelled to go on this quest for the grail. Not only do they abandon their fellow knights of the fellowship, but they also leave their king and queen unprotected and all in the name of questing. Lull writes in his chivalric handbook that,

the knight must carry reason in front in all that he does, for the task that is without reason has so much baseness in itself that it must not be in front of a knight. Thus, just as the shaffron guards and protects the horse's head, so reason guards and protects the knight from censure and shame (69).

There knights go on this quest because of their devotion to their faith, another facet of their code. They want the renown that will come from retrieving the grail, but there is little else that warrants this quest. Arthur even expresses his desire that the knights not go on this journey. He says to Lancelot, "'A, curteyse kynght, sir Launcelot! I require you that ye counceyle me, for I wolde that thys queste were at an ende and hit might be'" (2.8.871.1-3). Arthur's desires are clear, yet none of his knights heed his wishes and they go on this quest anyway. The lack of respect the knights show for their king are jarring considering the oaths and loyalty they have pledged to Arthur. The knights certainly could not have forgotten about their oaths, because the start of the grail quests is at the Pentecostal feast, so the knights have just been reminded of their

pledge to Arthur, yet they all leave him to go on this unnecessary quest anyway. The quest results in the death of several knights, including Sir Galahad, Lancelot's son. The grail is an unattainable goal, and thus none of the knights return home successful from their quest, which only further reveals that this quest was unnecessary. The knights blatantly disobey Arthur, revealing their waning loyalties to their king and Arthur's inability to command his knights.

One of the most important traits of a good king is the ability to maintain the loyalty of his men. This particular trait is something that Arthur both succeeds and fails at, and the failure of this is part of his downfall. Malory emphasizes the importance of loyalty, which operates in tandem with the ideal of fellowship that is a key component of the Arthurian legend. Malory stresses the importance of fellowship and the relation this has with chivalry. Malory refers to the homosocial bond between Arthur and his knights consistently throughout his text. This begins first with Pentecostal Oath, sworn by each member of the Round Table; this oath establishes the values of this Arthurian chivalric community. They bind themselves to Arthur as their king and agree to a standard of behavior:

kyngge stablysshed all the kynghts, and gaff them rychesse and londys; and charged them never to do outorage nothir mourthir, and allwayes to fle treson, and to gyff mercy unto hym that askith mercy, upon payne of forfiture [of their] worship and lordship of kyngge Arthure for evermore; and allwayes to do laydes, damesels, and jauntilwomen and wydowes strengthe hem in hir ryghts, and never to enforce them, unpon payne of dethe. Also, thatno man takes batayles in a wrongfull quarrel for no love ne for no worldis goodis. So unto thys were all kynghtis sworne of the Table Rounde, both lode and yonge, and every yere so were they sworne at the hyghe feste of Pentecoste (1.3.120. 15-27).

The Pentecostal Oath occurs on a recurring day of feasting each year. It was done on this day because all of the knights would attend. Despite this oath and the fellowship these knights pledge themselves to, multiple knights find themselves straying from these oath, leading to the demise of the fellowship and Arthur. This oath is similar to the requires for becoming a knight of the Order of Chivalry described by Lull:

The knight must be invested on one of the honoured feast days of the year, for the honour of the feast will cause many men to gather that day in that place in which the squire shall be made a knight, and they will all pray to God for the squire that He may give him grace and the benediction through which he will be loyal to the Order of Chivalry (62).

While the betrayal of the oath is not always intentional, the effect it has on the strength of the fellowship is significant.

The strength of the Round Table emerges from the bonds these knights hold with one another. Part of the code of chivalry they devote themselves to requires these knights to pledge love and loyalty to one another as well as their king. This homosocial bond of Arthur and his knights places precedence on male fellowship. As Elizabeth Archibald explains, “Lancelot's love for the queen points to the inevitable clash of loyalties to come, the irreconcilable demands of the fellowship of the queen and the fellowship of Arthur's Round Table” (323). Lancelot is the hero that saves Guinevere when she finds herself in crisis because of the love he has for her. Rather than Arthur doing it, he always sends Lancelot. This is how romances are traditionally built. However, courtly love cannot exist within the homosocial bonds of chivalry because it requires the knight to put his love for the object of his affection before his love for the fellowship. Lancelot tries to do both, and these clashing loyalties ultimately lead to the downfall of the

fellowship. Arthur on the other hand, chooses his love for his knights over his love Guinevere. Malory emphasizes the fellowship of knights, and ultimately presents Guinevere as one its foils.

There are undeniable flaws to this chivalric fellowship. The nature of the Round Table makes Arthur an equal with his knights. However, as king, Arthur must also act as impartial judge where the law is concerned. The devotion Arthur has for his knights puts him in danger of being lenient with the law where his knights concerned. On numerous occasions, Arthur sides with his knights over Guinevere in legal matters. While there is no doubt Arthur loves Guinevere, his love for her is secondary to the love he has for the fellowship. Arthur and Lancelot represent the two conflicting sides of the oath. Where Arthur's love for Guinevere comes second to his love for the fellowship, Lancelot makes the fellowship secondary to his love for Guinevere.

