THE ARTHUR OF THE MARCH OF WALES

by

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A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in

The Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies

(English)

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA
(Vancouver)

September 2016

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Abstract:

“The Arthur of the March of Wales” explores the medieval Arthurian legend through the lens of the political boundary separating and combining the English and Welsh people. This border, I argue, is overwhelmingly responsible for the legend’s genesis and its most enduring features. This critical orientation breaks from the conventional organization and focus of Arthurian scholarship, which has meticulously segregated literary works about Arthur into independent traditions. These traditions forcibly map our modern conceptions of homogeneous imagined communities—nation states or linguistic heritage—onto literary texts which are themselves overwhelmingly inter-linguistic and comparative. My study, instead, reads Arthurian border works outside the disciplinary and nationalistic boundaries which have been erected upon them.

As I argue, recognizing the Anglo-Welsh border as the preeminent origin for a substantial portion of the Arthurian corpus is important for how we understand the wider manifestations of the legend. However, the implications of this project reach beyond scholarly tradition. My study details how the Arthurian legend and the border serve similar cultural and political purposes throughout British history. Both Arthur and the Anglo-Welsh border are entities which hold a mutually reflexive position to Welsh, English, and Norman hegemony and ideology; they simultaneously shape and are shaped by the evolving conceptions of British identity on both sides of the border. Amid the clash of armies, the coexistence of peoples, and the clamor of courts, the Arthurian border continuously revealed and unraveled the ever-evolving “truths” of British culture. “The Arthur of the March of Wales” is a fresh, interdisciplinary intervention in our conception of the Arthurian legend and the national/disciplinary boundaries which have hitherto confined it.
Preface:

There are no co-authors or collaborators for this dissertation. A version of Chapter Three has been published as “’An Arður sculde ȝet cum’: The Prophetic Hope in Twelfth Century Britain,” *Arthuriana* 26.1 (2016): 78-108.
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Acknowledgements:

The analogy between dissertations and babies is an apt one, and, like a real child, it has taken a community to raise this one. My initial interests in early literatures and critical scholarship were sparked by my advisors at the University of Virginia’s College at Wise, Ken Tiller and John Mark Adrian. The honest advice and scholarly professionalism of Daniel Mosser at Virginia Tech encouraged me further. To Charlene Eska, who has answered many an eccentric email query over the years, I owe my initial interest in medieval Welsh literature and the linguistic foundations by which to read it in the original. David Coley has never been an official advisor to me, but the quantity and quality of his suggestions certainly suggest otherwise. Patricia Badir used her role as Graduate Program Chair to fund my research, my travels for research, and my ability to pay rent while doing research. The perils of UBC’s bureaucracy are impossible for any English graduate student to navigate without Louise Soga’s lovely personality and relentless work.

Of my committee: Jessica Hemming has fielded many of my esoteric questions, loaned me many books not available in Koerner Library, and was a ruthless and punctual reader of this document. Many of my best and worst ideas for this project were spurred and spurned in the countless conversations I have had with Robert Rouse over the years; his advisory role even extended to driving us around in circles through the March of Wales in search of Nennius’s “Wonders of Britain.” And, without Siân Echard’s sage counsel, meticulous readings and brilliant suggestions, this project simply would not have been possible.

My real children, Evan and Brenin, have been the best distractions from this project that I could ever have asked for. My parents and sister, however, provided countless
babysitting hours to ensure the boys did not overdo their job. Finally, and most importantly, I owe my most humble thanks to my best friend and wife, Tracy, whom I met in a medieval literature class ten years ago—since then, I’ve been unable to stop thinking about either.
The Arthur of the March of Wales

Introduction:

The characters of medieval Arthurian literature rarely concern themselves with political borders. In *Culhwch ac Olwen*, Culhwch travels from his father’s realm into King Arthur’s and later, accompanied by the Arthurian war band, he walks right up to Ysbaddaden Penkawr’s castle—all without mention of the political boundaries which supposedly separate these areas. Similarly, while it is certainly true that Bertilak rules a separate realm than Arthur’s “Logres,” Gawain somehow manages to reach Bertilak’s door without realizing he had even crossed the border. Even when these Arthurian stories are mapped onto the landscape of real sovereign nations, as they so often are, the thresholds to those sovereignties are, in practice, permeable. The number of lands, countries, realms and nations (real or otherwise) mentioned by Arthurian writers is dizzying—yet these political entities seem to somehow exist on a fluid geo-political plane and their characters curiously pass from center to center without ever having touched the edge.

The dissemination and development of Arthurian literature has been enduringly reflective of these boundless and boundary-less realms of the Arthurian dreamscape. Throughout the Middle Ages—despite linguistic, geographic and cultural barriers—no place in Western Europe was without a tradition of the king and his knights. From its origins in Brythonic folklore, the legend moved to Latin historiography, to romances in French, Middle English, and German, and eventually travelled to Italy, the Iberian Peninsula, Ireland, the Nordic countries and even Greece before the close of the Middle Ages. At that point, as we are well aware, the arbitrary boundaries which sunder the medieval from the modern proved similarly futile in containing the Arthurian legend. Since
then, Arthur has broken the generic bonds of romance and history to be featured in operas, novels, Tennysonian idylls, films, television series, and even comic books.

However, despite this elemental fluidity of the Arthurian legend, we have endeavored, obstinately, to map homogeneous imagined communities—be they nation states or a linguistic heritage—onto Arthurian texts which are themselves overwhelmingly inter-linguistic and comparative. Even as we continually demonstrate their flexibility and range, we insistently segregate Arthurian texts along nationalistic and disciplinary lines, creating culturally distinctive “Arthurs” for each supposedly homogeneous community. Nowhere is this practice more glaring than in the titles to the critically rich volumes of Arthurian scholarship published through the Eugène Vinaver Memorial Trust: *The Arthur of the English, The Arthur of the Welsh, The Arthur of Medieval Latin Literature*, etc. These works are, appropriately, a mainstay on the Arthurian scholar’s bookshelf and I have no qualms with the goal which they each successfully achieve on an individual basis—providing a cogent introduction to Arthurian literature in medieval Europe from a manageable, discipline-specific range of texts. However, their meticulous division is representative of a problematic structural misconception prevalent in Arthurian scholarship writ large: that Arthurian literature can be neatly segregated by language and culture.

The following study is, in part, a reaction to that misconception. Though it might seem counterintuitive, the curious “lack” of borders in and for Arthurian literature which I mention above stems in large part from the role that one particular border, the March of Wales, played in the development of Arthurian literature from its origins through the fourteenth century. Arthurian literature, on a macroscopic level, is essentially about a
society coming to terms with itself; a society slowly recognizing the limits of its values and the value of its limits. The border between England and Wales—the most persistent “limit” in all of the British Isles and in most of Europe—was, of course, an appropriate community to spur such an introspective and versatile legend.

The border origins of the Arthurian legend has, to varying degrees, been recognized and emphasized by interdisciplinary-minded scholars over the past three decades, and it is high time for a comprehensive study. Recognizing the sweeping borderlands of the March as the preeminent origin for a substantial swath of the British Arthurian corpus is important for how we understand the wider manifestations of Arthur in the European Middle Ages and beyond. As the substantial number of texts which derive from this border especially (and, to a lesser degree, other European borders) overwhelmingly demonstrates, Arthurian literature is not, by and large, a tradition derivative of centralized, grassroots homogeneous communities; it is a tradition from the edge, as it were, and our approaches to categorizing that tradition should more openly reflect its peripheral origins. However, the texts I cover in the following chapters have more in common than geographic proximity and an origin in cultural diversity; and the connections I draw among them are not only important for rethinking the way scholars combine and divide Arthurian texts. Focusing our critical attention on Arthurian texts from the border over the course of the Middle Ages also reveals the significant role which Arthur and the border played in their construction of

1 Of the many scholars I cite in the footnotes below who read Arthurian literature with an eye toward the interdisciplinary environ of the border, I will briefly note this study’s debt to two book-length, postcolonial readings of Arthur with a keen eye on the border: Patricia Ingham’s Sovereign Fantasies: Arthurian Romance and the Making of Britain (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995) and Michelle Warren’s History on the Edge: Excalibur and the Borders of Britain (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000). I respond to their work more fully in Chapters 2 and 5, and in Chapters 2 and 3, respectively.
the evolving cultural consciences of the sovereign nations which surrounded the border and intervened in its history.

For almost as long as there has been a border between England and Wales, there has been an Arthurian legend to complement, inform and interrogate the interactions of the communities invested in that border. The effects of the Arthurian legend on these border communities—on what it means to be Welsh or English, on proper rule and rebellion, on heritage, on the very idea of “Britain”—has not yet been fully appreciated. Long before and after those evocative material substrates—Offa’s dyke, the River Severn, the Bristol Channel—came to represent the peripheries of Saxon incursion, or the extent of Welsh sovereignty, or the edge of aristocratic privilege for the Norman people, the Arthurian legend embodied the punctum of British cultural and political ideation in the Anglo-Welsh border. The societies which sought to shape the extent and influence of their culture on the border were, more often, shaped by that border and the Arthurian texts which emanated from it. The Arthur of the March demonstrates that cultural identity does not end at the border; rather, it is at the border where “Britain” truly begins.

Shaping the March

This, then, is the simple premise to which each of the following chapters in this study ultimately returns: that Arthurian literature from the border served as a figurative extension of the border itself. Arthur helped to delineate, define and decimate the cultural constructions of British sovereignty, of a cross-channel Norman Empire and a resurgent political populism in Wales. That is not to say, of course, that Arthur’s approximation of the border displays anything in the realm of consistency over the medieval period; the use of Arthur in border literature is as varied as the March itself. Arthur represents,
contradictorily, a “pure” British ethnicity in the face of hybridity for Nennius and a
culturally amalgamated resurgent threat from the border’s past for Laȝamon. Arthur is a
veritable “dinas” [fortress] of border defense in “Marwnad Cynddylan” and a giant satire of
a pompous and dangerous border lord in Breuddwyd Rhonabwy. Despite the contradictions,
however, Arthur is consistently employed as an appendage and a surrogate of the border
writ large.

My readings approach these texts as polytemporal, as both actors within the cycle of
literary text and historical circumstance, and as artistic entities which may outstrip those
circumstances. Thus, the readings of Arthurian literature and the Anglo-Welsh border
which follow are two-fold in their approach: first, each reading represents an important
encounter among cultures in the March of Wales which begets an Arthurian literary
creation. Second, each reading represents a unique and often failed attempt to define the
immaterial border by drawing connections between the intangible concepts of the border
and corporeal constructs of that border in the Arthurian text: a fortress in the Prelude, a
river in Chapter One, a garden in Chapter Two, a historical book in Chapter Three, a game
board in Chapter Four, and a ditch in Chapter Five.

Though each text in this study represents Arthur as an extension of the Anglo-Welsh
border, the “border” and “Arthur” represented in each set of texts is thoroughly unique to
the particular time frame which engendered it. It is appropriate, therefore, before
embarking on a critical journey spanning several centuries, texts, definitions and
redefinitions of the border, to trace the evolution of that boundary over the course of the
Middle Ages. A full history of the border is not necessary to appreciate this narrative arc, but a brief overview of some of the parameters of how the border persisted and changed over the course of the Middle Ages will, I hope, give readers a sense of both the protean nature of the area and its consistent importance in insular history and insular Arthurian texts.

In one sense, the Anglo-Welsh border is easy to define; its appearance on modern maps and from the perspective of Offa’s Dyke Path is much the same as it was throughout most of the Middle Ages. From the far south, where the muddy River Severn spits its impressive Bore into the Bristol Channel, the border threads its way between the Malvern Hills and the Black Mountains to the Dee Estuary and the (former) wilderness of Wirral.

The land that nestles this undulating border throughout its length is simultaneously

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3 A quick caveat before proceeding: Though, as I argue, Arthurian literature in the March is an especially important factor in the changing concept of the border throughout the medieval period, it is one piece of a much larger conceptual puzzle. Therefore, the narrative arc I trace over the next pages and throughout this study is best characterized as one of many narratives of the medieval March of Wales.
prohibitive and well-worn—a testament to its role in curbing thousands of armed
invasions (on both sides) and also providing shelter and sustenance for humans since the
Neolithic age.4

The border as a political entity is, in a sense, a vignette of the British Middle Ages at
large, since its predominant conceptions and most important roles in history and culture
align nicely with the major events of the British Isles which fell between late Antiquity and
the early Reformation. Before the medieval period, there seems to have been no
substantive political differences in the lands east and west of the Severn during the Roman
occupation of Britain: the Cornovii tribe inhabited much of what would eventually become
Cheshire, Pengwrn (Shropshire) and Powys while the (future) southern border was
straddled by the Silures and Dobunni tribes.5

The regression of the Romans and the intrusion of the Angles and Saxons into the
area is a time largely lost to history—but linguistics tells us that this was when the initial
concept of the Anglo-Welsh border was formed. Mercia, the predominant kingdom for a
long period of the Anglo-Saxon Heptarchy, embodies in its name the first conception of a
“border” between the Britons and the English: “Mercia” is a Latinization of AS mearc
[border], which would eventually bequeath its root to the fully Latin “Marchia Wallia”, then
morph into the Anglo-Norman “Marche” and eventually revert into Middle English

4 The various long-barrow tombs of the Neolithic period found in the southern border area
and across southern Wales and south-east England are apparently designated as the
“Severn-Cotswold Tombs”. See Glynn E. Daniel’s classic study, The Prehistoric Chamber
5 Locations of the tribes of pre-Roman Britain are vague and vary according to source, but
most modern conjectures are based on Ptolemy’s second century map of Britain. See Barri
“March”—an etymologic path blazoned with markers of major political changes in medieval insular history.

It is typical to regard the Saxon progression throughout the West Midlands that created the “mearc” as a militaristic push by the Saxons in a consistently westward linear trajectory which ultimately ended at the Severn for geographic reasons—almost like a several-hundred-mile-long shield wall edging the Britons ever westward until mountains scared off further progress.6 The reality, however, was far less clean and comprehensive and much more telling about the complex border relations that resulted some years later. After establishing large, politically dominant settlements in northeast and southeast Britain, the Saxons intermittently branched west, settling piecemeal, and often peaceably, in areas with low populations of Britons.7 Interestingly, many of the initial Anglo-Saxon settlements were in sub-prime farming areas, and with little to no access to pasture; this is a likely indication that the Saxons initially settled in deference to British authority in the Midlands.8 Indigenous Britons were slowly but effectively surrounded by Saxons and—contrary to the narratives of early Anglo-Saxonists9—certainly intermixed voluntarily with the Saxons and left a largely untold influence on Saxon culture, likely including the

9 Edward Augustus Freeman’s racist and (now) inflammatory description of the “Teutonic” Saxon heroic destruction and sexual enslavement of Britons to establish a “great and free” people is one of the best examples of this rhetoric. See his Old English History for Children (London: Macmillan and Co., 1869): esp. 27-29.
conversion of the Hwicce and Magonsaetan Saxons,\(^\text{10}\) the mixed heritage in the royal lines of Northumbria and Wessex,\(^\text{11}\) in literature,\(^\text{12}\) and on the English language.\(^\text{13}\)

Certainly, the incursions of Germanic pagans throughout the West Midlands into areas long ruled by Romanized, zealously Christian Britons was predominantly aggressive and forced mass emigrations of Britons into modern Wales, Cornwall, Brittany and Northwest Spain. Gildas’s invective against the British elite who, he argues, enabled those sweeping conquests is a staunch testament to the effectiveness of Saxon aggression and the prevailing antagonism between the peoples during that period. However, we should remember that Gildas’s *De Excidio et Conquestu Brittaniae* is also the sole surviving


\(^{12}\) Though exchange in literary themes and ideas in the early period is undeniable, scholarship in this field is small, largely owing to the philological skills required to engage in such a study. Nonetheless, there are some examples: Sarah Lynn Higley, *Between Languages: The Uncooperative Text in Early Welsh and Old English Nature Poetry* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1993); Dorothy Ann Bray, “A Woman’s Loss and Lamentation: Heledd’s Song and The Wife’s Lament” *Neophilologus* 79.1 (1995): 147-154. And the field is steadily growing: Lindy Brady’s forthcoming monograph, *The Welsh Frontier in Anglo-Saxon Literature*, sounds as though it will be especially helpful.

\(^{13}\) Linguistic evidence for English borrowing from the various stages of Brythonic languages is a diverse field with strong opinions on either side; but the evidence for at least piecemeal influence from Brittonic to Anglo-Saxon and the various regional dialects it became is growing. For instance, the number of Celtic loan words discovered in Old English dialects is slowly but steadily increasing: see Andrew Breeze, “A Celtic Etymology for Old English *deor* ‘brave,’” in J. Roberts, J.L. Nelson and M. Godden ed. *Alfred the Wise* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997): esp. 1-4. And, we must remember that loan words are only part of the linguistic evidence: see Markku Filppula, Juhani Klemola and Heli Paulasto, *English and Celtic in Contact* (New York: Routledge, 2008) who note several extra-lexical grammatical features of Present Day English and Old English which owe to contact with insular Celtic languages.
testament to that period and Gildas is writing with desperate political goals in mind, namely to procure assistance from the still Romanized and Christian continent, which had been much more successful in repelling pagan invasions in the decades prior to Gildas’s writing.

There is another, largely unrecorded side to this story. Had all politically-minded, sub-Roman Britons shared Gildas’s providentialist characterization of British culture, the border would have been much further west—if it existed at all. Fortunately for the future generations of the Welsh, other leaders pursued alternative means of resistance. Cadwallon ap Cadfan of Gwynedd, the infamous tyrant of Bede’s partisan history who conquered Northumbria and killed its king and heir, Edwin and Osfrith, had allied himself with other Englishmen for the task: the still-pagan Mercians on the border. Though this alliance seems very odd in a broad historical framework, as Rowland points out, “at this period, the chief threat to Wales was seen as Northumbria, not Mercia.”

Gwynedd’s recurring propensity throughout the medieval period to exacerbate internecine strife in England was one of the most effective and enduring strategies, as it ensured that English armies largely stayed on their side of the border.