Lancelot often presents Malory's ideal of chivalry rather than Arthur. Aside from the matter of Lancelot's betrayal, he is Arthur's best knight and he is praised for his chivalric ways. In a poem that is entirely Malory's creation, Sir Ector recalls Lancelot's character saying,

“A Launcelot,” he sayd, “thou were hede of al crysten kynghtes; and now I dare say,”  
said syr Ector, “thou, sir Launcelot, there thou lyst that thou were never matched of  
erthley knyghtes hande; and thou were the curtest kynght that ever bare shelde; and thou  
were the truest frende to thy lovar that ever bestrade hors; and thou were the trewest lovar  
of a synful man that ever loved woman; and thou were the kyndest man that ever strake  
with swerde; and thou were the godelyest persone that ever cam emonge prees of  
knyghtes; and thou was the mekest man and the jentyllest that ever ete in hall emonge  
ladyes, and thou were the sternest knight to thy mortal foo that ever put spere in the  
breste.” (3.21.1259.10-21)

Lancelot is great in many ways, yet his love for Guinevere, Arthur's knight creates such a fracture in the homosocial community of the Round Table that they cannot recover. This betrayal is what begins Arthur's unraveling as a king, and the decisions he makes only pushes the end of Camelot closer.

Lancelot, however, is not the only one of Arthur's knights to betray him. Agravain and Mordred betray Arthur in more malicious ways. This clearly reveals that Arthur has a problem maintaining the loyalty of his knights. On more than one occasion his knights defy him. In Lancelot's case, his anguish over his situation is clear, showing his respect for his king. But nonetheless, he still has an affair with his king's wife. Mordred's betrayal is much more deliberate, and very intentional in the harm he meant to cause. Lull would argue in fact, that Mordred betrayal strips him of the title of knight. Lull's handbook reads "Therefore, the malfeasant knight who aids the people rather than his lord, or who wishes to take his lord's place by deposing him, is not following the office for which he is called a knight." (46). Mordred's purpose for his betrayal is to take Arthur's throne, and this according to the Code of Chivalry, makes him unfit to be a knight. Arthur does not recognize the corruption in one of his closest advisors, and because of this Mordred tries to usurp Arthur and take the kingdom.

The issue of loyalty with Arthur's knights does not come down to their knights' love for Arthur (other than Agravain and Mordred), but it reflects their lack of respect for their fellowship. Arthur's knights are much more invested in their personal feuds with each other than they are in the wellbeing of their Round Table. Gawain's family hates Lancelot because of his support for Sir Lamorak. Agravain and Mordred trap Lancelot and the queen in adultery because of their own jealousy of Lancelot and his standing with Arthur. Sir Pinel hates Gawain's family because they killed his kinsman, Sir Lamorak, and he then tries to kill Gawain by poisoning the

apple at Guinevere's dinner. Gawain eventually hates Lancelot because he accidentally kills his kinsmen Sir Gareth and Gaheris. These feuds are all caused by personal strife, and many of them could have been avoided had the fellowship been their primary concern. Arthur, however, cannot make this their primary concern despite the fact that Arthur's love for the fellowship come before everything else in his life.

In addition to maintaining the loyalty of his knights, a good king is expected to seek the council of his knights and barons. Keen writes that, "above all, [a king] must be prudent in seeking and weighing good counsel to inform his decision making" ("Chivalry and English Kingship in the Later Middle Ages" 251). Arthur does this often through Malory's text, however, at a certain point a king needs to make his own decision – or at the very least, realize when he is being given poor counsel. Brusio explains that,

failing to heed advice, listening to bad advice, and damaging the common weal were common charges to level against such kings: Edward II, for instance, was specifically charged with listening to bad counsel, which in turn damaged the common weal; Edward III was accused of listening to bad advice and violating his coronation oath, and he was reminded that his father had been deposed for similar things; and finally, Richard II was accused of heeding poor advice and playing favorites and rewarding them disproportionately, and he was threatened twice—once in 1386, and again in 1387—with deposition before he was actually deposed in 1399. (55)

Once Arthur begins to make his own decisions with the council of his barons or Merlin, he often does not act in the best interest of his people. There are instances where Arthur ignores sound advice and acts hastily, such as when he orders Guinevere to be burned at the stake. One of the biggest instances where Arthur takes bad counsel is from Mordred and Agravain. The two devise



a plot to catch Lancelot and Guinevere together. They present this plan to Arthur under the guise that they want to reveal the traitor, but in reality they are only invested for personal gain. Arthur, not realizing the driving factors of their plan, agrees. They come to Arthur and say, “we all know that Lancelot holdith youre quene, and hath done longe; and we be your syster sunnes, we may suffir hit no lenger. And all we wote that ye shulde be above sir Launcelot, and ye ar the kynge that made hym knight, and therefore we woll preve hit that he is a traytoure to your person” (3.20.1163.7-11). These two knights manipulate Arthur for their own personal agenda. Arthur responds to the two knights saying,

Gyff hitbe so...wyte you well, he ys non other. But I wold be lothe to begyn such a thyng but I might have prevys of hit, for sir Launcelot ys an hardy kynght, and all ye know that he ys the beste kynght amonge us all, and but if he be takyn with the dede he woll fight with hym that bryngith up the noyse, and I know no kynght that ys able to macch hym. Therefore, and hit be sothe as ye say, I wolde that he were takyn with the dede” (3.20.1163.12-19).

Rather than approach Lancelot’s betrayal from the authority of a king, Arthur allows Mordred and Agravain to continue with a plan that he does not fully agree with. As the monarch, and the head of the fellowship, Arthur would be well within his rights to bring Lancelot forward for questioning on the affair. However, Arthur chooses not to do this, and the outcome is grim. Not only does he lose Lancelot in this process, but he loses a number of other knights as well.

This episode with Agravain and Mordred parallels the *Warkworth Chronicle* of Henry VI’s reign. Radulescu writes that,

There, Henry’s counselors are said to be ‘myscheves peple that were about the Kyng, [who] were covetouse towarde them selff, and dyde no force the Kynges honour, ne of

his wele, ne of comone wele of the londe.’ Just as Henry VI’s bad counselors brought strife in fifteenth-century England, so Sir Mordred and Sir Agravain’s maliousness usher so much internal conflict into Arthur’s court that it is ultimately destroyed. (47)

This is one of the clearest connections Malory makes with Henry VI’s reign. Malory supported Henry, though not at first. Malory was known for his switching of sides depending on what most benefitted him, but this was not an uncommon occurrence during this tumultuous political climate. His loyalties were easily swayed, thus it makes sense that Malory places the blame on Henry’s advisors rather than the king himself. Perhaps what Malory did not consider is the issue of a king not recognizing poor counsel, and how that might be a reflection of poor kingship.

Arthur’s tendency towards bad counsel unfortunately does not stop with Agravain and Mordred. Gawain, one of Arthur’s most trusted knights, give Arthur counsel throughout the *Morte Darthur*. Arthur however, tends to ignore Gawain’s good advice and take his bad advice. In the instance where Guinevere has been caught in her affair with Lancelot, Arthur condemns her to be burned the stake. It is Gawain who asks Arthur to not act so hastily saying,

“My lorde Arthur, I wolde counceyle you nat to be over hasty, but that ye wolde put hit in respite, thys jougemente of my lady the quene, for many causis. One ys thys thoughe hyt were so that sir Launcelot were founde in the quenys chamber, yet hit might be so that he came thydir for non evyll” (3.20.1175-5.31-36).

Gawain recognizes that Arthur is not thinking clearly because of the nature of Guinevere’s betrayal, and he tries to get the king to calm down and think more clearly about the situation. In his efforts to persuade Arthur, Gawain presents a different scenario that may have been occurring in the queen’s bedchamber. He suggests that perhaps Lancelot was not there for evil reasons, but perhaps just because the queen thought so highly of him because of the many times her had come

to her aid. In reality, there is no doubt in anyone's mind that the affair is occurring, but Gawain stoops to lying to Arthur in an effort to halt his desire to punish Guinevere with death. Arthur is blinded by his emotions, yet a good king makes decisions with a level head. This rashness is reminiscent of Richard II, and how he treated the advice from his barons. The young king was infamous for his immaturity, and for the influence this had on the decisions he made.

To further complicate Arthur's decisions to accept Gawain's council, when Gawain later discusses his desires to go to war with Lancelot, Arthur agrees. In this case, it is Gawain's judgment that is clouded with emotion, but nonetheless Gawain is justified in his desires to avenge his brother's death. This leaves Arthur in an impossible situation. The battle against Lancelot will undoubtedly have a grim outcome because of Lancelot's skill, but Arthur cannot simply ignore the circumstances. None of Arthur's knights support the war with Lancelot. Just as Gawain realized the destruction it would cause to burn Guinevere at the stake, the rest of the knights realized that fighting Lancelot signifies the end of the fellowship entirely. The knights actually advise Arthur to reconcile with Lancelot. Malory writes that, "all the lordys were full glad for to advyce the kyng to be accorded with sir Launcelot, save all only sir Gawayne" (3.20.1213.11-13). Arthur ignores sound advice, and continues with this war to avenge the deaths of his knights. There is no winning decision for Arthur. To ignore the circumstances would prove him to be a weak king, incapable of defending those who pledge themselves to him, but to war with Lancelot is just as grim. Radulescu explains that,

in both judgment errors, King Arthur's decisions are based on personal motivations rather than on the welfare of the state. These crucial and catastrophic decisions are made autonomously, without, or regardless of, the consideration of his council. Arthur also appears unable to distinguish between good and bad advice, between good and bad

individuals, and consequently loses leadership over, and control of, his Round Table knights” (48).

Once Arthur loses control over his Round Table, he must choose to go to war. There is no rectifying the fractures between him and his knights, so the only justice Arthur feels he can enact is that of war against Lancelot. While Arthur loves Lancelot, he blames him for his lost fellowship and that is why the war against him serves as justice in Arthur’s eyes.

Beyond betrayal and civil war, another connection with chivalry and strong kingship is the ability to administer justice. As Katharine Lewis explains, there is a “particular connection between good, strong kingship and the maintenance of justice” (23). Arthur does at times administer justice when it is needed, but not always. His love for his fellowship at times clouds his ability to punish them when the law dictates that they should in fact be punished. In the episode of the “Poisoned Apple”, a scene borrowed from the *Stanzaic*, Guinevere is charged with the murder of one of Arthur’s knights, when she is actually innocent. Lancelot must engage in a trial by combat with Sir Mador to clear Guinevere this murder. This trial by combat is demanded by Arthur’s knights, and they are actually well within their rights to require this. The Code of Chivalry charges them to uphold and administer justice (46). By simply declaring Guinevere’s innocence, the trial could have been avoided entirely, but Arthur just like his knights must allow justice to run its course. Unfortunately for Guinevere, her affair with Lancelot was hardly a secret among the knights at this point, and thus her reputation is already tarnished in the eyes of the fellowship. The knights’ impression of Guinevere does her no favors when she is accused of the murder. Tracy has noted that “the testimony of two reputable witnesses that the accused was widely believed to be guilty, or capable of guilt—was probable cause to charge someone with a crime and elicit a confession” (“Wounded Bodies” 8). Guinevere’s capability of guilt is already

determined because of her conspicuous affair, so while Arthur as king has the ability to clear the charges against Guinevere, doing so would be a gross misuse of his power. Arthur must be impartial and carry out justice. So, in this part of the case, Arthur does administer justice and is impartial even though it is his wife that is on trial.