Though Gwynedd’s link with Mercia was short lived, as I discuss below, the alliance between Powys (the easternmost Welsh kingdom) and Mercia that arose during this period seems to have been a different kind. Perhaps this alliance, like that of Gwynedd and Mercia, began as one of convenience and political necessity since Powysian rulers were similarly keen on promoting warfare among the English kingdoms; but the alliance nonetheless persisted into the eighth century and it heralded numerous military successes. The Powys-

14 *Early Welsh Saga Poetry*, 129.
Mercia alliance defeated the Northumbrians in the heart of Mercian territory at Lichfield and in the heart of Powysian territory at Oswestry before a collective invasion of Northumbria ultimately failed at the Battle of Winwaed (655). Though this alliance between Powys and Mercia may seem strange considering later developments, it nonetheless ensured the stability and endurance of the border throughout the early Middle Ages.

As I discuss in the Preface below, it is during the heyday of this alliance that a Powysian poet wrote the poem “Marwnad Cynddylan” and penned the first surviving reference to a tradition of Arthur. The poem, a seventh-century “death song” of a border king, Cynddylan, who died in defense of the alliance and the border, was probably the inspiration for the ninth-century cycle of poems called Canu Heledd—in which the sister of King Cynddylan, Heledd, poignantly describes the physical and emotional toll the loss of the British territory of Pengwrn (Shropshire) took on the Welsh border community. Arthur is mentioned in this precursor poem—a brief and fleeting allusion—as a comparison to the vicious Powysian warriors who, allied with Mercian pagans, died attacking Northumbria. The mere presence of this allusion to Arthur, perhaps centuries before any other, recommends the border community as the preeminent wellspring of the Arthurian legend we know today. Furthermore, as more and more of the peculiar cultural and political context surrounding the poem becomes clear, it is apparent that the poem, and the Arthurian reference therein, are advancing the political agenda of border relations in the seventh century—a theme Arthurian border writers would continue to revisit for centuries after the poem.
The alliance between Mercia and Powys temporarily broke however, some time after Northumbria’s defeat of Mercia, and the eighth century saw incursions into Powys by Mercian armies. The invasions were initially successful but the Saxons were rebuffed and expelled relatively quickly, though they did manage to hold on to Pengwern/Shropshire. Evidence from the Pillar of Eliseg, which was erected in the mid-eighth century, indicates that the titular hero of the monument, Elisedd ap Gwylog, reclaimed the rest of the “heriditatem Pouos” [inheritance of Powys] from the raiders and “in gladio suo parta in igne” [won with his sword and fire (?)]. It was perhaps this overwhelming rebuff by Powysian armies which prompted the initial constructions of the famous defensive earthwork under King Offa of Mercia in the later eighth century. Though it was undoubtedly antagonism which inspired Offa’s Dyke, it must have been a very stagnant antagonism by the late eighth century, since such a massive project would have required substantial resources and manpower—precious commodities in an open conflict. As Joan and Harold Taylor, drawing from archeological and historical sources, so succinctly

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15 F.M. Stenton notes that the evidence for Welsh raiding in Felix’s Life of St Guthlac may indicate that it was Powysian factions who initially broke the alliance in the first quarter of the eighth century. See his “Foreword” to Offa’s Dyke: a Field Survey of the Western Frontier Works of Mercia in the Seventh and Eighth Centuries AD (London, 1955); xx-xxi. It would not be until Aethelbald’s reign of Mercia (716-757) that full-fledged war broke out between Mercia and Powys. See also Rowland, Early Welsh Saga Poetry, 138.


17 Though the Pillar of Eliseg stands today, overlooking Valle Crucis Abbey near Llangollen, Denbighshire, the text inscribed on it is now too faded to read. Thankfully, however, much of it was visible to Edward Lluyd in 1696 and he recorded it. I have quoted his recording from N. Edwards, “Rethinking the Pillar of Eliseg,” Antiquaries Journal 89 (2009): 143-177. Most of the pillar is dedicated to a genealogy of Powysian kings which Owain Wyn Jones has recently called an “oversimplification” of much more contested dynasties and represents “official history in its most sanitized form.” See “Herditas Pouoisi: The Pillar of Eliseg and the History of Early Powys,” Welsh History Review 24.4 (2009): 41-80; 45 and 56.
characterize the construction, any work of that magnitude could have only come to fruition
during “a period of prolonged peace.” This ‘defensive barrier’ might be more
appropriately understood as a particularly stout fence between two disaffected but
peaceful neighbors, at least in its original construction.

The last centuries of the pre-Conquest period saw intermittent bouts of conflict and
calm between the Britons and Saxons on the border. As Wessex rose to become the
predominant English kingdom and the Mercian military became preoccupied with
defending its southern strongholds, the southern border area saw significant settlement by
Saxons in the Severn Estuary and beyond. As I discuss in Chapter One, much of this
settlement was peaceful and an intermixed and thoroughly unique community developed
in the eastern portions of Gwent and Brechyniog and in the west of Hereford and
Shropshire. Areas like Ercyng/Archenfield intermittently employed English and Welsh
bishops and collaborated on local government matters, including (at least in one case) a
unique collaborative system of law codes. We have documentary evidence of mixed Anglo-
Welsh marriages among the aristocracy, and we can safely assume a wide degree of
intermixture among the much more numerous portion of the population who inevitably
escape documentary records.

As has been the case so often in history, the reactions to this intermixture and
immigration ranged widely among the contemporaries who witnessed and experienced
it. Famously, the Welsh monk Asser was supportive of Saxon political and cultural influence
in southern Wales, and wrote a contemporary biography of King Alfred of Wessex.
Tellingly, Asser states that his decision to go into King Alfred’s circle was largely based on a

18 Joan and Harold Taylor “Pre-Norman Churches of the Border,” Celt and Saxon: Studies in
hope of protection for southern Wales from northern Welsh kings: “Sperabant enim nostri, minores tribulationes et injurias ex parte Hemeid regis sustinere... si ego ad notitiam et amicitiam illius regis qualicunque pacto pervenirem” [They were hopeful to suffer fewer tribulations and injuries on the part of King Hemeid... if I were to come to the knowledge of that king {Alfred} and make some kind of agreement].

It is easy to see how Asser and other southern Welsh would have welcomed the cosmopolitanism and possibilities for further security that the loosening of border tensions brought.

As I detail in Chapter One, “Pure Fictions: Early Arthurian Border Literature and the British Nation,” Nennius and the author of the Welsh poem “Pa Gur?” are representative of a much more negative reaction to influence and intermixture with Saxons on the border. By consolidating and homogenizing local border folklore and history, and by developing a novel conception of both Vortigern and Arthur, these authors create and propagate a myth of British ethnic purity and cultural superiority. They imagine Arthur as a mediator of racial and cultural boundaries, as an entity which delineates and defines the ultimately collapsible differences between Saxons and Britons on the border.

As the English formed an (often uneasy) alliance among the former states of the Heptarchy in the tenth and eleventh centuries, there were several attempts on the Welsh side for a similar unification. These attempts, such as that by King Merfyn Frych discussed in Chapter One, were predominantly unsuccessful. However, the gleaming exception to this rule was Gruffydd ap Llywelyn in the eleventh century, who exerted an enormous influence over all constituent parts of Wales, and is described in both English and Welsh accounts as

the ‘King of all Wales.’ Gruffydd intervened often in border affairs and breathed new life into the centuries-past Mercian alliance, as I discuss further in Chapter Three. Gruffydd assisted Earl Ælfgar of Mercia to regain his dominion after having been exiled from his kingdom by King Edward twice, in 1055 and 1058, and afterward married the Ælfgar’s daughter, Ealdgyth. A decade later, princes Bleddyyn and Rhiwallon, half-brothers of the (then dead) Gruffydd, were allied with Edwin and Morcar, sons of Earl Ælfgar, in a violent insurrection against the Normans along the border in the years following the Conquest.

We would expect this alliance to dissipate after the Normans established a substantive rule in Mercia and, from the perspective of broad political history, it did. However, as I demonstrate in Chapter Three, “‘Þrumde to are’: Combining Culture and Prophecy in Laȝamon’s Brut,” the memory of those connections between Saxon and Welsh border inhabitants in opposition to the Norman incursions survived throughout the twelfth century. This chapter follows the curious construction of Arthurian prophecies from Welsh poetry and Norman historiography in Laȝamon’s resolutely Middle English poem. By “beating together” motifs from Welsh political prophecy, English heritage and anti-Welsh


Ealdgyth, the granddaughter of Lady Godifu (Godiva), is an intriguing figure who has thus far escaped the interests of social historians. After Gruffydd’s assassination in 1063, Ealdgyth was remarried to the man leading the invasion of Wales which prompted Gruffydd’s death, Harold Godwinson. Ealdgyth was, of course, soon to be widowed again at the Battle of Hastings. At that point she disappears from the historical record.

Norman historiography, Laȝamon creates a thoroughly unique, multicultural version of the Arthurian legend which encourages a violent, anti-colonial hope for change.

Though it would not be known until much later, the death of Gruffydd ap Llywelyn in 1063 as a result of war with King Harold of England was Wales’ first defeat in their war with Normandy for control of the border some years later. While alive, and allied with Mercia, Gruffydd was capable of maintaining a staunch control over the more exposed areas of Wales on and near the border. The power vacuum and internecine strife which followed his death, however, meant that these areas were the first to succumb to Norman colonization in the later eleventh century.23 William fitz Osbern and his followers extended the southern border well into traditional Welsh territory in Gwent, Brycheiniog, and Morgannwg. Eventually, William’s gains would be extended to all of Deheubarth by his followers and all of southern Wales would succumb to various iterations of Norman rule. Roger de Montgomery edged into eastern Powys in the central borderlands and the northern border along the Dee Valley saw significant advances by Hugh de Avranches and Robert de Rhuddlan, a soldier memorably characterized by Rees Davies as “the exemplar of the swashbuckling Norman warrior.”24 As a result, Venedotian independence shrunk further behind the geographic shields of Snowdonia and the Menai Strait and the Anglo-Welsh border became the March of Wales. The March, being more dangerous and far removed from the political and military centers of the Norman empire, necessitated a unique legal status within that empire. The “Lex Marchia,” along with the domineering personalities of the Marcher Lords who wielded it, meant that Norman influence on the

23 Lieberman describes this process in detail, especially as it pertains to the central border area, see Medieval March of Wales, 56-101.
24 Age of Conquest, 30.
Anglo-Welsh border would be more far-reaching and enduring than previous short-term conquerors.25

Layamon’s reaction to the continued presence of these conquerors—much like Nennius’s reaction to the Saxons—represents a particularly partisan approach to the increasingly complex border tensions in the twelfth century; one that hearkens back to the pre-Norman days even while consciously incorporating Norman sources. As I discuss in Chapter Two, “‘Alienos Ortulos’: The Arthurian Border and the Garden of Others,” Geoffrey of Monmouth “cultivates” a somewhat more inclusive and elusive reflection of the March of Wales in his internationally renowned Historia regum Brittaniae. Picking up on Geoffrey’s metaphor for his text as an “hortus” [garden], as a figurative space where readers can reflect upon historical truths, my reading discloses the calculated ambiguity of Geoffrey’s version of the Arthurian legend. By seducing the self-reflexive gaze of both conqueror and conquered in the March of Wales, Geoffrey is able to skirt political pigeonholing and propel the Arthurian legend to an international phenomenon.

Geoffrey, of course, had good reason to appeal to both the Norman and Welsh lords in the border country, as I discuss in my reading of his work. Though it is the Norman Marcher families who are best remembered for their insubordination and independence, Welsh border lords were similarly problematic for western Welsh attempts at

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consolidation and control. This independence and recalcitrance, of both Norman and Welsh lords on the border, grew only more powerful in the following century. Of course, Gwynedd’s ability to control the turbulent (and now multiple) territories of Powys had never been consistent or comprehensive, but constant war and occasional success ensured that the various subsections of the former kingdom would only occasionally be under Venedotian sway. Similarly, the Norman border lords only grew more contumacious in the thirteenth century, and their avowed independence of the monarchy of England grew more defiant.

A colorful example of this independence is Walter III de Clifford, a minor Marcher lord along the River Wye in modern day Herefordshire. Some time in 1250, a royal messenger attempted to serve Lord Walter with a writ from the king. Though this would be a normal occurrence in the rest of the medieval world where feudal lord and vassal knight required official written interaction, the March of Wales was decidedly not the rest of medieval Europe. Walter forced the messenger to chew and swallow said writ, including the seal, and he subsequently sent the poor messenger running back to Westminster as a reminder to Henry that the king’s writ does not run in the March of Wales. Though Walter eventually paid for his actions—with money, not his life, as would have likely been the case

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26 On how geography and connections with England helped to make Powysian lords “ambivalent” see Davies Age of Conquest, 8. Davies also catalogues Powys’ rise to power at the expense of Gwynedd and the Marcher Lordships of the twelfth-century, especially under Madog ap Maredudd, (see 49-51). Thirteenth-century Powys, especially in the south (Powys Wenwynwyn), continued to be a thorn in the side of Gwynedd, especially under Gwenwynwyn ab Owain Cyfeiliog (d. 1216) and Gruffydd ap Gwenwynwyn (d. 1286)—the man who is often blamed for the death of Llywelyn ap Gruffudd in 1282. See Davies Age of Conquest, 227-236. It is the consistent recalcitrance of Powys which “stood in the way of the unification of native Wales” according to many “modern national” Welsh historians, as Davies says (236).

27 Matthew Paris, Chronica Majora ed. H.R. Luard (Rolls Series, 1872-83) V.95.
with other individuals—the incident reflects the “wild west” mentality of the powerful and dangerous men who presided over the borderlands in the thirteenth century.

In Chapter Four, “Gware dy chware’: Playing Near the Edge in Fouke le Fitzwaryn and Breuddwyd Rhonabwy,” I demonstrate how two texts of border origin reflect and exacerbate the avowed independence of the border. Though these texts are, ostensibly, of disparate origins and intent, they each present the March within a myriad of figurative conceptions which are strikingly similar in their tone and tenor. The border, to these authors, is a liminal and unruly individuated sphere where Arthurian impersonators “play” with identity, allegiances and the fate of their peoples. Though, as I discuss, these authors work through differing conceptualizations of the March of Wales, the spectral space of the game board forms a central conceit in both works—a metaphor for the troubled environment of inverted authority and identity “play” which these authors and their characters find themselves in.

If the original premise behind affording significantly more power to Norman Marcher Lords was to make quick work of the Welsh, then it was painfully unsuccessful. The conquest of Wales was a slow and piecemeal affair for the Normans with multiple setbacks that took centuries to accomplish—a wholly different affair than their conquest of the English. Successive regional and multi-regional rebellions in Wales throughout the thirteenth century saw the extent of Welsh sovereignty gradually diminish into the furthest northwestern reaches. The final and definitive death knell came in the wake of Llywelyn ap Gruffydd’s second rebellion against King Edward I in 1282. Edward thoroughly and efficiently quashed the rebellion, put Llywelyn’s head on a stake outside the Tower of
London, and disinherited the remaining Welsh aristocracy.\textsuperscript{28} The “Realm” of Wales thus became the “Royal Land” of Wales—subject solely to the prerogative of the English monarchy and the inherited domain of the heir apparent to the English throne (a tradition which remains to this day).

The effects of this conquest on the cultural identity of the Welsh people are difficult to overestimate. They were a broken people, now fully subject to a “stranger of whose language, manners and laws they were entirely ignorant.”\textsuperscript{29} Edward had appropriated not only their land, dynasties and monetary goods, but the key components of Welsh identity and pride: he ordered “round table” tournaments in his newly conquered lands soon after victory, and took the most prized relic in all of Wales, Y Groes Naid (a fragment of the True Cross), on a parade down the streets of London.\textsuperscript{30} As is often the sad case in history, it was because of this utter devastation and oppressive colonization that a new sense of cultural unity was formulated in the Welsh people, a unity that had been notoriously elusive in previous generations.

Similarly, England under Edward I reached a newfound sense of national identity after the Conquest of Wales. The particulars of this “Englishness” have been subject to some debate. Maurice Powicke sees Edward I’s personality as the primary factor in the development of both Englishness and English nationalism: “It was in Edward’s reign that nationalism was born.”\textsuperscript{31} Others, such as Thorlac Turville-Petre, have focused on the role English language and literature played in the shaping of that Englishness in the early

\textsuperscript{28} Davies \textit{Age of Conquest}, 352 – 358.
\textsuperscript{30} Davies, \textit{Age of Conquest} 355-356.
fourteenth century, when, according to Turville-Petre, English became a “national language”.\textsuperscript{32} More specifically, Robert Rouse locates a characteristic sense of nationalism in the Middle English Romances concerning the Anglo-Saxon period, and explores interrogations of English alterity in the Celtic and Saracen Other as pivotal markers of the development of “Englishness” in the early fourteenth century.\textsuperscript{33} Regardless of the specifics, “Medievalists agree that from the thirteenth century onward, discourses of the nation are visible and can be read with ease in medieval England.”\textsuperscript{34}

As I discuss in Chapter Five, “‘i-medled to gidres’: Arthurian Border Identities in \textit{Sir Gawain and the Green Knight} and the Poetry of Iolo Goch,” the sense of unity afforded to the English and the Welsh after the 1283 Edwardian Conquest is simply not applicable in the still individuated March of Wales of the fourteenth century. This chapter demonstrates how the fractured state of political and ethnic identity in \textit{Sir Gawain and the Green Knight} and the poetry of Iolo Goch were mediated by the unique, mixed versions of the Arthurian legend they employ. In these works, both Sir Gawain and the poetic persona of Iolo negotiate their competing allegiances and sense of border identity through the multifarious and fractured Arthurian legend.

The Marches, of course, continued to persist after the fourteenth century and even after the Middle Ages. However, the fractured state of identity which makes its poignant, if troubled, manifestations in Iolo Goch’s poetry and \textit{Sir Gawain} is simply not sustainable, and the unique character of the individuated culture in the March ultimately collapsed.

Certainly, vestiges of the medieval March outstripped even the fifteenth century: the piecemeal system of laws which was applied in the March of Wales at the behest of each individual Marcher Lord (entailing a considerable amount of judicial power) was not completely repealed until the Laws of Wales Acts under Henry VIII. These acts (in 1535 and 1543) annihilated the legal distinctions between Wales, the Marches and England with the stated intent of bringing the territories “into amicable Concord and Unity.” Though the border is still colloquially referred to as the “march” in parts of the UK, the term is a survival of language and not of practice. In almost all respects, the border between England and Wales, like borders in continental Europe, now functions as a linear political division, with only the dual-language signs to mark your passage into Wales.

Consequently, the role of the border in British literature has diminished considerably since the close of the Middle Ages. There have been some complicated developments in the relationship between England and Wales since the sixteenth century, but the number of literary works to rise from the persistently present border community has been fewer than might be expected. However, when the border does come in to the purview of modern British writers, the effects are comparable to those in the Middle Ages,

37 It is worth noting, if only in a footnote, the situation of a one Mark Roberts, UK businessman. In 1997, Roberts acquired the title “Lord Marcher” for the district of Magor (directly across the channel from Bristol) and sought to oust the Crown from the public lands in his district due to the legal distinction afforded to Marcher Lords. He was unsuccessful, but it was not until 2008 that the Crown nullified his supposed jurisdictional privilege by legally claiming “squatters rights” on the lands. See Graham Tibbetts, “‘Lord of the manor’ Mark Roberts loses case,” The Telegraph Feb 21, 2008, http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/1579365/Lord-of-the-manor-Mark-Roberts-loses-case.html.
and it is clear that—at least within literature—there is some degree of continuity of thematic function for the March of Wales into the modern era.

For instance, at the dawn of the twentieth century, A.E. Housman penned a volume of poetry from the perspective of a quintessential “Shropshire Lad,” Terence Hearsay. Housman, a Worcestershire and Oxford fellow in the years before writing the collection, was none too familiar with Wales or even Shropshire itself; indeed, he curiously waited until he was nearly finished with the volume to visit the county for the first time.38 Perhaps this decision was for the betterment of his theme, which paints a fatalistic, carpe diem, “God save the Queen” brand of nationalism onto the inhabitants of a “half-imaginary,” pastoral Shopshire. Though most of the poems invoke a lyrical pessimism with a lively backdrop of English rural life, “Poem XXVIII – The Welsh Marches,” attempts to reconstruct a more historically-informed border identity:

In my heart it has not died,

The war that sleeps on Severn side;

They cease not fighting, east and west,

On the Marches of my breast.

Here the truceless armies yet

Trample, rolled in blood and sweat;

They kill and kill and never die;

And I think that each is I.”

The speaker imagines himself as a descendent of a inter-ethnic rape—“Couched upon her brother’s grave / The Saxon got me on the slave,” and melodramatically laments the sins of

his brutish, conquering, Saxon patriarch: “When shall I be dead and rid / Of the wrong my father did? / How long, how long, till spade and hearse / put to sleep my mother’s curse?”

Here, as in the rest of the *Shropshire Lad*, Housman projects a quaint sentimentality onto Terence in order to approximate, from a distance, how Housman thinks an Englishman on the border *should* feel. How could one live beneath the “vanes of Shrewsbury” Castle—knowing that the land had been taken by force, knowing the history of bloody wars and sanctioned atrocities, knowing the nineteenth-century results of the “endless ill” of English colonialism—and not harbor a faint sense of inherited guilt? Though we must admit that Housman’s sentimental concerns are a projection (a predominantly inaccurate projection), they touch a certain chord with the rest of the English people, who do not have a border nearby to remind them that all English people tread on conquered ground from birth to death.

A counter example, from a few decades later and from the other side of the River Severn, was penned by a poet who actually lived on the border of England for much of his life:

*Eyr Pengwern, penngarn llwyt heno...*

We still come in by the Welsh gate, but it’s a long way

To Shrewsbury now from the Welsh border....

Despite our speech we are not English,...

We are not English... *Ni bydd diwedd*

*Byth ar sŵny delyn aur.*

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40 “High the vanes of Shrewsbury gleam,” is the first line of Housman’s poem.
Though the strings are broken, and time sets
The barbed wire in their place,
The tune endures; on the cracked screen
Of life our shadows are large still
In history’s fierce afterglow.\(^{41}\)

This poem by R.S. Thomas, appropriately titled “Border Blues,” is the first in his 1958 collection, *Poetry for Supper*. Here, and throughout the collection, Thomas elicits his characteristic Anglo-phobic brand of Welsh separatism. As with Housman, history hangs heavily over the Welsh border dweller, who imagines himself walking along the modern border with St. Beuno and “Talking in Latin and old Welsh.” However, unlike Housman’s Shropshire lad, Thomas’s character is weighted down not by a heritage of mixture but by a palpable sense of disdain for the English on the border. As when he and Beuno are wrenched back into modernity by some approaching English women: “a volley of voices struck us; I turned, / But Beuno had vanished, and in his place / There stood the ladies from the council houses: Blue eyes and Birmingham yellow / Hair and the ritual murder of vowels.” The disdain Thomas holds for the English and the Anglo-Welsh mixture in the land of his espoused ancestors is in many ways comparable to that of Nennius many centuries prior.

However, as is evidenced by the piecemeal snippets of Welsh scattered throughout the poem and his recurrent denial, “we are not English,” Thomas is personally harrowed by

\(^{41}\) R.S. Thomas, *Poetry for Supper: New Poems* (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1958): 1-3. The two lines in Welsh translate to: [Eagle of Pengwern, grey-crested tonight] and [Forever, never ending is the sound of the golden harp]; they are from *Canu Heledd*, the ninth-century englynion which laments the loss of Pengwern/Shropshire to the Saxons, and *Y Delyn Aur*, a nineteenth-century Christian hymn, respectively. They are not translated in the original.
centuries of English cultural hegemony. He held a conspicuous distaste for the poetic language he had mastered ("despite our speech we are not English"), and would not learn Welsh until much later in life. The vestiges of centuries of a consuming English colonialism was, ironically, one of the most poignant ranges of color on Thomas’s poetic palette. Broken and belittled, but more often merely ignored, the conquered Welsh “shadows” on Thomas’s border nevertheless loom large in the “fierce afterglow” of British history.

For both Housman and Thomas, the experience (real or imagined) of the border is important for the sense of identity being constructed in each of their poems. The Anglo-Welsh border which they come in contact with is certainly different from the one which Geoffrey of Monmouth playfully approximated in his history; and their reactions to that contact certainly differ from the anti-centrist embrace of the border by writers such as the Fouke author and Iolo Goch. However, their works demonstrate that living on the edge of a society can, almost counter-intuitively, enrich and embolden one’s own cultural consciousness; the experience of the Anglo-Welsh border serves to reify these poets’ confidence that their place on their respective sides of that border is appropriate. That notion of the border as generative of English and Welsh culture demonstrates a certain sense of continuity between this literary March of Wales and the medieval March I expose in the following chapters. The March looks back into England and Wales from the edge, as it were, delineating not merely the confines of the countries but the complexion of their cultural characteristics.

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Prelude: The Arthurian *dinas* in “Marwnad Cynddylan”

Maured gymined a weli di hyn
Yd lysg fynghalon fal ettewyn...
ni ellynt fyn nwyn brodir am buiad gwell ban vythin
canawn artir wras dinas degyn.

[Greatness of battle! Can you see this?
Even now my heart a burning torch...
I used to have brothers, it was better when they lived
Whelps of Arthur the strong, a mighty fortress]43

“Marwnad Cynddylan” is a very, very old poem in terms of British Literature.
Though it is associated with the ninth-century cycle of poems called *Canu Heledd*, this particular “marwnad” [death song/ elegy] dates to the seventh century and is likely the precedent and inspiration for *Canu Heledd*. To contextualize the uncommon vintage of this poem, we should point out that it precedes all English examples of literary texts except (possibly) the absolute earliest datings of “Caedmon’s Hymn” (660) and all Latin works except Gildas’s *De Excidio et Conquestu Brittaniae* (547).44 In terms of Welsh-language

44 Gildas’s erudite and literary prose is dated to before 547 since one of the princes he castigates, Maglocanus (W. Maelgwn), is recorded as dying in that year in the *Annales Cambriæ*. See Antonia Gransden *Historical Writing in England: c. 500 to c. 1307* (Routledge: London, 1996): 1. The date of Caedmon’s hymn is subject to some debate, and there is a school which places it after Bede; however, the generally assumed date is between 657 and 680. See R.D. Fulk, *A History of Old English Meter* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992): 61.
poetry, some sections of *Y Gododdin* (but not all) may be contemporary to “Marwnad Cynddylan” or slightly earlier—but that is a matter of some debate; the famous Arthurian reference in *Y Gododdin* is probably much later than “Marwnad Cynddylan.” This is not to say that our copy of the poem which is preserved in Aberystwyth, National Library of Wales MS 4973 and the later copies made from that manuscript are the same text which was originally composed in the early Middle Ages; the orthography and spelling have been inconsistently modernized by subsequent copyists and it is missing an unknown amount of text from before and possibly after the fragment which has been preserved. Nonetheless, all editors of the poem agree that “The metre, vocabulary and contents are all consistent with a seventh-century date for the poem.”

Though editors are in agreement as to the date of the poem, there is some disagreement regarding the reference to Arthur, quoted above. The manuscript reads “artir wras,” which—like much of the poem—is nonsensical without editorial emendation. Most of the scholars who work on this poem have confirmed Sir Ifor William’s original emendation of the line to “Artur fras” [Arthur the strong], including Rachel Bromwich,

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45 Debates on the dating of *Y Gododdin* have raged for nearly two centuries of scholarship and I will not try to summarize all the details of that ongoing debate—which are only tangentially related to the task at hand—in a footnote. Perhaps the safest characterization of the general scholarly consensus is by that of T.M. Charles-Edwards, who notes that while some of *Y Gododdin* dates back to the seventh century (the A text), much of it was not composed until the ninth century (the B text). The stanza which refers to Arthur is part of the B text. See T.M. Charles-Edwards, “The Authenticity of the *Gododdin*: A Historian’s View” in Rachel Bromwhich and R.B. Jones *Astudioethau ar yr Hengerdd*, Studies in Old Welsh Poetry (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1978); and his “The Arthur of History,” in Rachel Bromwhich et. al. *The Arthur of the Welsh* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1991): 15-32, 15. However, cf. John Koch, *The Gododdin of Aneirin: Text and Context from Dark-Age North Britain* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1997), who considers the Arthurian reference authentic to the early seventh century.


47 See Williams, “Marwnad Cynddylan,” 136.
A.O.H. Jarman, Brynley Roberts, R.G. Gruffydd, John Koch, and Thomas Green. Jenny Rowland, however, in her edition and translation of the poem in *Early Welsh Saga Poetry*, hesitantly proposes a non-Arthurian emendation of the line to “arddynfras” [strong-handed]. However (as the question mark that Rowland includes in her translation indicates) even she is not totally convinced by her reading. It is important to recognize that many portions of this text, including this one, are subject to debate and (barring the discovery of new manuscript evidence) are not likely to be solved unequivocally.

In a work this early, interpretation can be hindered by (among other issues): linguistic evolution of the Welsh language, scribal emendation, references to historical circumstances and characters which are not otherwise attested, and, as always, the intentionally-obscure artistry prized among the Cynfeirdd. We should certainly approach the reference to Arthur with caution, but—put simply—the line in question makes sense as an early reference to Arthur. As I discuss in more detail below, the reference fits with our understanding of the legend in the earliest of its iterations. Heroic comparisons to Arthur are commonplace in Welsh praise poetry a few centuries later and there is little reason to

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52 The Cynfeirdd [Early Bards] are the earliest iteration of Welsh poets and include Taliesin, Aneirin, the poets of the Llywarch Hen cycle, and the authors of the earliest Myrddin poems; the poet of “Marwnad Cyndyylan” is not named. The intentional obscurity of the Cynfeirdd, memorably satirized at the end of *Breuddwyt Rhonabwy*, has been described a number of ways by Welsh literary scholars. My personal favorite is the description by Sir Edward Anwyl in *Young Wales* (1897) “Their impulse was to dart down, as it were, upon some vivid thought like a hawk upon its prey, and then to record it in the strongest and tersest possible language... with practically no regard for coherence in our sense of the term.” (qtd in John Jay Parry “The Court Poets of the Welsh Princes” *PMLA* 67.4 (1952): 511-520; 515.)
suspect that the multitude of those texts were not drawing on an earlier, established literary tradition. We should not be surprised to find evidence of the Arthurian legend in a poem from a time period when the Arthurian legend was definitively in circulation and when the reference is contiguous with our expectations of the legend during that time period.

To understand how the Arthurian reference is functioning thematically in the poem—and in the early Anglo-Welsh border community from which this poem hails—we must first get a sense of the peculiar political circumstances surrounding the poem. The poet himself even recognizes his own rather unusual political predicament:

a feddyliais
myned i fenai cyn nim bai fais?
carafí am eneirch o dir kemeis
gwerling dogfeiling Cadelling trais
Ef cuiniw ini uuyf im derw llednais
o leas Cynddylan colled annofais"
[did I think / to go to Menai though I had no ford? I love him who greets me from the land of Cemais / Prince of Dogfeiling, scourge of the Cadelling / I shall grieve until I am in my modest oak {ie. coffin} because of the death of Cynddylan].53

The poet feels conspicuously ‘out of place’ on Anglesey, the other side of the Menai Strait than his homeland. He repeats the sentiment in the following stanza “ei feddyliaw / myned i fenai cyn nim bai naw” [did I think of going to Menai though I can not swim!].54

53 ll. 6-11.
54 ll. 12-13.
Of course, Ynys Môn (Anglesey) was no farther from the Welsh mainland in the seventh century than it is today, and some parts are within 500 meters from shore to shore. For this Powysian poet, however, the strait is a palpable symbolic division, a geographic representation of the political and social distance between Powys and Gwynedd. This mournful remembrance of a dead Powysian King (Cynddylan) addressed to the King of Gwynedd (the “prince of Dogfeiling”) being sung far away from Powys (in Cemais, on Ynys Môn) is conspicuously incongruous with its setting.

This strange situation begs for an explanation. Generally speaking, bards were not “loaned out” from kingdom to kingdom and this is long before the times when poets would require multiple patrons so far apart from one another. If, as is the case with this particular poet, the bard’s patron had died, it would seem reasonable that the bard would seek to transfer his talents to the next ruler either within the dynasty or to another ruler altogether. That motivation does not seem to be driving this poet. Though the poet is amiable enough with Gwynedd’s king, he is obviously not trying to win his patronage. As Rowland emphasizes, that task would require “A complete panegyric,” and it would certainly not include an elegy pledging eternal allegiance to a dead king of Powys. A partial explanation of the poet’s curious rhetorical situation, and his brief employment of the Arthurian legend in the poem, may be found by considering the events which led to Cynddylan’s untimely death, which—even though they are ostensibly the poet’s primary topic—are never made manifestly clear in the poem.

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55 Theoretically, one could wade across the Menai Strait, and many probably have, but at the parts of the Strait where it gets low enough to wade at low tide, the water is extremely swift.
56 *Early Welsh Saga Poetry*, 135.
We know, from this poem and from other sources, that Cynddylan was a Powysian lord who was allied with Penda of Mercia against the Northumbrians in various engagements. An alliance between the still-pagan Saxons and Welsh people on the border (who, one assumes, knew that it was the recent ancestors of those pagan Saxons who were responsible for the loss of British rule east of the Midlands) is at odds with the ethnically and religiously charged war painted by history. Perhaps it was merely convenience or their common enemy in Northumbria which incited the alliance rather than any sense of cultural or social correspondence, but the alliance was nonetheless made and it dominated seventh-century insular politics.

We are given snippet information in this poem about three of the battles in which Cynddylan was involved: One, on the “doleo taw” [dales of the River Taf (?)]; two, “Caer Luitcoed” [Lichfield]; and three “tra Thren” [beyond the River Tren].57 We also know from other sources that Cynddylan was at the famous 641 battle of Maes Cogwy (AS. “Maserfeld”) near Oswestry (then in the heart of Powys), in which King Oswald of Northumbria was killed.58 Of the first battle, “doleo taw,” very little is known. There are a number of potential sites for the “River Taf,” including one near Cardiff.59 Most of the rest of Cynddylan’s career was concerned with matters further north and east, but there are also numerous precedents for the more northern Welshmen dropping into Gwent and Dyfed uninvited. The poem merely indicates that Cynddylan won that particular battle, wherever it was, and took a vast amount of cattle as his winnings.

57 “Marwnad Cynddylan,” ll. 38, 48, and 22, respectively.
58 Rowland, Early Welsh Saga Poetry 125.
59 For river names with this same root, see R.J. Thomas, Enwau Afonydd a Nentydd Cymru (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1976): 177-178. See also, Rowland, Early Welsh Saga Poetry, 132.
The second battle in Lichfield, modern day Staffordshire, is similarly unattested elsewhere. However the poem provides somewhat more information about this engagement, as it appears to have been particularly successful for Cynddylan. Given that Lichfield is in the heart of Mercian territory, it has often been assumed that this battle constituted a break in the Mercia-Powys alliance. Rowland, however, convincingly demonstrates otherwise in her reading of the historical background of the poem.

Of the unnamed but defeated enemies of Cynddylan’s host at Lichfield, the poem tells us that “nis noddes myneich llyfr afael” [They were not saved by the book-grasping monks]. Since Penda was an avowed pagan, it makes little sense why the poet would mention the lack of protection afforded him by monks. Penda was, actually, more open than previous generations of Mercian kings to Christianity (Bede notes that he even permitted Christian missionaries) and there is even some sparse evidence that a community of British Christians remained near Lichfield. However, even if this is the case, there is little reason to hypothesize that this community of British-Christian remnants or Northumbrian-Christian missionaries would be predisposed to protecting a pagan king. If, on the other hand, the enemy at Lichfield was an invading Northumbrian army with an optimistic ecclesiastical mission in tow, then the poets’ comments make more sense. In that case, a scornful dismissal of protection by monks would be a stinging jab at the Northumbrians who, as Rowland says, “seem to have had a strong sense of their spiritual superiority over

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the pagan Mercians and heretical Welsh.”

Cynddylan’s victory at Lichfield in the heart of Mercian territory was, then, most likely a continuation of the Powys-Mercia alliance against Northumbria which had previously been successful at Oswestry, in the heart of Powysian territory.