The trial by combat establishes Guinevere's innocence of the murder charges brought against her, but not the adultery of which she is actually guilty. This trial speaks to Malory's knowledge of treason and English law. There is no solid proof that Guinevere is guilty in this case, and as Bellamy explains "if on an appeal of treason there was insufficient evidence to prove the case, if it was one man's unsupported word against another's and if they were both of good repute and not outlawed or indicted for felony, then trial by battle might result" (143). Guinevere is not of good repute among the knights because of her affair with Lancelot, which is why the knights are so quick to assume she is guilty. Malory includes this application of English justice where Guinevere is involved, which creates a striking contrast in how the law is applied where Arthur's knights are concerned. English law dictates that a false or wrong accusation is a punishable offense however, Mador, the knight that accuses the queen, suffers no consequence other than the wounds inflicted by Lancelot during the trial. He is merely helped back to his quarters and thus reabsorbed back into the fellowship. However, Muckerheide writes that, "had this incident taken place in a real-world Court of Chivalry...Mador's fate would have been much different" (63). He suffers no ill effects of his wrong accusation because Arthur puts the well-being of the fellowship before the law. Had Arthur administered the law appropriately, according to G.D Squibb, "the vanquished party, whether he was the appellant or the defendant, was disarmed in the lists and drawn behind a horse in the charge of the Marshal to the place of execution, where he was beheaded or hanged" (23). Clearly none of these punishments are

administered, and Mador has no need to ask for pardon from Arthur. Mador does not need to ask for pardon because of the importance placed on the fellowship. Rather than fracture the fellowship by punishing Mador, the trial is simply over, and Arthur and the knights accept this. Guinevere is found innocent of the charges brought against her; however, the real murderer must still be brought to justice. This would have been another opportunity for Malory to insert his knowledge of English law and allow Arthur to administer justice, however, he opts to use magic in the place of law to reveal the culprit. In the *Stanzaic*, the murderer is revealed through means of torture; Malory, however, uses Nynyve, the Lady of the Lake, to administer justice. Arthur himself does not carry out the justice that he should as king. Arthur protects the fellowship at all costs, and does not punish Mador or Sir Pyonell. Guinevere on the other hand, bears the full brunt of the law at Arthur's hands.

Justice is a facet of chivalry that Arthur struggles with throughout the *Morte*. Often clouded with emotion, Arthur makes hasty decisions. Pushed by Gawain, Arthur engages in a war with Lancelot that could have been avoided entirely had he listened to Gawain in the first place, because he believes that this is justice. Much like fifteenth-century England, civil war is the downfall of Arthur and his Round Table. Lisa Robeson argues that, "full-scale civil war is made acceptable to Arthur, Lancelot, and the Knights of the Round Table because Malory presents war as an unfortunate and unintentional result of the honorable practice of chivalry—war is chivalry, through tragic circumstances, gone wrong" (10). The problem with chivalry, as Malory presents it, is that there is no room for human error. Arthur and his knights are damned because of human reactions to events that should elicit that kind of emotion. The Pentecostal Oath that the knights swore at the beginning of Malory's texts lends itself to violations. Dorsey Armstrong explains that, "This act of chivalric legislation early in the *Morte d'Arthur* sets in

motion an ideal of knightly behavior; the rest of the text tests that code in a variety of circumstances, revealing the tensions, shortcomings, and blind spots of the chivalric project” (29). The Pentecostal Oath offers a shining example of what knightly behavior should be, but the oath leaves no room for human shortcomings. As Thomas Wright asserts, “the shortcomings of the Arthurian code, and of the society which it follows, are to be found in the code’s limitations. It is too inflexible and too static; it cannot embrace enough of the contingencies inherent in the human situation” (62). Arthur and his knights fail because it is impossible to follow the chivalric code in its entirety.

### ***Conclusion***

Like the fourteenth-century *Stanzaic* and *Alliterative*, Malory’s King Arthur is a good king who falls victim to circumstances outside of his control. Unfortunately, when he is presented with opportunities to change the trajectory of these events he makes decisions that only push them further along instead. Arthur is justified in many of his actions, including his war with Lancelot. Lancelot has betrayed his king, his fellowship, and he has committed treason. Arthur would be weak if he did not pursue Lancelot, but these actions left the kingdom open for Mordred to usurp him. Many of these actions, like in the fourteenth-century adaptations of the legend, occur because of the nature of chivalry.

Malory continues the literary tradition of critiquing kingship through literature that Chaucer began in the fourteenth-century. While Malory would have been aware of Chaucer’s *Knight’s Tale*, he approaches his critique differently. Where there are few redeemable qualities in Theseus, Arthur is a sympathetic character. Malory synthesizes the various Arthurian legends and creates an Arthur that is strong, but still victim to his circumstances. This is not dissimilar to

the fourteenth-century texts, but Malory removes the more damning qualities of the king in these texts. By removing these qualities, like the torture from the *Stanzaic* and the warmongering nature of Arthur in the *Alliterative*, Malory changes the focus of the tale to fellowship. The fellowship of knights is the most important facet of the chivalric code, but it is this same code that results in their dissolution.

Arthur is a strong king, but Malory is still commenting on the unstable nature of kingship in the fifteenth-century. Loyalty was a major issue in the fifteenth-century, so its place in Malory's text is fitting. A king is only as strong as the subjects that pledge themselves to him, and this is why Arthur falls. This same commentary is made by the author of *The Gest of Robyn Hode* who focuses on the corrupt nature of church and royal officials. The king of the *Gest* is strong, but he has to see past those that he trusts to regain order in his kingdom. Where Arthur fails, the king of the *Gest* succeeds in uncovering the maliciousness of his men.