The third engagement, and most likely the one that resulted in Cynddylan’s death, is given as “tra Thren tir trahawg” [beyond the River Tren in the haughty land]. “Beyond the Tren”, as Rowland notes, is “conventional for beyond the border of Powys,” and so could conceivably be anywhere which is not Powys. However, the poet also tells us that “saith gant rhiallu in y speidiawd / pan fynnwys mab pyd mor fu parawd” [seven hundred royals were {Cynddyylan’s} assembly / when the son of Pyd requested, how willing he was]. This is a clear indication that Cynddyylan was in alliance with Penda, “the son of Pyd,” for this battle, and therefore the “tir trahawg” [haughty land] they are invading must be Northumbria. The most likely candidate for such an engagement is the Battle of Winwaed (655), in which Penda died and Northumbria recovered the momentum which it had lost after sustaining so many defeats at the hands of the Powysians and Mercians. The deaths of Penda and Cynddyylan would thus represent a strong setback for the Mercia-Powys alliance.

Another important person who came to this battle was the King of Gwynedd, Cadafael ap Cynfeddw. Nennius, among other sources, remembers Cadafael’s role in the loss of the battle to be particularly important: “solus autem Catgabail rex Guenedotae regionis cum exercitu suo evasit de nocte consurgens, quapropter vocatus est Catgabail

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62 “Marwnad Cynddyylan,” l. 22.
63 “Marwnad Cynddyylan,” ll. 27-28.
Catguommed.” [But Cadafael alone, King of Gwynedd, rising up in the night, escaped with his army, wherefore he is called Cadafael Cadomedd]. Whether Cadafael’s pre-dawn retreat actually caused Cynddylan and Penda to lose the battle and their lives is not clear, but later chroniclers certainly thought that to be the case. The epithet given to him after his retreat, “Cadomedd” [battle-decliner], is particularly poignant since it plays off of his given name, Cadafael [battle-seizer].

This is an especially important context to consider in any interpretation of “Marwnad Cynddylan.” Cadafael Cadomedd, the leader who—correctly or not—was given the blame for the defeat of the Powys-Mercia alliance at Winwaed, would have been the very recent predecessor of the Venedotian king this poet is addressing. The death of Cynddylan and his men had been a crushing blow to Powys and (though Powys still held its territory and maintained some hope of recovery) it is easy to see why Powys would seek out opportunities to praise the benefits of the alliance to other Welsh kingdoms. Indeed, the defeat of that alliance eventually resulted in the rejuvenation of the Northumbrian juggernaut, the subjugation of Mercia, and more losses in the Brythonic-speaking kingdoms of the Old North. Though this poem comes from before those events are made fully manifest, they were certainly on the visible horizon.

Though Rowland is right when she says that the poet’s intent is “to remind Gwynedd of its former alliance with Cynddylan and Penda,” the tone and tenor of the poem suggest to me something more than an oblique “reminder.” This poem is a powerful call-to-arms, a desperate plea for Gwynedd to recognize that a cross-border alliance may mean the very existence of the Britons. Cynddylan and his men are the poet’s personification of both

the immense success alliance with Mercia could bring and a lucid foreshadowing of what would result from its demise: “a chyn eithuiue yno im bro fy hun / nid oes vn car neud adar iu warafun” [and though I went back to my country / not one warrior is left that the birds have refused.]  

Personification and foreshadowing are not the only tools in this poet’s repertoire, either. Though we must admit that “Marwnad Cynddylan” pales in comparison to the rich, somber imagery of the later Canu Heledd cycle, the poem nonetheless has its moments of literary merit. One of the more striking devices that the poet employs to evoke the complex range of emotions he feels towards Cynddylan is the stark antithesis of seemingly contrasting sentiments throughout the poem—often with little or no transition. The two primary themes and sentiments juxtaposed in the poem are “mawred” [greatness, grandeur, sublime glory] and “hiraeth” [a deep, painful nostalgia and yearning for home].

For instance, when the poet recalls the glory days of Cynddylan’s feasts, “mor wyf gnodaw / pob pysg a milyn yd fydd teccaw” [How accustomed I am to the finest of fish and beasts!], he is detailing the specifics of Cynddylan’s “mawred” by describing the generosity he employed as a host and leader. Praising the generosity of a lord is, of course, a recurring theme through heroic poetry in many languages. However in the very next line the poet remembers other warriors who attended the feasts with him, warriors who are now dead: “i drais a gollais gwir echassaw, / Rhiau Rhirid a Rhiadaw” [To violence I lost men most

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66 “Marwnad Cynddylan,” ll. 67-68. My translation of the last phrase “neud adar iu warafun” is loose; “gwarafun” [forbid, grudge, to refuse] implies a sense of restraint and seems to be a reference to carrion birds eating the bodies of the warriors—a frequent image in Old Welsh poetry. Rowland translates: “whom birds do not restrain.”

67 My labels for these sweeping emotions are drawn from the poem itself: “Maured gymined” [Grandeur of battle] opens each section of the poem and the poet describes himself as “hiraethawg” [full of sorrow] in line nineteen. Similar juxtapositions of emotional themes are prevalent throughout the Old Welsh corpus.
brave, / Rhiau, Rhirid, and Rhiadaw.] The memory of the fine foods upon the tables sits uneasily with the memory of the fine men who shared that food with him and then died on the battlefield. This is the poet’s “hiraeth,” an untranslatable concept approximated by English “sorrow” or “homesickness;” it is a deep and wretched sadness and longing for home or something that is unchangeable. The antithesis of these two sentiments is obviously appropriate for any poem which mourns the loss of a great battle leader; but within the unique political circumstances of this poem, the juxtaposition also approximates the glorious potency of a border alliance and the terrible repercussions of a failure to maintain that alliance.

The reference to Arthur in “Marwnad Cynddylan” is a further feature of this emotional juxtaposition and political intricacy: “ni ellynt fyn nwyn brodir am buiad gwellynt fyn / canawon artir wras dinas degyn” [I used to have brothers, it was better when they lived, / Whelps of stout Arthur, the mighty fortress]. Arthur straddles the poet’s sense of mawred and hiraeth—he represents both the glorious, heroic past and yet is also a reminder that that past glory is lost, forlorn on a distant Northumbrian battlefield. The Arthurian legend, even in this, our earliest example, is a requiem to the glory days of yesteryear and is tinged with a sad nostalgia.

The Arthur that this poet refers to is contiguous with the other examples of him in this earliest iteration of the legend. The “artir fras” of “Marwnad Cynddylan” is much like the example from Y Gododdin, where a warrior who kills more than 300 men in a single rush is compared to Arthur: “gochore brein du ar uur / caer ceni bei ef arthur” [He fed dark

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68 “Marwnad Cynddylan,” ll. 35-36.
69 ibid. ll. 45-46.
ravens on the walls of the fortress, though he was no Arthur.”] Arthur in these texts is a superlative example of superhuman military prowess, a paragon of warrior society. Furthermore, and importantly, both examples mention Arthur without further description or explanation. Brief asides like these are, of course, tantalizing and disappointing for modern Arthurian scholars, but they are also an indication that Arthur was widely enough known to preclude an elaborate introduction or elucidating details.

The epithet applied to Arthur, “dinas degyn” [mighty fortress/defender], deserves further comment. In a sense, this is an extension of Arthur’s association with superlative military prowess mentioned above, but it also accords with later constructions of Arthur as a “defender” figure. Perhaps the most famous example of this construction is Triad 37, which describes the uncovering of the magical head of Bendigeidfran, a mythical Welsh king whose head, so long as it was interred beneath the White Hill of London, was supposed to prevent Saxon invasions: “Ac Arthur a datkudyavd Penn Bendigeituran o’r Gvynnvrynn. Kan nyt oed dec gantav kadv yr Ynys honn o gedernt neb, namyn o’r eidav ehun” [And Arthur uncovered the head of Blessed Bran from the White Hill, because it was not right to him that the Island should be defended by anyone’s strength but his own]. Similarly, in Vita Cadoci, Arthur defends the father of Saint Cadoc, Gwynllyw, at the border of Brycheiniog and Gwynlliog—but only after Gwynllyw swears ownership over the land: “... Tum, Arthuro sociisque eius armatis, in hostes Gundleii irruunt, eosque uersis tergis cum magna confusione at patrium solum fugauerunt.” [Gwynllyw replies, ‘God being witness, also all who best know of the Britons, I avow that I am the owner of this land.’ ...

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70 Ifor Williams, Canu Aneirin (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1938): sec. 52. My translation.
Then Arthur and his companions being armed they rushed against the enemies of Gwynllyw and made them turn their backs and flee in great confusion to their native soil.]\textsuperscript{72}

Though Arthur’s military prowess has been employed by authors in a number of ways over the years, the conception of him as a mighty (and perhaps at times misdirected) “defender” is recurring enough to distinguish it as a core formulation of his legend.\textsuperscript{73}

It must be noted, however, that the sense of “homeland defense” the poet is praising here is not the most straightforward version of that concept. These are not warriors who died attempting to hold off the Saxon horde from entering their villages; they are not seventh-century versions of American minutemen, taking up arms as a final effort to repel the English from attacking their families. Cynddylan and his men died in a much more complex and abstract form of defense: allied with pagan Saxons while deep within enemy territory. As we have seen, there is certainly a legitimacy to conceptualizing Cynddylan’s alliance with Mercia and attacks against Northumbria as defensive—as preemptive strikes to thwart inevitable future incursions—but it must have been, nonetheless, a strange pill for the poet’s Venedotian audience to swallow.

This is why “dinas” is such an effective (if slightly reductive) concept to attach to both Arthur and Cynddylan’s men’s actions. Though the word is, here as elsewhere, employed as a metonym for military defenses in general, “dinas” is most specifically a “fortress”, that clear-cut and tangible brick-and-mortar or wood-and-dirt inhabitable barricade which repels foe and shelters friend. By invoking Arthur as a “mighty fortress” in a description of Cynddylan’s alliance with pagan Mercians and failed invasion of


Northumbria, the poet maps an remarkably solid material substrate onto a very fluid, immaterial, and perhaps controversial concept of “defense” and “the border.”

It is here where we find the most demonstrable continuity between this Arthur of “Marwnad Cynddylan” and the Arthurian legend which rises in border writing over the next seven centuries. The political, historical and cultural contexts of Arthurian border literature would shift dramatically over the following centuries and the legend of Arthur would exponentially expand from this snippet, fleeting glimpse into its nascent state. However, like the later Arthurian border works this study examines, “Marwnad Cynddylan’s” use of the Arthurian legend is clearly derivative of the intricate systems of cultural contact and conflict along the border, and it is clearly being harnessed to influence the cultural and political environ of a neighboring sovereignty—in this case, Gwynedd. Moreover, even in this, the earliest and one of the tersest example of border writing, we can see the Arthurian legend being employed as a simplified version of an otherwise immensely complex border phenomenon; the convoluted construction of “defense” the poet is advocating here is made demonstrably simpler and more straightforward by his association of them with the Arthurian legend. As we shall see in the next chapter, the tendency of using Arthur to “simplify” a complex version of border “defense” would persist well past the seventh century.
1) Pure Fictions: Early Arthurian Border Literature and the British Nation

[T]he very idea of a pure, ‘ethnically cleansed’ national identity can only be achieved through the death, literal and figurative, of the complex interweavings of history, and the culturally contingent borderlines of modern nationhood.” –Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*.74

At some point in the twelfth century, when the eastern and southern portions of Wales were being colonized by Norman barons and their armies, there developed a distinction in political documents between these mixed areas, called “Marchia Wallia,” and the areas of the northwest which remained “Pura Wallia.” That distinction has carried on in modern critical histories of Wales, and one can trace in the maps that invariably accompany these critical histories the lurking encroachment of the *Marchia* as the *Pura* shrinks tighter and tighter behind the shield of Snowdonia and the Menai Strait.75 Strictly speaking, these labels are supposed to be legal and jurisdictional ones: *Pura Wallia* is governed by the Welsh princes and *Marchia Wallia* is a conglomerate of Englishries and Welshries with various governance and unique legal systems.76 One can extrapolate from

74 Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1994): 7
76 From the Magna Carta: “tunc inde fiat in Marchia per judicium parium suorum, de tenementis, Angliae secundum legem Angliae, de tenementis Walliae secundum legem
this visual and verbal rhetoric, however, that there was once a time of pre-\textit{Marchia}, when all of Wales was \textit{Pura}—cleanly segregated from the Saeson who stayed to the east of Offa's Dyke. The development of the \textit{Marchia}, then, figures forth the beginning of the end of \textit{Pura Wallia}.

The truth, however, is that Wales and the Welsh have never been “pure”; their language and their lineage betray the influence of the Latin tongue and Roman culture from well before any Saxons set foot on the island, and archeological evidence suggests strong influences from Norse settlement and trade in the north-west and Irish settlement throughout the country.\footnote{See Wendy Davies, \textit{Wales in the Early Middle Ages} (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1982).} Even ignoring these “exceptions”, there is no evidence that the various tribes of pre and sub-Roman Britain or the petty kingdoms that followed had any sense of contiguous history or unity with one another.\footnote{Indeed, Gildas refers to Vortipori (king of Dyfed) as the “Demetarum tyranne,” [tyrant of the Demetians] reflecting the continuation of ‘tribal’ strife in the sub-Roman era. See Gildas, \textit{Gildas: the Ruin of Britain and Other Works}, ed. Michael Winterbottom (Chichester: Philmore and co. ltd., 1978): c.31.} If they were linked in some grand ethno-linguistic or racial heritage, they certainly did not recognize it at the time. “Pure Wales” is, and always has been, a nostalgic construction projected upon a largely indeterminate swath of history in the “olden days”.

In this chapter, I trace an early attempt to develop this sentiment of ethnic and political “purity” in the historical depiction of Wales by Nennius in the \textit{Historia Brittonum Walliae, de tenementis Marchiae scendum legem Marchiae.” [Thus let it be judged in the March by the judgments of their peers; For tenements of England according to the English Law, for the tenements of Wales according to Welsh Law, for tenements of the March according to the Law of the March.”]} Select \textit{Charters and Other Illustrations of English Constitutional History}, ed. William Stubbs (Oxford: Clarendon, 1913): 303.
and other border writers roughly contemporary with him. Through the historicization of Welsh folklore and especially the Arthurian legend, the *Historia Brittonum* is the earliest and most formative work to propagate this myth of political and cultural purity and is a central pillar in constructing the imagination of Wales as a nation. I argue that the most important influences and motivations for Nennius's rhetorical work are not found in the political environment of the Venedotian court (as some have recently emphasized), but in the mixed, cosmopolitan culture of his home region in the southern border area. Nennius's *Historia* and his Arthur are productions of and primarily for the political environment of the Anglo-Welsh border.

By reading Nennius and some of his contemporaries from the perspective of border culture, I am not solely claiming an early and important Arthurian work for the border region. Instead, I want to gesture towards a rearticulation of that implicit and ubiquitous nationalist narrative I presented in the opening of this chapter: that the creation and growth of the mixed, troublesome Marches was a later development which eventually strangled the previously omnipresent and real idea of Wales and Welsh culture as a “pure” entity. Instead, by examining the contexts of Nennius's writing and his ingenious alteration

79 It has fallen out of fashion to refer to the author of the *Historia Brittonum* as Nennius. David Dumville has strongly argued for a disassociation of the Nennian prologue (which he identifies as a later corruption) and the *Historia Brittonum*. Peter Field, in contrast, has disagreed and connects the author of the *Historia* to a “Ninnius” living in modern day Breconshire. See David Dumville, “The Historical Value of the *Historia Brittonum*,” *Arthurian Literature* 6 (1986): 1-26; and P.J.C. Field, “Nennius and his History,” *Studia Celtica* 30 (1996): 159-165. I base my decision to refer to the author as “Nennius” on neither of their conclusions. “Nennius,” to me, is a convenient placeholder for a distributed system of author functions and various communities of production. Though calling him “the author of the *Historia Brittonum*” ultimately accomplishes the same goal, such constructions sever the work from its historical scholarship both good and bad. It is the same as if we were to cease referring to “the author of *Piers Plowman*” as William Langland because there is an ambiguous (some might say precarious) relationship between that name, the person(s) “William Langland” refers to, and *Piers Plowman* itself.
and homogenization of sources, we can see that Nennius’s pure, unified British nation is primarily a reaction to the cultural environment of the mixed, troubled border area. In short, *Pura Wallia* owes as much of its artificial construction to *Marchia Wallia* as it does to its imagined deconstruction.

**Nennius, Merfyn and the Border**

“It is precisely his ignorance and his stupidity which caused him to jumble together good and bad materials without amalgamating them into a single whole, and each successive commentary on the evolution of his curious book makes it more possible to sort out the different elements of which it is composed.”

Such is the assessment of Nennius in the 1936 by Robin George Collingwood, a towering figure in twentieth-century historical philosophy, British history, and sub-Roman British archeology. Collingwood’s deserved reputation, and the reputation of the *Oxford History of England* series his assessment of Nennius was published in, meant that Collingwood’s assessment of and approach to Nennius’s writings would be followed by researchers for decades afterward. Nennius was viewed as artless, brutish, and dangerous to the historian because of his lack of objectivity and clarity; his text is a “jumble” of “good and bad materials,” which he makes no distinction between. It is the task of the modern critic to pick apart his text to find the hidden layers of truth about the “Dark Ages” of Britain. Nennius himself is the sad imitation of proper (English) historiography (ie. Bede), and apparently is capable of writing without aim or intent.

Thankfully, this approach to the *Historia* is fading from scholarly assessments of the work, and, rather than attempting to mine the *Historia Brittonum* for ‘accurate’ reflections

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of sixth-century Britain, recent critics have been very successful in framing the *Historia* within the political milieu of ninth-century British politics. David Dumville, David Howlett, and Nick Higham have been particularly important in establishing a more fruitful environment for the interpretation of this text and its references to the Arthurian legend.\(^{81}\) Instead of an aimless compilation of historical materials, it has emerged that the *Historia Brittonum* was, instead, written by a single author who may or may not be the monk Ninnius of the Breconshire region.\(^{82}\) Though precisely who this author is will remain impossible to confirm, the largely unknown figure we have chosen to label “Nennius” is writing with a perceptible personal background for perceptible political purposes.