#### Chapter 4: *The Gest of Robyn Hode* and Edward III

The *Gest of Robyn Hode*, one of the oldest known Robin Hood ballads, is ironic when set next to the other texts of this thesis. Robin Hood is more chivalric than Arthur, Lancelot, and Chaucer's Knight – yet he is not a king or a knight. He is a yeoman. Still in a position that garnered respect and status, Robin Hood would not have been expected to be chivalrous in this position. Critics and historians contest the date of the ballad, but largely agree that the poem was written sometime between 1350 and 1450, though most scholars lean towards the later date. The content of the *Gest* points to a focus on the reign of Edward III. The mid-fourteenth-century reign of Edward III was considered by many to be a period of good law corrupted by greedy officials and churchmen. *The Gest* does not just place Robin Hood next to knights and kings of contemporary texts for comparison, his behavior is also a stark contrast to characters within the ballad acting under the king's authority that fail to act in a manner fitting their position.

The date of the *Gest* is muddled, but there are critics that try to place the authorship of the ballad in the thirteenth-century, the fourteenth-century, and the fifteenth-century. Olgren argues that the ballad was composed during the reigns of Henry V or Henry VI in the fifteenth-century. Despite this, Olgren also notes that the “historical time of the various social, cultural, and economic practices—bastard feudalism, livery and maintenance, archery and forest law, and the emergence of mercantilism—belongs instead to the early decades of the reign of Edward III” (2). One of the most concrete pieces of evidence that links the *Gest* to Edward III comes at the very end of the sixth fitt: “Of Edward, our comly kyng” (6.1412). The problem that comes from this line is the number of Edward's who reigned in succession from 1272 until 1377: Edward I (1272–1307), Edward II (1307–1327), and Edward III (1327–1377) (Knight and Ohlgren 163). However, as Knight and Ohlgren note, looking at other literature of the time may help in

“identifying the king in fitts seven and eight as Edward III, because Laurence Minot refers to him as *Edward, our cumly king* in line 1 of *Poem IV*, which was composed about 1399 to commemorate Edward III’s invasion on France at the beginning of the Hundred Years Wars” (163-4). The similarity between the two lines is enough for many scholars and critics to agree that this ballad does reflect back on the period of Edward III’s reign.

The *Gest of Robyn Hode* tells the story of Robin Hood, Little John, and a sorry knight named Richard. Richard finds himself at the dinner table of Robin, and he leaves a much richer man than he was when he sat down thanks to the generosity of the yeoman. Sir Richard owes a great debt to the churchmen because his son has murdered two men, and Sir Richard had to give up all of his money and property to save his son’s life. Now Sir Richard is in debt with the Church officials, and Robin Hood’s generosity is the only thing that saves him. This ultimately results in Richard getting back on his feet and living in a castle. Robin and his band find themselves seeking refuge in Sir Richard’s castle from the Sherriff of Nottingham who is pursuing them. After this, there is a price on the head of Richard and in an effort to catch them, the king disguises himself and in doing this he sees the true, good nature of Robin Hood and has him come back to live with him at court.

The author of the *Gest* plays on a tradition surrounding Edward III and his portrayal of the king in this ballad. The king had a reputation for disguising himself to meet his subjects without them knowing they were in the presence of their king. Ohlgren explains that, “Works such as *King Edward and the Shepherd* and *King Edward and the Hermit* clearly preserve the tradition that Edward III made a habit of meeting his lower-rank subjects incognito” (10). This makes a compelling argument for the Edward in the *Gest* to be Edward III. Edward disguises himself as an abbot in an effort to catch and punish Robin Hood. This deviates slightly from the

Edward of the other works, as the king is not trying to listen to their complaints as a commoner. However, much like the Edward of those texts, he pardons Robin for the crimes he has committed. Many of the crimes Robin committed through the text occur because of his outlaw status in the forest.

The question of Robin's yeoman status is a topic of discussion among critics. Robin Hood is often identified as a peasant representing the peasant class (Almond and Pollard 55). However, the term yeoman places Robin Hood in a higher social class than just common. What this does is allow Robin Hood to appeal to different social classes, both gentle and common. Almond and Pollard argue that,

the king and the audience again, are reminded that Robin and his men were once forest officials and that they now live by practicing their craft illegally (supplemented from time to time, it is true, by highway robbery, preferably of churchmen). Above all, he and his men are explicitly yeomen of this forest; they remain, despite their current outlawry (by implications imposed wrongfully by the Sheriff of Nottingham), the true foresters of Barnsdale (or Sherwood), as the king himself is pleased shortly to recognize. (59)

Robin Hood and his men still serve the king, perhaps not in the way Edward envisioned, but nonetheless they maintain their loyalty to him. Robin Hood, by his title of yeoman and his actions as a forester is of noble status, or at the very least, gentry. Robin is not a knight, but his position is not the opposite either.

One of the most striking comparisons of chivalric behavior to be made from the *Gest* is the one between Robin Hood and Sir Richard, the knight. Sir Richard, as a knight, should have chivalric characteristics and be in the service of a king or lord. However, it is Robin that has all of these characteristics at the beginning of the text, not Sir Richard. Robin is first described as,

“So curteyse an outlawe as he was one/ Was nevere non founde” (1.7-8). Before the tale even begins, the unknown narrator presents Robin as courteous. An outlaw yes, but a courteous one. After this, Robin is referred to as “Maister” by Little John (1.19). Robin takes the place of lord or king of his company of men, and his men are loyal to him. The strength of the relationship between Robin and Little John is also very apparent at the beginning of the text. Much like the relationship between King Arthur and his knights, Robin’s men stand by him. To add to the chivalric character built at the start of the poem, Robin’s religious habits are discussed at length by the narrator. Early lines of the ballad read,

The one in the worship of the Fader,  
 And another of the Holy Gost,  
 The thirde of Our dere Lady,  
 That he loved allther moste.  
 Robyn loved Oure dere Ladyy:  
 For dout of dydly synne,  
 Wolde he never do company harm  
 That any woman was in. (1.33-40).