As has become more and more apparent from recent criticism, much of these political purposes can be tied to the reign of King Merfyn Frych of Gwynedd, titled in the Nennian prologue as “Meruini regis Britonum.” Though Dumville has cast doubt on the connection of the prologue to the original work, he has nonetheless verified that the work was composed near the beginning of Merfyn’s reign and is connected to Merfyn’s larger political influence.\(^ {83}\) As Nick Higham has summarized, “there should be little doubt that his text was written expressly for Merfyn and his circle.”\(^ {84}\)

All the historical records point toward Merfyn’s reign as being a major turn in the British political infrastructure. Merfyn seized control of Gwynedd in 825 after a very turbulent historical period; in the decades prior, Gwynedd had been embroiled in an

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\(^{82}\) See Dumville, “Historical Value”; and Field “Nennius and his History.”


\(^{84}\) Higham, *King Arthur* 122.
internal strife between the sons of King Rhodri Molwynog (Hywel and Cynan), a devastating attack by Coenwulf of Mercia (who was taking advantage of that strife).

Furthermore, upon Cynan ap Rhodri’s death, the 400 year-old paternal line of Maelgwn Gwynedd and Cunedda had officially ended. It is unlikely that Merfyn would have been able to hold the throne based on his pedigree alone: his claim was based on his maternal line rather than paternal (his mother was the daughter of Rhodri Molwynog) and there were almost certainly other contenders to the crown. It would have taken an impressive personality and a considerable show of force to maintain this claim, but Merfyn was nonetheless successful in establishing a new dynasty. Soon after he took control of Gwynedd, he repelled the Mercian incursions and married the daughter of King Cadell of Powys, allying the two powerful kingdoms.

Nennius, also, seems to be part of Merfyn’s wider plans to establish connections throughout Wales. All evidence suggests that Nennius is not from Gwynedd, but from the south-eastern border area, most likely in Gwent around the River Severn delta region. As evidenced by Figure One, it is within this area that Nennius describes over half of the wonders in his mirabilia section, and most of the remaining ones are within a short travelling distance from this central location. The few wonders that are located a considerable distance from Gwent (in Ireland, Scotland and Gwynedd) lack the detail and personal familiarity that we can perceive in his descriptions of the core group. As Andrew Evans, John Nettleship and Steven Perry have recently argued, Nennius’s description of

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85 See Lloyd, *A History of Wales*: 230-231. Cunedda is probably a historical construct (Higham, *King Arthur* 125), but he was obviously a historical construct by the 9th century as well. This means that Nennius would have seen Hywel and Cynan as Cunedda’s final descendents and Merfyn as “new blood” despite modern questions of the antiquity and historicity of “Cunedda’s line”.

Lake Lliwan (wonder six) can be linked with some interesting geographic features in the Caerwent area not far from the border.\textsuperscript{87} For two of the wonders in Gwent and Ergyng, Nennius explicitly notes his personal familiarity: “Nam ego probavi et vidi,” “Et ego solus probavi.”\textsuperscript{88} This is not something he does for the few wonders he locates outside of the border area for the obvious reason that he does not have that familiarity with them. As Nick Higham has said, the wonders in Gwynedd were likely “added rather hastily... to avoid causing offence among Gwynedd’s ruling elite.”\textsuperscript{89} It is important to note that this area (the region of Gwent, Brycheiniog and Glywysing) was, in fact, the only area Merfyn and his descendents were unable to establish sovereignty.\textsuperscript{90}

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\textsuperscript{87} Andrew J. Evans, John Nettleship and Steven Perry, \textit{“Linn Liu\textae/Llyn Llyw: The Wondrous Lake of the Historia Brittonum's de Mirabilis Britanniae and Culhwch ac Olwen,”} Folklore 119 (2008): 295-318.

\textsuperscript{88} Nennius, \textit{“Historia Brittonum,”} ed. Theodor Mommsen in \textit{Chronica Minora Sec. IV, V, VI, VII, iii, Monumenta Germaniae Historica,} AA xiii (Berlin 1898): 147-222, ch. 59, 60.

\textsuperscript{89} Higham, \textit{King Arthur} 153.

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Figure 1: The Wonders of the Historia Brittonum. My map is drawn from and only slightly differs from that given by Higham, *Mythmaking and History*, 154. The Tomb of Amr, discussed below, is number 13 on the map.

Higham similarly locates Nennius to "the more cosmopolitan interface between southern Wales and England" in Gwent or Brycheniog, and also, interestingly, cites Asser's
departure for the English King Alfred’s court a few decades later as a “pressing [parallel].”\textsuperscript{91}

Certainly, Asser’s move from St. David’s to Wessex offers an important comparison to Nennius’s move to Gwynedd; but the political motivations behind these moves could not be further apart. One of the primary reasons Asser gives for seeking an alliance with Wessex was Dyfed’s continual conflict with northern Welsh kings: “Sperabant enim nostri, minores tribulationes et injurias ex parte Hemeid regis sustinere... si ego ad notitiam et amicitiam illius regis qualicunque pacto pervenirem” [They {my companions} were hopeful to suffer fewer tribulations and injuries on the part of King Hemeid... if I were to come to the knowledge of that king {Alfred} and make some kind of agreement].\textsuperscript{92} As history (and the \textit{Mabinogi}) has taught us, attacks on Southern Wales from the north were typical throughout the Middle Ages. Asser’s hope to garner protection from Wessex, though unsuccessful, was a reasonable approach to mitigating the inter-British conflict.

Nennius, however, was attracted away from southeastern Wales to Gwynedd for much different reasons than Asser’s flight to Wessex. Merfyn was a powerful ruler who unified Gwynedd after prolonged turmoil and, by establishing strong political ties to Powys and eventually to Dyfed, he had demonstrated his ability to unite British kingdoms rather than divide them. Whereas Asser hoped to protect St. David’s even if it exacerbated inter-Briton conflict, Merfyn sought to ally all the kingdoms in opposition to the growing Wessex hegemony. Nennius’s stylization of Merfyn as “regis Britonum” is certainly an exaggeration, but it is an exaggeration of hope rather than sycophancy; only a united Wales led by a powerful king could hope to contend with the growing Mercian/West Saxon dynasty. As

\textsuperscript{91} Higham, \textit{King Arthur}: 122.
Higham and others have emphasized, it is important that we recognize Merfyn’s political aims within Nennius’s history; the conception of a contiguous British state with a shared, illustrious history present in the Historia Brittonum was a vital construct for realizing the ambitions of this upstart king and the hopes of this talented writer.

However, as I will argue here, the emphasis on Venedotian politics in the Historia Brittonum has been somewhat overstated. Merfyn did not write the Historia Brittonum, and the work’s primary influences derive not from the secluded cultural environment of ninth-century Gwynedd—which the author was largely unfamiliar with—but from the legends and stories of the borderlands. Furthermore, his wider inclusive and unifying gestures are not directed towards the areas of Wales already under Merfyn’s control, but towards areas where British culture and British political allegiance are perceived as threatened—Gwent, Brycheiniog, and Ergyng in particular. Nennius’s emphasis on the “omnibus Britanicis regionibus,” “omnes homines gentis” and “omnes reges Brittanicae gentis,” should be read as directed towards the border rather than the relatively secure culture of Gwynedd.\(^9\) To properly situate this work and its revision of the Arthurian legend, it is imperative we recognize that the political ambitions of Merfyn’s Gwynedd are being shaped by the cultural perspective of Nennius’s border.

For much of the early Middle Ages, Gwynedd was largely secluded from the Saxon powers to the east; the Powysian buffer zone and the significant terrain obstacles prevented long-term English influence in the area. In southeastern Gwent, Brycheiniog, and Ergyng, by contrast, prolonged contact with the cultural Other was a given. Furthermore, despite the bellicose rhetoric of distant kings like Merfyn, everyday existence in a

\(^9\) Nennius, Historia Brittonum, ch. 14, 48.
multicultural mixed zone like the southern Anglo-Welsh border meant that prolonged contact was often peaceful and occasionally collaborative. Aristocrats married across the border regularly, and we can assume that cross-border marriage was common among the lesser classes as well.

In one particularly interesting case, we find an Edwin son of “Eanneawn” involved in a legal dispute in a Hereford “scirgemot” [shire meeting], where he attempts to claim some of his mother’s family land in Herefordshire. This is likely the Welsh aristocrat Edwin ap Einon who (as his English name “Edwin” and the location of his mother’s lands suggest) was probably the product of one of these cross-border aristocratic marriages. This mixed heritage does not seem to have hindered Edwin’s political ambitions either, as he is noted to have risen successfully within the southern Welsh dynasty. Later in his life, Edwin would ravage the lands of Maredudd ab Owain with the help of Saxon warriors; perhaps these Englishmen were even his family.

Given the flexibility of inheritance laws in Wales compared to England, it is perhaps less surprising that Edwin was able to rise in politics on the western side of the border. However, it is striking—and telling—that he is attending a “scirgemot” (an emphatically Anglo-Saxon tradition) in England in order to acquire English land on his mother’s side. Welshmen could, and did, own land in England, but the prospect of a Welshman taking an Englishman’s land through a maternal connection seems far-fetched. Edwin’s claim was

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94 See George Molyneaux, “The Ordinance concerning the Dunsæte and the Anglo-Welsh Frontier in the late tenth and eleventh centuries,” 271-272
96 Thornton, “Maredudd ab Owain,” 582-585.
97 The Laws of Ine from Wessex, for instance, describe the various wergilds for Welshmen depending on their social status, relationship with the king, and property ownership. For
unsuccessful; but as George Molyneaux says, "it is unlikely that he would have raised it had he thought it hopeless." There must have been at least some degree of precedent for his situation.

In the ecclesiastical realm, it is apparent that, on the whole, southeastern Wales had a far more cordial relationship with Canterbury and York than did St. David’s or other Welsh areas. In one instance, the Bishopric of Herefordshire—in the English nation—was deputized to a Welsh clergyman in the eleventh century after the reigning English bishop became disabled. The Bishop of Ergyng/Archenfield—also technically in the English nation—in 924 was a Welshman, Cyfeiliog. When he was captured by Vikings, it was the English king of Wessex and Mercia, Edward the Elder, who paid Cyfeiliog’s ransom. In an area of the world where much of the laity would be of English and Welsh background, and would have linguistic capabilities in both languages, this sort of cordial administrative interchange is completely understandable. Welsh people certainly lived in Herefordshire and throughout southwest England throughout the Anglo-Saxon period. As far north as Gloucestershire there is evidence of land being rented to Welshmen by English landlords in the tenth century.

instance, a Welshman holding at least five hides of land was worth 600 shillings. See F.L. Attenborough, ed. The Laws of the Earliest English Kings (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1922): 45.


100 Anglo-Saxon Chronicle (C), 1055 and by John of Worcester II.578 (1055).

101 Gelling, West Midlands, 114-116; Molyneaux, 272.

102 Molyneaux, “The Ordinance concerning the Dunsæte” 272
This long-term contact and interchange between the English and the Welsh on the border resulted in some very interesting cultural and historical developments. As I discuss in more detail below, the border population in Ergyng (an area Nennius notes his personal familiarity with) collaborated extensively with the Saxons in judicial and ecclesiastical affairs, and even shared jurisdictional rule.\textsuperscript{103} Other border inhabitants, however, such as Nennius and the author of "Pa Gur yv y Porthaur?" (hereafter “Pa Gur?”), were viscerally reactive to such collaboration, and worked to counter what they perceived as a slow dilapidation of native culture.

Specifically, Nennius is drawing from his border experience to create an artificial conception of a “pure” Wales with a contiguous history wholly unified against the evil Saxons in the east. Of course, “Pure Wales” did not actually exist in Gwynedd or anywhere else, but only by creating a historical precedent could that historical precedent be repeated. To do so, Nennius is drawing from and actively adapting conceptions of the “British” and “Saxons” developed in his sources, most importantly in Gildas’s \textit{De Excidio et Conquestu Brittaniae} and Bede’s \textit{Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum}, but also from folklore and legendary material he encountered on the border.

It is not that the “Britons”—as an individuated ethnic group—is a new concept for Nennius. Gildas’s “Britons” are, like the Israelites he so often compares them to, a ‘whole’ people. However, Gildas’s Britons are also depraved and divided, “nunc deo, interdum civibus, nonnumquam etiam transmarinis regibus et subiectis ingrata consurgit” [“ungratefully rebelling... now against God, now against its own countrymen, sometimes

\textsuperscript{103} See below, 41-43. Nennius notes his personal familiarity with Ergyng in Ch. 73, “et ego solus probavi”; see below, 40-52, for more commentary on Nennius and Ergyng.
even against kings from abroad and their subjects”]. They are also without a venerable, contiguous history. The time before Roman rule is dark, dangerous and better left in silentio: “et tacens vetustos immanium tyrannorum annos” [“I shall be silent on the long past years when dreadful tyrants reigned”]. Gildas’s Britons have no history, little heritage worth mentioning and all ideas of Britain’s past must be derived from foreign sources. The conception of “the British” and “British history” received by Nennius is, thus, largely a construction of absence and division. The British race is largely dispersed and governed by tyrants, and they have no history of their own to build upon.

Bede is, perhaps surprisingly, slightly less pessimistic on the subject of the Britons. He praises their early adoption of Christianity in Book I and he clearly admires and respects St. Alban and other (highly exceptional) British Christians. However, he is quick to note, and exaggeratedly castigate, their supposedly wholesale adherence to the Pelagian Heresy, he regularly refers to them as barbari, and he wrongly condemns them for their failure to convert the Anglo-Saxons. As Robert Hanning noted some years ago, Bede’s particular and specific condemnations of the British are less damning than his subtle allusions and macroscopic vision of history. Bede presents the British people as akin to the superseded Jew in Christian history: “the Scots and the Britons are equated with the

105 Gildas, 4.3
106 Gildas mentions the lack of native sources about Britain in Sec. 4.4.
108 HE I.10
109 As in HE III.2, 3; IV.2.
110 HE III.28. For British Christian influence in the West Midlands, see Patrick Sims-Williams, Religion and Literature in Western England: 600-800, esp. 54-86; Also, for an updated discussion, see Steven Basset, “How the West Was Won,” Anglo-Saxon Studies in Archeology and History II (2000): 107-18.
old law.”¹¹¹ W. Trent Foley and Nick Higham have recently expanded and qualified Hanning’s broad characterization, and identify specific verbal echoes from the Bible in the *Historia Ecclesiastica* that paint “the Britons predominantly as perfidious Jews.”¹¹²

Nennius, by contrast, presents the Britons as rich with history and accomplishments; he describes the descent of their kings from the illustrious patriarch and conqueror Brutus, whom he locates both within Roman History and Christian genealogy.¹¹³ And, though he does not wholly neglect the occasional bouts of strife and civil war among the Britons, there is never a question that they are one contiguous people who controlled the whole island of Britain and will control it again in due course. Nennius’s self-conscious construction of historical presence and cultural unity in contrast to his sources is the first and most important formulation of a pan-British political identity and a foundational historical infrastructure for a British nationalist imagination. It is only through this unified identity and historical infrastructure that cultural segregation along the border and united opposition to the Saxons could materialize.

**Vortigern and Arthur in the *Historia Brittonum***

The central tenet of the *Historia Brittonum* is articulating the (ultimately collapsible) differences between the Briton and the Saxon and emphasizing the perils of cultural and ethnic integration. In doing so, Nennius is anticipatory of Homi Bhabha’s fundamental concept of the creation of the colonial subject—a term he uses to refer to both colonizer

¹¹³ Nennius, III.10, 17.
and colonized: "the construction of the colonial subject in discourse, and the exercise of colonial power through discourse, demands an articulation of forms of difference—racial and sexual." Colonial discourse inscribes onto the subjected body that which the body politic wishes to control; the construction of physical and material alterity is foundational to the formulation of a fictional and ideological cultural identity.

The figure of Vortigern (Guorthigirn) is pivotal to this rhetorical tenet. Though Nennius does not create Vortigern ex nihilo, he extensively reconstructs and contextualizes the legendary ruler from his received sources to create a new and dangerous exemplum for border inhabitants. From a macroscopic historical perspective, Nennius casts Vortigern as the direct personification of a fundamental transitional moment of British history, the Adventus Saxonum. Nennius also articulates, through Vortigern’s character, the appropriate and inappropriate social and political responses to Saxon culture. Vortigern’s character reveals to us, somewhat surprisingly, that the Saxons are not the most dangerous enemy to the Britons; much more destructive is the Briton who eschews British culture to accommodate English incursion.

The legend of Vortigern’s invitation to the Saxons is one that had been present in Welsh folklore and history for some time before Nennius’s writing. Though he does not directly use his name, Gildas records the first ever mention of Vortigern in his description of the council which convened to determine a solution to the Pictish and Scottish incursions into British territory:¹¹⁵

\[
tum omnes consiliarii una cum superbo tyranno caecantur, adinvenientes tale praesidium, immo excidium patriae ut ferocissimi illi nefandi nominis Saxones deo
\]

¹¹⁴ Bhabha, Location of Culture, 96.
¹¹⁵ Some MSS do include Vortigern’s name, just not the authoritative ones.
hominibusque invisī, quasi in caulas lupi, in insulam ad retundendas aquilonales
gentes intromitterentur.

“Then all the members of the council, together with the proud tyrant, were struck
blind; the guard – or rather the method of destruction – they devised for our land
was that the ferocious Saxons (name not to be spoken!), hated by man and God,
should be let into the island like wolves into the fold, to beat back the peoples of the
north.”

Notice that the “superbo tyranno”—a thinly veiled pun on Vortigern’s name (a combination
of *wor- [over, super], and *tigern [king, chief])116—is acting in accordance with a council
and is doing so for honorable, if misguided, purposes. The quote from Isaiah which follows
this section, “stuiti principes... taneos dantes pharaoni consilium insipiens” [“the silly
princes of Zoan... giving foolish advice to Pharoah”],117 even implies that Gildas’s Vortigern
is a victim of poor counsel rather than his own incompetence. In Gildas’s account, neither
Vortigern nor the council could have known that the Saxon mercenaries would turn on
them. Vortigern is “infausto” [unfortunate, unlucky, ill-fated] rather than sinful or evil:
“primum in orientali parte insulae iubente infausto tyranno terribiles ifixit u_ngues” [“On
the orders of the ill-fated tyrant, they first of all fixed their dreadful claws on the east side
of the island.”]118

This is the image of Vortigern that Nennius inherited. A very similar portrayal was
repeated by Bede, with the expected reminder that the Saxons were a divine punishment

Medieval Celtic Studies* 3: 30-40.
117 Gildas, 23.1.
118 Gildas 23.4.
upon the Britons,¹¹⁹ and again repeated in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle without further invective.¹²⁰ The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle even notes that six years after Vortigern’s ill-advised invitation, Vortigern personally opposed the Angles in battle: “Her Hengest 7 Horsa fuhton wiþ Wyrteorne þam cyninge, in þære stowe þe is gecueden Agelesþrep.”¹²¹ It is important to recognize that this section of the Chronicle is being composed after the Historia Brittonum and with no implication of having consulted it, further supporting the contention that the differences in Nennius’s account were likely introduced by him, rather than drawn from another source as has been traditionally supposed.¹²² It is safe to say that neither Bede nor Gildas would have been likely to shy away from condemning Vortigern for being particularly sinful if they were so inclined.

Nennius’s description of the arrival of the Saxons is significantly different. The Saxons are not sought out by a council as mercenaries, but arrive unexpectedly in the southeastern portion of the island. Also unexpectedly, they are kindly welcomed by Vortigern despite their obviously heathen practices: “Guorthigirnus suscepit eos benigne, et tradidit eis insulam, quæ in lingua eorum vocatur Tanet” [Vortigern received them kindly, and he delivered unto them an island, which in their language is called Thanet.].¹²³ Eventually, it is revealed, Vortigern agrees to provide the Saxons with provisions in exchange for their military assistance with the Picts, but the Saxons become too numerous

¹¹⁹ HE I.31.
¹²¹ ibid. f.5r.
¹²² The first entries in the Parker Chronicle, quoted above, is understood to be the oldest version of the Chronicle and is typically dated the 890s. See, for instance, Thomas Bredenhof’s broad overview of the textual history of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle in the Introduction to his Textual Histories: Readings in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001): 3-13.
¹²³ Nennius, III.31.
for Vortigern to support. The evil and crafty Hengist devises a plan to prevent being expelled by the Britons; he convinces Vortigern to allow him to send for more Saxon ships to fight the Picts, and with those ships Hengist brings a surprise:

"et in una ciula ex eis venit puella pulcra facie atque decorosa valde, filia Hencgesti. Postquam autem venissent ciulæ, fecit Hencgistus convivium Guorthigirno et militibus suis, et interpreti suo, qui vocabatur Ceretic, et puellam jussit ministrare illis vinum et siceram, et inebriati sunt et saturati nimis. Illis autem bibentibus, intravit Sathanas in corde Gurthigirni ut amaret puellam, et postulavit eam a patre suo per interpretum suum, et dixit, 'Omne quod postulas a me impetrabis, licet dimidium regni mei.'

[and in one of the ships there came a very elegant girl with a beautiful face, the daughter of Hengist. And after the arrival of the ships, Hengist made a feast for Vortigern and his men, and also his interpreter who was called Ceretic; and he ordered the girl to serve them wine and strong drink, and they became exceedingly drunk and satiated. And while they were drinking, Satan entered into Vortigern’s heart and he loved the girl, and he asked her father for her through his interpreter, and said, “All that you ask of me you shall obtain, unto half of my kingdom.”]

The price of Hengist’s daughter is the county of Kent, which is ceded without the knowledge of the currently ruling British lord of that region. Vortigern’s kindly acceptance of the Saxons (“suscepit eos benigne”) and his friendly carousing eventually leads to the inevitable sexual desire for the Saxon maiden. Vortigern is, of course, already married, so

124 ibid. III.37.
his marriage to the pagan princess would have been troubling for Christian readers on a number of levels.

Nennius’s modifications to this story run considerably deeper than religious moralizing, however. His revisions to the story are reflective of a much deeper, psychosomatic aversion to Saxon culture and, more importantly, its lurking potential for the corruption of British culture. Gildas’s Saxons were another vague scourge upon the Israelite Britons for their sinfulness; they are hardly distinguishable in Gildas’s narrative from the Picts or the Scots or even from the pestilences sent by God to punish the tyrants and their people. The Saxons of the Historia Brittonum, by contrast, represent an evil, crafty, and sexually provocative Otherness; they are Satan’s temptations personified: “intravit Satanas in corde Gurthigerni” [Satan entered into Vortigern’s heart].

Vortigern’s accommodation of the Saxon enemy and his sexual interest in their women is the first of the long list of sins that Nennius attributes to him. After taking Hengist’s daughter to bed, the king takes the Saxon chieftain as personal advisor as well: “Et dixit Hencgistus ad Guorthigirnum, ‘Ego sum pater tuus, et consiliator tui ero...’” [And Hengist said to Vortigern, ‘I am a father to you, and will be your advisor...’].\textsuperscript{125} The Saxons arrive in droves, colonizing the east and north while Vortigern falls deeper and deeper into sexual depravity and sin: “Jam super omnia mala adjiciens Guorthigirnus accepit filiam suam uxorem sibi, et peperit ei filium” [Now adding more evils over those already present, Vortigern took his own daughter to wife, and she bore him a son]. The incestuous relationship with his interracial daughter is an extension of Vortigern’s sexual desire for the Saxon princess, which is in itself a further extension of his kindly reception of Saxon

\textsuperscript{125} Nennius, III.38.
settlement. To use a modern metaphor, Nennius depicts the toleration of Saxon culture in any form as the gateway sin to more and more deleterious sins against one’s soul and one’s culture.

In place of Gildas’s “infaustus tyranno,” Nennius has created a character of more color and depth upon whom we can lay the entirety of the blame for the loss of British sovereignty. Instead of a military miscalculation by an unfortunate king and his counsel (Gildas), or merely the figure who happened to be on the receiving end of a long overdue punishment against the collective Britons for their sins (Bede), Nennius presents us with an evil tyrant who, for his lack of loyalty to his people and a deviant sexual attraction to the racial Other, gave away his kingdom. The Britons, as a whole, are not to blame for the misdeeds of this one man. Indeed, Nennius tells us that the remainder of the Britons despised Vortigern for his interactions with the Saxons and, as the prophecy of the boy Ambrosius to Vortigern explicitly states, that the righteous Britons will eventually retake sovereignty of the island: “et postea gens nostra surget, et gentem Anglorum trans mare viriliter dejiciet” [And after a time our people shall rise and manfully cast out the English nation to the other side of the sea].

It is important to further recognize that Nennius’s rhetoric reaches beyond historiographic causality; Vortigern is not just a convenient figure to place the blame upon for the loss of British sovereignty. Vortigern’s downfall is a cautionary tale to Nennius’s ninth-century readership: Britons who accommodate the Saxons, who receive them “benigne,” who intermarry and mix with their culture, are more dangerous to British culture than the Saxons themselves. Though it is framed within the legendary stories of

126 See Nennius, III.48.
127 ibid., III.42.
kings in fifth-century Britain, it is not hard to discern from his narrative an implicit reference to the ninth-century people who live on the border and accommodate Saxon settlement, who intermarry into Saxon families and formulate political alliances. This “kind reception” is intrinsically dangerous to the conception of a pure Wales that Nennius is formulating and to the longevity of Welsh independence.

As Higham has pointed out, Nennius’s primary literary mode is in doubling and exempla; our bad example of Vortigern must be countered by good examples. \(^{128}\) This is accomplished most directly by St. Germanus, who repeatedly castigates Vortigern for his sexual depravity and tyranny. \(^{129}\) However, Germanus is not British, and the author is not satisfied with providing a single positive counter to this wholly depraved King. As Higham discusses in detail, St. Patrick is the spiritual antithesis to Vortigern’s Christian backsliding, and Nennius strongly infuses his character to resemble a Moses-like prophet and religious leader for the Britons. Politically and militarily, however, the strongest antithesis Nennius provides to Vortigern’s weakness and his accommodation of the Saxon scourge is the British kings’ “dux bellorum,” Arthur.

As has been widely recognized, the Arthur of the Historia Brittonum is not a king himself, but is a military leader of the collective kings of Britain, a supreme general of sorts, who defeats the Saxons in twelve legendary battles across Britain. At one of these battles he slays 960 men in one attack and at another he carries the image of the Virgin Mary on his shoulder. In his tantalizingly short description, Nennius provides us with only a few clues as to his conception of the Arthurian legend. However, it is obvious that Nennius is articulating a novel version of Arthur to serve a rhetorical point his subjective history.

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\(^{128}\) Higham, King Arthur, 136.

\(^{129}\) See Nennius III.39, 47.
Though Nennius’s use of Arthur in a historical context (rather than folkloric/legendary context) is unprecedented, the Arthur that Nennius deploys remains familiar to us in many respects. In the Battle of “monte Badonis” (here attributed to Arthur for the first time), Nennius tells us that “corruerunt in uno die nongenti sexaginta viri de uno impetu Arthur; et nemo prostravit cos ipsi solus” [nine-hundred and sixty men fell in one day from one charge by Arthur; and no one struck them down except he alone]. A single person killing 960 men in one charge is a pretty impressive feat, and one that we can safely describe as hyperbolic. Such hyperbolic, superhuman feats are to be expected, however, of the Arthur which Nennius has gleaned from his depiction in legendary texts. Perhaps most familiar is the famous Arthurian passage of Y Gododdin, where a man who kills 300 soldiers and singlehandedly takes down the center and the wing of the enemy formation and is still not the equal of Arthur: “ceni bei ef Arthur...” [though he was no Arthur...].

This superhuman tradition is well established in Arthurian legends from the border area as well. As I discuss in the Prelude to this study, the reference in “Marwnad Cynddylan” to Cynddylan’s sons, who were responsible for numerous Saxon deaths in the West Midlands and along the border, as being the “canawan Artir” [whelps of Arthur] is a fitting example. The superhuman Arthur depicted in Geraint Filius Erbin, where Arthur is located in Langport, Somerset, (not very far from Nennius’s home area) has a similar depiction of this superlative warrior: “Enllogporth y gueleife y arthur guir deur dymynint adur ameraudur llyw iaudi llawur.” [In Llongporth I saw Arthur and brave men who cut

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131 “Marwnad Cynddylan,” l.46. See my Preface 27-40 for a fuller reading of this allusion.
down {their enemies} with steel; the emperor, the conductor of strife].\textsuperscript{132} In all of these early Arthurian border references, Arthur is depicted as brutally violent and possessing superior military strength—therefore killing 960 men by himself, in one charge, is in keeping with this tradition.

In other respects, however, Nennius’s Arthur (much like Nennius’s Vortigern) is a much more expansive and grandiose character than in the legendary tradition Nennius had received. For the first time Arthur is depicted as serving a national political role, as a military leader of British kings: “Arthur pugnabat contra illos in illis diebus cum regibus Brittonum, sed ipse dux erat bellorum” [Arthur fought against them {the Saxon} in those days with the kings of Britain; but he was their leader of battles]. Much has been made of the description of Arthur as “dux bellorum.” Higham has made a strong case for Nennius drawing the reference from \textit{Judges} 1.1: “post mortem Iosue consuluerunt filii Israel Dominum dicentes quis ascendet ante nos contra Chananeum et erit dux belli” [After the death of Joseph, the children of Israel said to the Lord: who shall go up before us against the Canaanites and be our leader in battle?\textsuperscript{133}] This lends credibility to Higham’s comparison of the Historia’s Arthur with the Biblical Joshua, and the verse seems perfectly acceptable to me as the direct source for the phrase.

Yet, the description of Arthur as “dux bellorum” is, first and foremost, an expansion of Arthur's traditional military role discussed above. He is consistently represented as a superior warrior and, as the reference to him as “amherawdyr” [emperor] in “Geraint”

\textsuperscript{132} “Geraint Filius Erbin” in J. Gwenogvryn Evans, ed., \textit{The Black Book of Carmarthen} (Pwllheli: Series of Welsh Texts, 1906): 71-73, 72.9. My translation. We should note that although “llongborth” is generally taken to refer to Langport, Somerset, it literally translates to “ship harbor” and thus does not necessarily refer to that particular coastal community.

\textsuperscript{133} Vulgate Judges 1.1
implies, as an effective military leader as well. Nennius is just conceptualizing that
established military leadership role on a national scale. More important to the description
(though it is discussed much less frequently) is Arthur’s role as a leader of the collective
“regibus Brittonum”. This depicts him as a unifying figure—or at least a product of
unification—in which the disparate rulers of Britain are drawn together to defend against
the incessant onslaught of Saxons. Such a unification is, of course, a fantasy—the various
kings and kingdoms of Britain had never been thus united—but it is a fantasy with an
important rhetorical point for Nennius: such military unification in opposition to the
Saxons had happened before and could happen again.

Another much-debated section of the Historia’s depiction of Arthur is the list of
battles ascribed to him and his kingly conglomerate. Arthur and the kings of Britain win
twelve battles before the overwhelming numbers of invading Saxons saturate the eastern
part of the island. Many of these battles have, if not a historical precedent, at least a
precedent within written tradition and a few have prior associations with Arthur. Most of
them, however, will remain the fuel for speculative analyses for generations of scholars to
come.

The locations which Nennius ascribes to these battles are important enough for the
present topic that I will touch on them briefly—though there remains a great deal of
speculation and debate concerning the locations of these battles. Although some of the
locations are easily perceptible, as I discuss below, others are shrouded in mystery and
have resisted our attempts to nail them down. Though scholars will doubtless continue in
their attempts to locate all the battles on this list, the more exotic and obscure place names
for the battles seem to me to be best contextualized by a similar Arthurian battle list given
by Glewlwyd Gavaelvawr in *Culhwch ac Olwen*: “mi a uum gynt yg kaer se ac asse yn sacht a salach yn lotor a ffotor, mi a uum gynt yn yr india uawr, a r india vechan…” [I went once to Kaer Se and Asse, in Sach and Salach, in Lotor and Fotor, I went once to India the Great, and to India the Minor...].\(^{134}\) Perhaps some of the locations Nennius mentions, like those mentioned by Glewlwyd in *Culhwch*, are supposed to be unrecognizable and exotic because they articulate range breadth and an international rapport for the Arthurian legend.

Three of these locations, depicted in Figure Two, are relatively safe to put on a map, so long as no geographic coordinates are requested. The site of four of the battles is given as “Linnuis”: “secundum, et tertium, et quartum, et quintum, super aliud flumen, quod dicitur Dubglas, et est in regione Linnuis” [the second, third, fourth, and fifth were fought over the river which is called Dubglas and is in the region Linnuis]. As many linguistic scholars have noted, this is pretty clearly related etymologically to the region of Lindsey; both “Linnuis” and the Anglo-Saxon “Lindsege” are derivative of the reconstructed pre-Old Welsh name for the region, *Lindēs*.\(^ {135}\) The seventh battle is given in the far north:

“Septimum fuit bellum in Silva Celidonis, id est, Cat Coit Celidon” [The seventh battle was in the Caledonian forest, that is, the Battle of the Caledonian Forest]. This battle is most likely

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\(^{134}\) *Culhwch and Olwen: an Edition and Study of the Oldest Arthurian Tale*, eds. Rachel Bromwich and D. Simon Evans, (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1992): 28. My translation. Here is Sioned Davies’ translation of the complete list: “I was once in Caer Se and Asse, in Sach and Salach, in Lotor and Ffotor. I was once in India the Great and India the Lesser. I was once in a battle of the two Yyrs when the twelve hostages were taken from Norway. And I was once in Europe, I was in Africa, and the islands of Corsica, and in Caer Brythwch and Brythach and Nerthach. I was once there when you killed the warband of Gleis son of Merin, when you killed Mil Du son of Dugum. I was once there when you conquered Greece in the east. I was once in Caer Oeth and Anoeth, and in Caer Nefenyhr Nawdant: fair kingly men did we see there—but I never in my life saw a man as handsome as the one who is at the entrance to the gate this very moment.” Sioned Davies, trans., *The Mabinogion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007): 182.

the same battle of Triad 84 and the Book of Taliesin poem “Kat Godeu” where it is said the
trees rose up to fight.136 The last easily locatable battle site mentioned by Nennius is close
to home for him: “Nonum bellum gestum est in Urbe Legionis” [the ninth battle was waged
in the City of the Legions]. Though technically “Urbe Legionis” could be any city previously
associated with Roman legions, the most obvious contender is Caerleon since “Urbe
Legionis” is a direct translation of “Caer Llion,” and the area was referred to as “Cair
Legeion guar Uisc” in Nennius’s day.137

136 Triad 84, Teir Oergat Ynys Prydein [Three Futile Battles of the Island of Britain], in
Rachel Bromwich, ed. and trans., Trioedd Ynys Prydein, 3rd edition (Cardiff: University of
poem from the Book of Taliesin in Legendary Poems from the Book of Taliesin (Aberystwyth:
Cambrian Medieval Celtic Studies, 2007). For this battle’s link with the battle mentioned in
the Historia Brittonum (suggested first by Ifor Williams, confirmed by Haycock and
Bromwich) see Bromwich, 218-9.
137 See Hywel Wyn Owen, The Place Names of Wales (Cardiff: University of Wales Press,
No matter where the rest of these sites might be located, if at all, it is apparent from the spread of these known sites that Nennius is representing Arthur and his kingly companions as having fought in some very widely separated areas of Britain. Much in contrast to the divided and oppressed Britons of Gildas, Nennius’s Britons fight as a collective whole and are able to defend themselves from the Saxons in all areas of Britain. Arthur is no longer a local, generic superhuman warrior figure tied to particular legendary stories; he is a unifying figure which all of the British people can claim as an important portion of their heritage and who was worthy to follow into battle in all the extremities of the kingdom.
Perhaps one of the most interesting alterations that Nennius has made to the figure of Arthur in his work is his depiction of him at the Battle of Guinnion:

“Octavum fuit bellum in castello Guinnion, in quo Arthur portavit imaginem Sanctæ Mariæ perpetuæ virginis super humeros suos, et pagani versi sunt in fugam in illo die, et cædes magna fuit super illos per virtutem Domini nostri Jesu Christi, et per virtutem Sanctæ Mariæ virginis genetricis ejus” [The eighth battle was at the castle of Guinnon, in which Arthur carried the image of the perpetual virgin, the Blessed Mary, on his shoulders; and the pagans were put to flight on that day, and through the power of our Lord Jesus Christ, and through the power of Blessed Mary the virgin, there was great slaughter among them.]\(^{138}\)

In one sense, this is a pretty typical medieval depiction of a Christian army defeating a pagan army and gloating about their ideological superiority. Nennius reinforces the recent heathenness of the Saxons compared to the historical Christianity of the Britons and attributes the victory to divine judgment.