These stanzas serve two purposes. The first is they present Robin’s religious priorities. His devotion to the Virgin Mary is a common focus of chivalric adoration. This account of Robin’s faith is important because according to Ramon Lull, “A knight who has no faith cannot be trained in good habits, for through faith man sees God and His works spiritually, and believes in things invisible. And through faith man has hope, charity and loyalty, and he is the servant of truth. And through lack of faith, he disbelieves in God and His works and true things invisible, which the man without faith cannot understand or know” (71). Robin’s devotion to the Virgin

Mary is not just seen in words, but also in his actions. He demonstrates both charity and loyalty on numerous occasions. Tracy notes that this devotion is reminiscent of Arthur's same devotion to the Virgin Mary in Layamon's *Brut*, and Gawain's in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* ("For Our dere Ladyes sake" 38-39). This connects Robin Hood and a well-known, chivalrous English king and his knightly nephew and trusted counselor. Robin's charge to never harm women echoes the chivalric requirements of the Pentecostal Oath in Malory, where they are charged to "allwayes to do ladyes, damesels, and jantilwomen and wydowes, strengthe hem in hir ryghtes, and never to enforce them, uppon payne of dethe" (1.3.120. 15-18). Just in the first forty lines of the *Gest*, Robin practices courtesy, maintains the loyalty of his men, prays to the Virgin Mary, and protects the wellbeing of women. His status as yeoman rather than knight requires the author to emphasize the chivalry of Robin Hood.

Robin's chivalry is even more apparent next to that of Richard, a knight that,

All dreri was his semblaunce,

And lytell was his pryde;

His one fote in the styrop stode,

That othere wavyd beside.

His hode hanged in his iyn two;

He rode in symple aray,

A soriar man than he as one

Rode never in somer day. (*Gest* 1.85-92).

The disheveled appearance of the knight is striking in comparison with the image of Robin that is presented first. In many ways, the knight resembles the Knight of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. This knight does not exhibit the same ignorance as Chaucer's Knight; however, his physical

appearance is not what a knight's should be. There is no description of armor, like the rusty garb of Chaucer's knight, but there is clearly something that reveals Richard to be a knight, because Little John immediately greets him as "gentyll kynght" (1.95). Richard, of course, does not remain in this homely state. With the help of a loan, and some clothes, Richard is back on his feet and is able to repay his debt to the churchmen.

In addition to giving Sir Richard money, clothes, and food, Robin also gives him a horse. This seems natural to offer considering the Knight's need to travel and his horse was probably in the same shape the knight was when he arrived. In line with the origins of chivalry, the gift of a horse is much more significant. Lull writes that,

Among all the beasts, the finest, swiftest and most capable of enduring the most amount of work, and the most suitable for serving man was sought out; and since the horse [cavall] is the noblest beast and the most suitable for serving man, thus of all the beasts the horse was chosen, and it was given to the man who was chosen from one thousand men, and thus is that man called a knight [cavaller]" (40).

The horse is a signifier of knighthood, and of chivalry. This is perhaps the most important part of Robin helping the knight return to his noble status.

In helping Sir Richard, Robin displays more chivalric traits including generosity, or largesse. When Robin asks Richard how much money he has, and Sir Richard reveals that he has only ten shillings Robin says to him, "If thou hast no more.../I will nat one peny,/ And yf thou have nede of any more,/ More shall I lend the" (11.157-60). Because of the knight's lack of funds, Robin refuses any payment for his hospitality and the meal he provided for the knight. One top of this, Robin gives the knight more money than he had to begin with. Kaeuper explains that,

the *Geste*, merges the social ranks of knights with sturdy yeoman and places issues of law and justice firmly the foreground. Robin Hood is not a knight; the text pointedly calls him ‘a gode yeman’. But he shows many qualities we associate with ideal knighthood. His prowess is constantly displayed and is never in question... Robin dispenses largesse with an open hand, never mind that the wherewithal comes from others’ purses. The text shows – and comments on – his courtesy time and again; he regularly removes his hood and drops to one knee in the presence of those of more exalted rank. He is devoted to the Blessed Virgin and will harm no company in which ladies are present. (112-13)

Robin’s chivalry is established, and this ultimately contrasts not with Sir Richard, who eventually returns to a more noble status, but with the Sherriff of Nottingham. The Sherriff serves the king, but his corruption clearly makes him unfit for this position.

The Sherriff of Nottingham and the church officials are all servants of the king, but in the *Gest* they are much more interested in serving their own selfish needs. This behavior reflects the corruption of the officials during the otherwise prosperous reign of Edward III. When Sir Richard finally has the money from Robin to repay his debt, he returns to the abbot. Upon his entrance into to the Abbey, Richard pretends to not have the money to repay the debt in order to “reveal the avariciousness of the abbot” (Ohlgren 16). Once they believe that the knight cannot pay his debt, both his lawyer and the sheriff refuse to help him. The abbot then offers Richard one hundred shillings to release the claim of his land, which Thomas Ohlgren notes is a very low sum (16). After this deliberation, where the knight is clearly being taken advantage of by these officials, Richard empties his four-hundred shillings lent by Robin Hood onto the table, exposing the “greed, corruption, and collusion of the abbot, sheriff, and justice” (16). This kind of behavior is linked with the bastard feudalism that was present during Edward III’s reign which,

according to Michael Hicks, is “the set of relationships with their social inferiors that provided the English aristocracy with the manpower they required” (389). It was money, rather than land that fed this feudal system, but this system was abused which led to “embracery (bribing of judges, jurors, and witness), maintenance (support of one’s own or another legal cause instead of proper legal process), and champerty (supporting a false legal claim for a share of the profits)” (Ohlgren 15). This is certainly what occurs in Sir Richard’s case. These officials conspire to take advantage of him, and would have been successful had he not come up with the money on the day it was due.

The Sheriff of Nottingham plays a much bigger role as the tale continues. During an archery contest, the Sheriff sees Little John shooting and thinks him the best archer he has ever seen. So he says to him, ““Sey me, Reynold Grenelefe,/ Wolde thou dwell with me?/ And every yere I woll the gyve/ Twenty marke to thy fee”” (ll. 597-600). Little John has lied to the Sheriff about who he is, but nonetheless he agrees to be the Sheriff’s servant, but he vows to be the worst servant the Sheriff has ever seen (ll. 615-16). After some time spent in the Sheriff’s employment, Little John is refused food by the Sheriff’s cook. For Little John, this seems to be a grievous crime, and in response he steals both the Sheriff’s cook (who agrees to leave), and his treasure which included some silver serving plates. Little John then returns to Robin in the forest, and they decide to trick the Sheriff into coming to eat with them. Upon seeing Robin, the Sheriff realizes he has been tricked. Little John offers him an explanation saying, “Mayster, ye be to blame;/ I was mysserved of my dynere/ Whan I was with you at home” (ll. 758-760). The importance of hospitality is one that the author of the *Gest* links with chivalric behavior. Robin offers his hospitality to Sir Richard, and even offers hospitality to the Sheriff of Nottingham, but Little John is denied this same hospitality. In this, Robin and Little John found cause to rob the



Sheriff because he had gone back on his word. In order to teach the Sheriff of Nottingham a lesson, Robin tells him that he will have him stay with him and his men in the forest for a year. This prospect of this is terrifying to the Sheriff, and he begs Robin to let him leave. Robin says to him,

‘Thou shalt swere to me an othe,’ sayde Robyn,

‘On my bright bronde:

Shalt thou never awayte me scathe,

By water ne by lande.’

‘And if thou fynde any of my men,

By nyght or day,

Upon thyn othe thou shalt swere

To helpe them that thou may.’ (ll. 805-812)

Robin is looking out for the interests of his men by having the Sheriff swear this oath. The Sheriff knows where to find Robin and his men, and he knows that they are thieves, so releasing the Sheriff back to Nottingham is a danger to them. The Sheriff does swear the oath; he does not keep it, however. This further reveals the lack of chivalry in the Sheriff, since keeping one’s oath is one of the most important facets of the construct in medieval romances. This goes back to the religious devotion that becomes a focal point in the order of knighthood. The Sheriff was not just swearing his oath to Robin, he was swearing the oath to God as well. The *Oxford English Dictionary* explains that the swearing of an “othe” invokes God as a witness. The Sheriff has explicitly done this as the text reads, “The sheref sware a full grete othe./ Bi Hym that dyed on Rode” (ll. 1329-1330). These lines say that he is swearing this oath by Christ that died on the Cross. He clearly invokes the name of God in his oath, which should strengthen or ensure that he

keeps his word. The Sheriff has gone back on his word to Robin and to God. The breaking of oaths often results in the demise of men, such as in Malory's *Morte Darthur*. When Lancelot and Mordred break their Pentecostal Oath, the entire fellowship falls apart, and they all find their deaths. Robin Hood and his men, however, do not break the oaths they take. They are true to their word, and the one instance where Robin Hood does go back on his word as he is leaving the king's service, he is honest about his intentions.

Like Arthur's knights, the Sheriff ultimately dies as a result of breaking his oath. Robin Hood, who administers justice throughout the ballad, determines that the Sheriff deserves to be slain because of his actions. After he kills the Sheriff, Robin says, "Lye thou there, thou proude sherife,/ Evyll mote thou cheve!/ There might no man to the truste/ The whyles thouwere a lyve" (ll. 1393-96). The importance Robin places on keeping one's word is significant. He keeps his word throughout the ballad, but the sheriff is corrupt and goes back on his, putting Robin and his men in danger. The king should administer justice; however, because of the king's inability to see the corruption in his own high sheriff, Robin, an outlaw, must act as judge and see justice carried out.

The character of Edward in the *Gest* has his moments where he displays both good and poor kingship. The first signal that there are problems within the reign of Edward is the mere existence of these corrupt officials under his hand. Barbara Hanawalt asserts that, "In describing the crimes and outrages of medieval barons, scholars have blamed the nobility for not obeying the laws and kings for not bringing them to justice" (54). These crimes committed by the upper-class members of society largely went unpunished. Edward might try to rectify the injustices caused by his officials, but it still exists that they were his officials. His inability to see the corruption of those ruling under his hand is a problem. The other part of this problem is that the