The suggestion has been made by some scholars, largely on account of this depiction, that the Arthurian section of the Historia is derivative of a poem in Old Welsh; and that theory has been compelling for multiple generations of scholarship on the Historia.\(^{139}\) If that is in fact the case, then arguments about Nennius’s role in shaping the Arthurian legend in this chapter become muddled in equivocations about what Nennius is

\(^{138}\) Nennius, III.56.

repeating and what he is introducing to the legend—which would, of course, be difficult to impossible to parse apart.

Such equivocations are unnecessary, however, as recent scholarship on Nennius has largely determined the Old Welsh poem theory to be untenable.\footnote{See Higham, \textit{King Arthur} 146 and Green, \textit{Concepts of Arthur} 19-21.} Indeed, the theory is largely contingent on two specific notes and some other very broad assumptions: note one) the battle names in some cases seem to rhyme, and the language may be reminiscent of Old Welsh poetic structure; note two) the seemingly unusual depiction of Arthur carrying the image of Mary on his shoulders is supposedly made clearer by an assumed scribal error of Old Welsh “iscuid” [shoulder] for “iscuit” [shield].

One has to admit the attractiveness and ingenuity of the scribal error theory. It is attractive because it speaks to our long-standing desire to uncover more of an Old Welsh poetic tradition, which we know existed. It is also a facet of our perpetual, institutionalized, and somewhat ironic privileging of the medieval vernacular over medieval Latin. However, it has been largely the appeal of this theory, its undisputable creativity, its longevity, and the authority of its proponents that have kept it upheld rather than the quality of its argument. Oliver Padel has demonstrated that there is little reason to assume a shield-cover would be any more acceptable a medium for the Virgin Mary’s image in the ninth-century than a banner or a tunic (both of which would be displayed on the shoulder).\footnote{Oliver Padel, \textit{Arthur in Medieval Welsh Literature} (Cardiff: University of Wales Press).} ‘Reminiscent’ Old Welsh poetic structure should not be a surprising find within a text by a Welsh-language author of imaginative literature living in the ninth-century. I think we can safely assume he would have been familiar enough with that structure for it to find its way into his own writing. Place names have common endings across many languages (\textit{Celidon},...
Guinnion; Legionis, Badonis; Germania, Britania, Beornicia); the fact that they rhyme is merely evidence that they are supposed to look like place names, not that they are from a poem.

Also, we should note that this theory is largely a development of the implicit assumptions that A) there was a historical Arthur who fought in battles and had poems written about those battles and B) Nennius is haphazardly compiling materials from existing sources rather than composing a rhetorically-driven historical tract. Both of those assumptions are problematic, to say the least. Though it is impossible to disprove this theory—it is based on some creative speculation, not actual evidence to disprove—I think it best to put it aside and, per Ockham’s razor, accept that Nennius composed the section himself as the better explanation.

The emphasis on the location of the image of the Virgin Mary’s image on Arthur’s person has taken attention away from some of the more interesting implications that Arthur’s association with this particular icon might have. There are a number of religious figures Nennius might have chosen for Arthur which would cast him in a more militaristic, vengeance-of-Our-Lord light; Mary is a far from obvious choice. Even if Nennius had simply chosen a cross for the warrior’s arms, the notion that his campaign was divinely sanctioned would have been sufficiently relayed. This, indeed, was the choice of the tenth-century annalist of the Annales Cambria who, “plagiarizing heavily” from the Historia Brittonum, substituted both the battle and the icon to be more recognizable: “LXXII. Annus. Bellum Badonis, in quo Arthur portavit crucem Domini nostri Jesu Christi tribus diebus et tribus noctibus in humeros suos et Britones victores fuerunt” [Year 516: The Battle of Badon, in

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142 Higham, King Arthur, 202.
which Arthur carried the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ for three days and three nights on his shoulders and the Britons were the victors.]\textsuperscript{143}

Nennius’s choice of the Virgin Mary as Arthur’s emblem is an important one and it serves his rhetorical positioning of Arthur in two particular ways. Firstly, the cult of the Virgin Mary was highly popular throughout Wales. As Jane Cartwright notes in her study on female spirituality in Medieval Wales, “there were far more churches and holy wells dedicated to Mary in Wales than any other Saint.”\textsuperscript{144} These sites stretch from Anglesey to St. David’s, all along Offa’s Dyke and everywhere in between. Furthermore, as Richard Barber argued some years ago, the particular brand of Mariolatry Nennius is employing here (evident in his title for her as “sanctae Mariae perpetuae virginis”) was becoming particularly popular in Wales in the ninth century.\textsuperscript{145} The Virgin was an important saint to \textit{all} of Wales; had Nennius used another saint, it might seem as though Arthur was partial or particular to a region which was associated with that saint. Christ and the Virgin are safe choices, in this respect, because it is impossible to regionalize them; they are too important for Christianity as a whole.

More important, however, is the Virgin Mary’s emphatic and long-standing association with sexual and racial purity. To Nennius (and to many others), Mary is the “perpetuæ virginis,” meaning that she was not simply a virgin during the Immaculate Conception, but she also remained a virgin during the birth of Jesus and throughout her

\textsuperscript{144} Jane Cartwright, \textit{Feminine Sanctity and Spirituality in Medieval Wales} (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2008): 9. It should be noted that most of these dedications can only be traced back to the eleventh century; this is not necessarily because they were not associated with the virgin before then, but because, as Cartwright notes, tracing dedications back earlier than that is “notoriously difficult.”
\textsuperscript{145} Richard Barber, \textit{The Figure of Arthur} (London: Longman, 1972): 101-03.
marriage to Joseph. Mary, possibly even more than Jesus, is Purity personified. Nennius’s association of her with Arthur suggests that this purity is similarly relative to Arthur and to Arthur’s campaign against the Saxons. Mary, and all that she stands for, are the utter antithesis to Vortigern’s sexual depravity, miscegenation, and weakness; her ethnic and sexual cleanliness enable Arthur’s success against the defiling and debasing Saxon culture and the threatening mixed culture of the border.

“Pa Gur?”: Arthur and the Specter of Hybridity on the Borders of Britain

Because of the *sui generis* nature of the *Historia*’s depiction of Arthur, it has historically been difficult to find texts of its era to compare Nennius’s Arthur to. Since Nennius depicts Arthur as a historical ‘battle leader’ rather than a folkloric superhero or rambunctious war-chief, explicit connections between the *Historia Brittonum* and *Culhwch ac Olwen, Preiddeu Annwn*, and the Saints’ lives are difficult to articulate. As I have argued, this is largely because Nennius is engaged in a novel reorientation of the Arthurian legend and much of British folklore; he is transitioning it from a dispersed, regionalized, inter-competitive tradition (as seen in *Culhwch ac Olwen*, etc.) into a national, unified, historical context.

However, there is at least one other early Arthurian text, “Pa Gur?” of the Black Book of Carmarthen, to which some explicit and implicit connections with the *Historia* can be made. Like the Historia, “Pa Gur?” depicts Arthur fighting in battles across far-flung areas of the British world and being overwhelmingly successful in those battles. One of the battles mentioned in “Pa Gur?”, “Tryfrwyd,” has been long suspected to be the same battle mentioned by Nennius for Arthur’s tenth victory: “Decimum gessit bellum in littore
Furthermore, due to the consistency of the portrayal of the Arthurian legend in this poem with other texts from the region and references to geography in southeastern Wales, “Pa Gur?” is, like the Historia, most likely derivative of the southeastern border area in the early to central Middle Ages.

It is not simply the origin of the poem near the border or its unique, direct correspondence with the Historia which mark it as relevant to the current study, however. “Pa Gur?” is a text which explores many ‘boundaries’, both literal and figurative, and is primarily concerned with the figures who inhabit, regulate and utilize those boundaries. “Pa Gur?,” I argue, much like the Historia Brittonum, is responding to a deep-seated cultural concern with encroaching Saxon culture and the development of a mixed culture on the border. Much like Nennius, the “Pa Gur?” poet is nostalgically recalling a fictional Arthurian past when such threats of intermixture were met with overwhelming and successful resistance.


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146 Nennius, III.56.
147 Patrick Sims-Williams, “Early Arthurian Poetry”, in The Arthur of the Welsh, ed. Rachel Bromwich et. al. (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1991): 33-72, 39. Dating this poem is difficult, but it was probably written between 900 and 1100.
148 Glewlwyd Gafaelfawr is known from Culhwch ac Olwen as Arthur’s porter, and as one of the “Tri Gwrthniviad Varhoc oedd yn Llys Arthur” [Three Irresistible Knights {who} were in Arthur’s Court], see Bromwich, TYP 268. See also Bromwich, TYP 361-362 for further elaboration on the character.
the pure. What goes with you? The best men there are.

To where Arthur is seeking access and precisely why his own porter will not give him that access does not seem to be a major concern for this poet. The setting is a traditional one with numerous analogues in other Welsh tales and scholars have primarily viewed this initial dialogue as a convenient stage to address more pressing poetic concerns, namely the lively recount of Arthur's war-band's achievements.

Though the lucid descriptions of the war-band's heroism and the terrifying enemies they encounter are, indeed, the primary topic of this poem, Arthur and the porter's interaction provides a metaphorical framework for those achievements. Arthur is refused access unless he can "gwared" [reveal/vouch] for his companions, and it is upon this request that Arthur enumerates their various achievements: "Ym ty ny doi onys guaredi. Mi ae guardi. athi aei gueli." ['In (this place) you will not come unless you reveal them.' 'I will reveal them, and you will see them'].

Green has argued that the use of "gwared" here is a reference to Arthur's ability to turn things, including people, invisible with a magical mantle named Gwenn mentioned in other texts. Such an enigmatic, folkloric reference is certainly within the general style and tone of "Pa Gur," but I think we should emphasize that Arthur, as a narrative persona, is accomplishing a figurative revealing in this poem as well. The doorway, like a border, is a symbolically transitory area; Arthur must reveal his war-band as appropriate figures for passage from the 'outside' (dark, distant, Otherly) to the inside (familiar, protected, privileged). The parallel poetic framework of opposing and

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150 Among other examples, Culhwch ac Olwen, Peredur vab Effrawg, and Nennius, III.32 all have porter scenes.
151 "Pa Gur?", ll. 4-5.
152 Green, Concepts of Arthur 81-82.
conflating Arthur and Glewlwyd the porter demonstrates that they are serving very similar metaphorical roles: they are liminal, regulatory figures, responsible for keeping that which belongs outside from getting inside.

This role is expanded in the descriptions of the battles which Arthur and his war-band fight. Unlike the contemporary portrayal of the Arthurian war-band in Culhwch, who kidnap giants’ daughters with playful alacrity, the war-band of “Pa Gur?” seem to approximate a weightier role. These men are sage advisors, “affivyon” [wizards?], and wise counselors, “duify cufil” [weighty in counsel], rather than the raucous buccaneers who accompany Arthur in Culhwch.153

Importantly, the Arthurian war-band of “Pa Gur?” is described as the line of defense, and specifically the line of defense in traditional border regions: “Oet rinn vy gueisson in amuin ev detvon... Oetin diffreidauc ar eidin cyminauc.” [strong were my servants in defending their rights... they defended Edinburgh on the border.]154 Edinburgh is a border of classical Britain, the longstanding stronghold of Brythonic people against the Picts and later the Saxons.155 As in the Historia Brittonum, Arthur is depicted as a defensive perimeter to the British people, fighting in far flung borders of the British past.

After a general appraisal of many members of his war-band, Arthur notes some of his own accomplishments and describes the nature of the enemies that his war-band defends the British from:

Arthur ced huarhei. Y guaed gouerei.

In neuat awarnach in imlat ew agurach.

153 “Pa Gur?” 94.6, 94.10. 
154 ibid., 94.8 – 95.1. 
Ew aguant pen palach. inatodev dissethach.

Ym minit eidin amuc a chinbin. Pop cant id cuitin.

Id cvitin pop cant rac beduir bedrydant.

Ar traethev trywruid. in amvin a garvluid.

Oet guychir y annuyd o cletyw ac yscuid.

[Arthur was only playing but he made the blood flow.
In the Hall of Awarnach while fighting with the witch.
He split the head of Palach in the place of Disethach.
On Mount Eidin (Edinburgh) he battled the dog-heads; by the hundred they fell.
They fell by the hundred before Bedwyr the Perfect.
On the banks of Tribruit, fighting with (Gwrgi) Garwlwyd.
He was furious(?) in nature of his sword and shield.]\(^156\)

Again we find Arthur and his closest companions fighting in Edinburgh on the border.
Similarly, the Battle on the Tribruit is here associated with Bedwyr, though earlier the poet had told us that “Neustuc manaud eis tull o trywruid” [Manawydan {son of Llyr} brought back shattered spears from Tribruit], and, as noted previously, the battle is explicitly connected with Arthur in the *Historia Brittonum*: “Decimum gessit bellum in littore fluminis, quod vocatur Tribruit.”\(^157\) Though we cannot confidently assign a specific locale to Tribruit, in the north with Edinburgh and Northumbria seems a plausible speculation. In all references, however, it is consistently a battle on a river, which connects it to anthropological conceptions of boundaries if not to an actual political boundary.

\(^{156}\) “Pa Gur?”, 95.3-12.

\(^{157}\) ibid., 94.11; Nennius III.56.
The form and function of these enemies are important to our understanding of the conception of the Arthurian legend in this poem. Arthur’s battle with a witch recalls depictions of him in other Welsh literature, such as in *Peredur* where he kills the witches of Gloucester and, more relative, in *Culhwch* where Arthur is tasked with fighting a witch in the “North” to collect her blood.\(^{158}\) Later in the poem, the deaths of nine more witches are attributed to Cai in the unidentified region of Ystavingun (Sims-Williams suggests Porth Ysgewin in the south-east border region).\(^{159}\)

The reference to the monster of “Dissethach” is much more difficult to nail down. The line is vague in that it might reference Arthur ‘splitting the head of Palach,’ as I translate above, or it may be a reference to a fuller name, as in “he pierced Penpalach in the dwelling of Disethach.” “Pen” is often incorporated into names (ie. Pendragon) and it is often a title, as in “chief”; though in this case “pen” and “palach” are distinctly separate words in the manuscript.\(^{160}\) “Palach” does not occur elsewhere as a name, but the plural of the word, “pelechi”, is used to gloss the L. “clauæ” [clubs] in the Cambridge Juvencus Manuscript (Cambridge, University Library MS Ff.4.42).\(^{161}\) Especially since Cambridge Juvencus, like “Pa Gur?”, seems to be derivative of South Wales (and possibly near the border) in the tenth century,\(^{162}\) “cudgel” or “club” is an appropriate base for the name

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\(^{159}\) “Pa Gur?”, 95.6-7.

\(^{160}\) “Pa Gur?” is contained in the Black Book of Carmarthen: Aberystwyth, National Library of Wales, Peniarth MS 1, f. 47v – 49r; the reference to “pen palach” is on 48r. Consulted online at www.llgc.org.uk.


\(^{162}\) The location of the south east border area for the Cambridge Juvencus is, of course, not definitive; that speculation is based on some interesting glosses of Anglo-Saxon
“Palach.” Lloyd-Jones also notes that “pal” is the base of many Brythonic lexemes related to beating (W. paladr [spear]) and digging (W. palu [to dig], Br. pâl [spade]). The ending “-ach” has a few potential meanings, but the one that seems most applicable to here is the common derogative suffix (compare “corrach” [dwarf], gwrach [hag], and “dynionach” [contemptible people]).

Given this linguistic context and the variety of enemies encountered by the war-band, identifying Palach as a giant is an attractive speculation: medieval giants are commonly associated with cudgels or clubs (as opposed to more chivalric weaponry), and attaching a derogative suffix gives an appropriate sense of distaste that one should have for giants. Furthermore, giants are a common supernatural enemy and are not otherwise represented in the poem, despite the obvious attempt to depict the Arthurian warband fighting a wide range of folkloric enemies.

Arthur’s battle with the “cinbin” [dog-heads] of Mount Eiden is less obscure, as it is clearly relative to the wider Classical and medieval tradition of the Cynocephali, dog-headed men, often depicted in the Far East. With these vague dog-headed warriors we can also connect the enemy Arthur and Bedwyr encounter at Tribruit two lines later, “Garvluid” [“rough-grey”]. This is almost certainly a reference to Gwrgi Garwlwyd of Triad 32, one of the “Teir Mat Gyflauan” [Three Fortunate Slaughters]: “A Diffydell mab Dysgyfdawt (a ladawd) Gwrgi Garwlwyd. A’r Gwrghi hwnnw a ladei gelein beunyd o’r Kymyry, a dwy bob


163 Sims-Williams uses this translation.
164 GPC, s.v. “-ach”.
165 I am indebted to both Charlene Eska and Paul Russell for their advice on the linguistic possibilities of “palach”—though the circumstantial and purely hypothetical suggestion that he might be a giant is my own hesitant speculation.
Sadwrn rac (llad) y Sul vr un" [And Diffyddl son of Dysgyfdawd who slew Gwrgi Garwlwyd {‘Rough Grey’}. That Gwrgi used to make a corpse of one of the Cymry every day, and two on each Saturday so as not to {slay} one on Sunday.”166 We can deduce from Gwrgi’s name, a combination of “gwr” [man] and “ci” [dog], and his epithet, “rough-grey” (probably a reference to his appearance), that Gwrgi is a similar creature to the “cinbin” [dog-heads] Arthur fights on Mount Eidyn.167

The last enemy mentioned before the poem breaks off unfinished is the famous Cath Palug [Palug’s Cat] who is confronted by Cai and the Arthurian war band on the Isle of Anglesey. We are told that “Nau ugein kinlluc a cuyt ei in y buyd” [nine score warriors?] fell as its food] before the war-band attacked it.168 This monster also has precedence in Triad 26, where she is said to have been born of Henwen the swine and thrown into the sea. Cath Palug survives, of course, and is cited as one of the “Deir Prif Ormes Mon a uagwyt yndi” [Three Great Oppressions of Môn, nurtured therein].169

The areas where the Arthurian war-band encounters these enemies are, all in all, pretty typical locations which might host military engagements at any time in history: islands, straits, rivers, and, importantly, political borders and boundaries. However, given the figurative framework of the poem (at a doorway) and the nature of the monsters Arthur is engaging, the author may have also chosen the locations because they are characteristically “liminal” topographic features—they entail folkloric associations with

166 Bromwich, trans., TYP, 73-74.
167 Bromwich summarizes the scholarly discussion and general consensus that Gwrgi is some type of werewolf in TYP, 385. Sims-Williams directly compares this enemy to the “cinbin” in “Early Arthurian Poetry,” 42.
168 “Pa Gur?” ll. 87-88.
169 “Tri Gwrdueichyat Enys Prydein” [Three Powerful Swineherds of the Island of Britain], Bromwich, TYP 50-58; 26 WR, l.25.
physical and metaphysical transgression and transition.\textsuperscript{170} It is, indeed, these figurative, metaphorical boundaries that Arthur is enforcing in the poem: witches, giants, werewolf figures, and monstrous cats born from pigs are monsters of “hybridity,” to use Bhabha’s terminology. They are paradoxically assimilative and disjunctive and are representative of the cultural assimilation and disjunction that characterizes political boundaries. The poet imagines these disruptive, hybrid enemies on the far-flung boundaries and borders of the British past, but they are the manifestation of his psychosomatic obsession with hybridized culture and mixed bodies on the Welsh border he comes from.