Sheriff of Nottingham was in fact a sheriff. This meant that he was in a position to dispense justice. This was common; however, according to Hanawalt: "For the most part, kings seem to have avoided direct confrontation in the courts because the royal judicial system was likely to back down in the face of threats from the nobility. It was more to the king's advantage to recruit the upper classes to peacekeeping commissions of various sorts where they could use their warring propensities and desire for prestige in royal service" (61). In addition to this, it was also convenient for kings to appoint these kind of noble servants when they were too busy at war to worry about day-to-day peacekeeping. This fits with the picture of Edward III who waged extensive foreign wars. Aside from his corrupt officials, the Edward of the *Gest* is not portrayed as a weak king. In fact, compared with Arthur or Theseus, he comes across as a rather strong king who makes amends when they are needed. Edward is not too proud to realize he was wrong in his pursuit of Robin Hood and Sir Richard, and he rectifies this by giving Sir Richard his land back and asking Robin to come live with him in his court. This portrayal of Edward in the ballad is a reflection of how Edward III was viewed by his people. Overall, Edward was a very popular king. W.M. Omrod writes that by the middle years of Edward's reign, he was commonly seen as the "divinely inspired instrument of English salvation, the epitome of Old Testament kingship, and an exemplar for Christian princes" (849). Edward was the model for other kings to emulate. Unfortunately for England, this did not happen. Edward's grandson Richard II inherited the throne at a very young age after Edward's death, and his reign was anything but peaceful. Edward in the *Gest* is also a stark contrast to Malory's Arthur. Where Arthur lets his knights go about and solve the country's problems for him, Edward takes it upon himself to see the peace of his reign upheld. He does this in the *Gest* by disguising himself to earn the trust of Robin and his men so that he can apprehend them.

Once the king has disguised himself, and he is in the presence of Robin and his men, the king realizes his error in judgment. He is treated with kindness and hospitality by Robin. He sees the chivalric nature of Robin Hood, and he notes to himself “Here is a wonder seemly syght:/ Me thynkth, by Goddes pyne,/ His men are more at his byddyngge/ Then my men be at myn” (7.1561-64). In this moment, the king realizes that a yeoman outlaw is more chivalrous than he, and as a result his men are more loyal. The ability for Robin to maintain the loyalty of his men despite being pursued by the king and his men for their crimes speaks to Robin’s ability to lead his men justly.

### ***Conclusion***

Robin Hood is a rare presentation of ideal chivalry in romantic literature. He embodies all of the characteristics of the Order of Chivalry, and this reflects upon the men that follow his lead. The irony of this is Robin’s status as an outlaw yeoman. He is no knight, and he is no noble. King Arthur and his knights are chivalrous in both the *Stanzaic* and *Alliterative Morte Darthur* as well as Malory’s adaptation, but they never achieve the same balance of the chivalric ideals that Robin Hood and his men do. Robin Hood does not fail because of human nature in spite of the code’s flaws, and his men follow this example. Despite his yeoman status, Robin’s chivalry is unquestionable from the very beginning of the ballad. He helps those in need, and he administers justice to greedy and the corrupt. Robin Hood is the ideal knight, and much to the chagrin of Edward, he refuses to stay at court and serve the king. There is not much text devoted to Edward’s knights in the ballad. The ballad is much more about Robin Hood than it is about Edward, so the focus would not be on his knights. But it also means that Edward’s knights are not really worth mentioning. Edward is not presented as a perfect king in Robin Hood, but he is

good, and he is just. The fact that his knights are not presented acting in a manner unfit for a knight already puts them ahead of many of Arthur's knights, and Chaucer's Knight. Robin Hood represents the ideal of chivalry, not the reality – and so his character represents what Chaucer's Knight, and King Arthur and his knights could not achieve.

If the period of unstable kingship began with Richard II in 1377, then the last strong king that held the English throne was his grandfather, Edward III. *The Gest of Robyn Hode* rather than highlight flawed kingship, reflects back on a period of just rule that was plagued with corrupt officials. The blame is not on the king, but on those that claim to serve him. In contrast to Chaucer and the Arthurian texts, the *Gest* does not critique kingship but serves as a reminder of what strong kingship looked like. Much like Malory's reminiscing for times past, the author of the *Gest* presents the ideal for kings to strive towards.

## Conclusion

Scholars and critics have noted that there is a difference between real world chivalry and the chivalry found in the pages of medieval literature. However, the actions of the kings and knights in Chaucer's *Knight's Tale*, Malory's *Morte Darthur*, and the anonymously written *Gest of Robyn Hode* reveal that the chivalry of romantic literature often reflects the real world struggles kings and knights found in living a life under the code of chivalry. Chivalric literature did not exist to present the chivalric ideal, but rather it existed to present and critique the flaws that already existed in the world of kings and knights. Lull and Geoffroi de Charny offered valuable guides for kings and knights on how to behave; however the application of these guides was not so straightforward. The code was a set of standards to aspire towards, but achieving them in their entirety was not a reasonable expectation, at least not so according to the fictional characters who provided a complementary corrective to their real-life counterparts.

Theseus as a king is a reflection of the failure of chivalry. His anachronistic existence in the *Knight's Tale* is to create the reality of the violence that often occurred in the name of chivalric culture. The knights of the Arthurian tradition are a representation of the difficulties of being a chivalrous knight. The guidelines found in Lull and Geoffroi's manuals were just that – guidelines. It was impractical to expect knights to act chivalrously in all aspects of their life all the time. Arthur's and his knights fail because they are humans, and to be human is to error. The code itself is flawed, not just the knights. Robin Hood, an outlaw, is the closest representation of actual chivalry – yet he is not a knight. Robin Hood is not flawless, but his chivalrous actions stand out against those in the tale that are corrupt or fail to exhibit the traits of their occupation. The characters represented in these texts mirror the very real difficulties of the thirteenth and

fourteenth centuries. Perfect kingship and perfect knighthood did not exist – not even in romantic literature.

Ultimately, chivalry did not accomplish the goals for which it was created. This was supposed to be a standard of behavior for knights and kings to strive for, but literature reflects the contradictory nature of this behavior. A king is supposed to remain in his kingdom and rule, but if he is striving to be chivalric he should also be seeking renown, which is gained through battles and crusading. A knight is supposed to be loyal to his king, his fellowship, and to any focus of courtly devotion, but these loyalties often contradicted each other.

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