These terrifying enemies, especially the witches, dog-heads, and giants derive their monstrosity from being part-human and part Other; they complicate the artificial conceptions of racial and sexual purity being literally enforced by Arthur and figuratively enforced by the author. As Bhabha describes this “paranoid threat from the hybrid,” it is troubling to segregationist rhetoric and ethnic/sexual control “because it breaks the symmetry and duality of self/other, inside/outside. In the productivity of power, the boundaries of authority—its reality effects—are always besieged by ‘the other scene’ of fixations and phantoms.”\textsuperscript{171} The elision of these clear, pure boundaries of


\textsuperscript{171} Bhabha, The Location of Culture 165-166.
Welsh/English/human/Other is a direct threat to the author’s imagination of an artificial cultural/racial unity.

The narrative mode and poetic style employed by the author of “Pa Gur?” to articulate this threat is wholly different from Nennius’s mode and style—and their differences move far beyond language. Nennius is working within a historical narrative tradition directly tied to the wider European and Christian concepts of history and eschatology, cultural continuity and change, progression and denigration, morality and sin, and the *translatio imperii*.172 “Pa Gur?”, on the other hand, is founded in a tradition of battle songs and praise poems, monster tales and marwnaddau, folklore and praise englynions, epic lists and epic boasts. These works are of essentially different conventions and I do not want to overly conflate their individual traditions; such differences speak to the astounding diversity of literary practices along the border.

Yet, nonetheless, it is equally important to recognize that these two writers from the south-eastern border region both display a visceral aversion to cultural assimilation and hybridity—a complementary aversion which is more comprehensible when their similar origins are considered. Nennius’s Vortigern—his sinful sexual depravity and passive intermixture with the Saxons—finds his metaphorical reciprocation in the dog-heads and witches of the “Pa Gur?” poet’s ancient northern borders. Both Vortigern and these hybrid monstrosities are a direct threat to British political sovereignty, as it is made abundantly clear. But they are more pointedly threats to the conception of “Britishness” as a contiguous and pure entity. The imaginary destruction of these threats allows for a fantasy of recapturing that purity and reinforcing cultural segregation along the border.

172 Howlett, *Cambro-Latin Compositions*, explores Nennius’s connections to wider European traditions in more detail.
Furthermore, it is not the final result—the eventual destruction of the overtly sexual and racial hybrid threat—which is productive for these nationalizing motives. The process of directing rhetorical and physical violence at these threats is the only real production, here. The hybrid scapegoats incur the purgative calumnies of the remaining population because the remaining population are themselves plagued by a lack of cultural purity. The process of identifying and vilifying hybridity artificially segregates the hybrid from the remainder of the population. The rhetorical tenets of these literary works are not a means to an end; alleviating the forces which elide fantasies of national coherence is an unattainable end. Their means are the end: by creating a literary fantasy of a hybrid scapegoat which is segregated from an equally fantastical “pure” British culture, these authors are creating a perception of pre-existing ‘mixed’ and ‘pure’ entities. Though this perception is a false one—cultural/racial purity in any sense is unattainable in this context—this perception is the only stable bastion of shared history and potential unification. Historical and legendary imaginative writing are the only solid foundations of national unity and nationalism.

It is also important to recognize that both of these authors imagine Arthur, and Arthurian literature, as the primary response to these impending threats of hybridity. Though they have drawn their conception of this warrior from the legendary lore local to the border area, they rearticulate his role as representative of a collective British populace, wholly intent on segregating that which has been assimilated, on dis-integrating (and disintegrating) the blurred lines of mixture in favor of clean division of peoples and cultures. It is not simply that this use of Arthurian literature is from the border—it is the border. Both Arthur’s literary figure and figurative Arthurian literature are being
articulated as performing cultural and political actions that the border is *supposed* to perform yet is failing to do so: segregating, separating and defining the peoples and their cultures as two wholly separate nations.

These works represent some of the earliest and most extensive articulation of this use of the Arthurian legend as a border entity. Their development of the Arthurian legend on the border is vitally important to the reuse, revision and reaction to these concepts explored in later Arthurian border literature. These poets have not created this conception of Arthur in a vacuum, however. The connection of the Arthurian legend to the border region is one that reaches back centuries, further back than any other region’s use of Arthur. As I discuss in the preface, the reference to Arthur in the border text “Marwnad Cynddylan” is probably the earliest surviving written reference to the legend and the casual nature of the reference indicates that the legend was widely known in the northern border area almost two centuries before Nennius’s writing. In the following section, I reconstruct another early connection of Arthur and the border. This connection is possibly one of the sources for Nennius and the “Pa Gur?” poet’s conception of the Arthurian legend on the border—one that is directly relative to the rhetorical conceits developed in their more expansive surviving works.

**Licat Amr and the Origin of the Border**

Est aliud miraculum in regione quæ vocatur Ercing. Habetur ibi sepulchrum juxta fontem qui cognominatur Licat Anir, et viri nomen, qui sepultus est in tumulo, sic vocabatur. Anir filius Arthuri militis erat, et ipse occidit eum ibidem, et sepelivit. Et veniunt homines ad mensurandum tumulum; in longitudine aliquando sex pedes,
aliquando novem, aliquando quindecim. In qua mensura metieris eum in ista vice, iterum non invenies eum in una mensura; et ego solus probavi.

[There is another wonder in the region which is called Ercing. A tomb is located here next to a spring which is called Licat Amr; and the name of the man who is in the tomb was called thus: Amr. He was the son of Arthur the soldier, and Arthur killed him and buried him in this place. And men come to measure the tomb; in length sometimes it is six feet, sometimes twelve, sometimes fifteen. In whatever measurement you find it one time, another time you will not find it the same measurement—and I myself have tested this.]

Nennius’s onomastic description of this spring is relatively familiar within Arthurian studies, since it contains an early description of Arthur and one of the very few references to Arthur’s children. Indeed, this particular child is only mentioned in one other text, as I discuss below. “Licat Anir” is not particularly different from the other wonders that Nennius describes: it is a strange topographical feature which can be explained by etymology and foundational narrative. This portrayal of Arthur is commonly read along side of the description of Arthur’s dog’s footprint, Carn Cabal, in the previous wonder, and both are understood as being a more “folkloric” portrayal of Arthur than in the history section of the Historia Brittonum.173 Because there has been little other context revealed for this wonder, most of our assumptions about it derive from extrapolating information from the names Nennius uses.

173 Green, Concepts of Arthur 71.
“Licat” is a Latinization of the Old Welsh “Llygad”, which translates to “eye”. “Anir”, similarly, is a Latinization of Amr, and might also have an ocular stemma (amrant [eyelid], amrantun [nap], amrantiad [instant; ‘blink of an eye’]). Some scholars, however, have suggested a back-formation of the name from the River Gamber for Amr’s name.174 Regardless of the “real” etymology of Amr, the tradition that Nennius records is clear: “Licat Anir” is an anthropomorphic and etymological metaphor for an important topographical feature of the local landscape: the origin of the River Gamber is “Amr’s Eye,” from which a stream of tears continually springs.

Embedded within this miraculum description is an otherwise unattested story of Arthur and his son, Amr: “Anir filius Arthuri militis erat, et ipse occidit eum ibidem, et sepelivit.” The story, like Arthur’s hunt of Twrch Trwth in the description of “Cairn Cabal,” is alluded to rather than recited in full; so we must assume that the tale would have been familiar enough to have some currency even across large geographic areas of Wales. Although the finer points of this story will remain largely unknown to modern readers (barring new discoveries), I argue it is possible to tentatively reconstruct some of the broader elements of the tale and gesture towards some of its general implications.

Part of Nennius’s point in the Mirabilia section is tying known stories to a particular place (“ipse occidit eum ibidem,” my emphasis), therefore it is important to consider the region in which Nennius locates Licat Amr. Ercing [W. Ergyng, OE. Archenfield] is in the southwestern portion of modern-day Herefordshire and was an independent Welsh kingdom in the early medieval period. After Anglo-Saxon incursions into the area in the eighth century, the Welsh control over the area became questionable—but not negligible.

174 Higham, King Arthur 89, 153.
Ergyng was no longer wholly part of Wales, but neither would it be wholly a part of England until well after the medieval period. The *Domesday Book*, for instance, presents landowners in the wider area as being “in Herefordscire 7 in Arcenefeld 7 in Walis,” which implies Archenfield’s individuation from either “Herefordscire” or “Walis.” This individuation must have had some tax benefits as well, because Archenfield section was not hidated and pays no geld in the *Domesday Book*.176

Evidence for distinguishing this area from both Wales and England at an even earlier date is present in an Anglo-Saxon law code deriving from Ergyng/Archenfield, “The Ordinance Concerning the Dunsæte.”177 This intriguing document, which might date from anywhere between the early ninth century to the eleventh century, suggests a large degree of cooperation and peaceful coexistence between the Saxon and Welsh communities in the area, even to the point of cooperative self-government.178 As with any community, there are practical concerns for dealing with theft and unaccompanied travel; the ordinance states that these legal issues were to be governed by an equally weighted committee of English and Welsh “lawmen”:

175 The termination of their official mixed designation would have been the 1535 and 1543 Laws of Wales Acts. See Raithby and Strahan, ed., *The Statutes at Large*.
178 Dating the Ordinance is a tricky subject matter for historians. Some, such as Gelling, *West Midlands*, pp. 113-19 and F. Noble, suggest the ordinance itself was written down in its current form in the 10th century, but was based on a much earlier agreement. Liebermann’s original dating of the mid-tenth century has been followed by most, but has recently been called into question in favor of a much later date by Molyneaux, who discusses this in detail, “The Ordinance Concerning the Dunsæte” 252-254.
3.2) XII lahmen scylon riht tæcean Wealan 7 Ėnglan: VI Englisce 7 VI Wylisce.

3.3) Ðolien ealles ðæs hy agon, gif hi woh tæcen; oððe geladian hi, þæt hi bet ne cuðon.

[3.2) 12 Welsh and English lawmen shall determine the right (judgment): 6 English and 6 Welsh.

3.3) Let them suffer the loss of all that they own if they judge wrongly; or exculpate themselves if they know no better.]

The document seems to incorporate at least some elements of Welsh law, especially in the triplet time frames described in the body of the text. However, because both Anglo-Saxon and Welsh legal systems are built around similar foundations (both are status-based and compensatory systems), it is difficult to judge the full extent of English/Welsh legal borrowing in the document. As George Molyneaux has recently argued, there are strong reasons to view the “Ordinance” as “a compromise, which combined English and Welsh customs.”

Such a situation largely contradicts the broad political brushstrokes made by historians that characterize the relationship between the Saxons and the Welsh in this time period as being solely characterized by conflict and conquest. The people in Archenfield/Ergyng lived in close quarters with one another, combined legal traditions, and shared administrative responsibilities and ecclesiastical offices. Small border communities such as this, where people and customs intermixed peaceably for centuries,

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180 Molyneaux, “The Ordinance Concerning the Dunsæte” 270. See also Sara Elin Roberts, The Legal Triads of Medieval Wales (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2007).
181 Molyneaux, “The Ordinance Concerning the Dunsæte,” 270.
are probably much more prevalent than our history books suggest—everyday life rarely makes the historical record.

The area is also particularly important to the current topic since it is just to the north of Gwent and the Severn estuary where, as I have argued, we should locate Nennius prior to his relocation to Gwynedd and Merfyn Ferch’s court. Nennius emphasizes his own personal familiarity with this site, “et ego solus probavi”—something he does for only one other wonder, which is nearby in Gwent.\textsuperscript{183} This is an area and context with which the author is intimately familiar and which has considerably shaped his understanding of Wales, the border, and Arthur.

Of Amr himself, however, we have little other record. Of the entire medieval Welsh corpus, there is only one other mention of him: as one of the “mackwy” [squires] in Arthur’s court in the much later romance \textit{Geraint}:

\begin{quote}

[And when came the following day, they woke. And Arthur called on the chamberlains; no less than four squires guarded {Arthur’s} bed! This is who they were: Cadrieth son of the porter Gandwy, and Amhren son of Bedwyr, \textbf{and Amhar the son of Arthur,} and Goreu son of Custennyn.]\textsuperscript{184}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{183} Nennius, 72.

\textsuperscript{184} The text is adapted from the \textit{Rhyddiaith Gymraig} project’s transcription of Oxford, Jesus College MS. 11, f.190v: col. 1, ll. 39-45; the translation and emphasis are my own. See Diana Luft, Peter Wynn Thomas and D. Mark Smith, eds., \textit{Rhyddiaith Gymraeg 1300-1425}, http://www.rhyddiaithganolesol.caerdydd.ac.uk.
The later romance writer portrays Amr as one of four *gweisson* [attendants, servants] who dress Arthur and tend to his personal quarters (“Agadwei ywely”). He is not given the official legal title for heir apparent (edling), so we might assume that Arthur has another son filling that role. Though being a chamberlain might seem, from our modern perspective, to be a demeaning role, it is actually one of deep intimacy with the king and would have been appropriate for such a well-born youth. The fact that Arthur has four chamberlains is merely indicative of his exaggerated, imperial and imperious status. At the very least, this later reference tells us that Amr/Amhar was considered to have been in Arthur’s good graces for a portion of his legend.

At present, we have a man, Amr, who was at one point legally recognized and honored as Arthur’s son and who at some later point was killed by Arthur in a region widely recognized as being culturally intermixed. Arthur then takes the time to bury Amr in the same spot as his death, which might imply a sense of regret for his deed or a lingering fondness for Amr; otherwise, why not leave the body for the birds? From these known portions of the story, I argue that we can tentatively reconstruct some of the primary plot elements through the comparative folkloric tradition. I postulate that the story of Arthur and Amr which Nennius references is a common Indo-European folk motif whereby a father and son engage in fatal combat because of a tragic misrecognition and the survivor buries the other: Thompson Motif-Index number N731.2.

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185 Charlene Eska helped me pick apart the legal/courtly issues in this reference—for which I am most grateful.
186 This is under the assumption that the twelfth-century writer of *Geraint* knew more of Amr’s legend than do we. I think this is a reasonable assumption, but he may very well have gleaned the reference from the *Historia Brittonum* himself and backfilled from there.
187 Stith Thompson, *Motif-Index of Folk Literature: a classification of narrative elements in folktales, ballads, myths, fables, mediaeval romances, exempla, fabliaux, jest-books, and local*
Though there are no Welsh analogues I am aware of, there are plenty within the Irish and Germanic traditions. The story of Cú Chulainn’s fatal conflict with his son Connla is a fitting comparison: Cú Chulainn fathers Connla on the Scottish female warrior, Aífe, and instructs her to send the boy to Ireland and find him when he is of age. When the precocious seven-year old crosses the sea by himself, shooting great birds down from the sky with a sling, the men of Ulster see him as a threat and call upon Cú Chulainn to fight him. Cú Chulainn is warned that it might be his son, but he ignores this advice for the honor of Ulster. He does not recognize the half-Scottish half-Irish boy, and kills him. When Connla is mortally wounded he reveals his identity, and Cú Chulain becomes remorseful and buries him.188

Another analogue which is important for comparison to Arthur/Amr story is from the Old High German/Old Saxon *Hildebranslied*. In this particular sequence, it is the father, Hildebrand, who is returning from foreign lands—specifically he had gone to the Huns to escape the wrath of King Odoacer: “forn her ostar geweit, floh her Otachres nid” [Long ago he departed to the East, he fled Odoacer’s hate].189 When he returns, Hildebrand’s son Hadubrand challenges him to single combat because he suspects he is a Hun. Hildebrand offers golden arm-bands from Atilla to stop the fight, but Hadubrand suspects treachery:

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“Mit geru scal man geba infahan, ort widar orte. Du bist dir, alter Hun, ummet spaher; spenis mih mit dinem wortun, wili mih dinu speru werpan” [With spear shall man receive such a gift, point against point. You are a cunning old Hun, ever scheming; luring me with your words, you will cast your spear at me.] 190

Hadubrand’s accusation, “Du bist dir, alter Hun” [you are a cunning old Hun], pointedly addresses the primary friction in all of these folktales: the friction between the intimate blood bond of a father and son (a privileged link in patrilineal society) and the perceived dissolution of that bond by cultural assimilation or estrangement. In their own distinct manner, each iteration of this folk story manifestly speaks to a pervasive fear of intermixture, of becoming unrecognizable and dangerous by estrangement or miscegenation. The overriding moral is that the bonds of blood cannot always abrogate the bonds of an imagined ethnically and culturally contiguous community. Cultural assimilation, ethnic integration, hybridity and homogenization are the primary causes of each wholly avoidable misrecognition and tragedy.

Given the origins of Nennius near these culturally mixed portions of the Anglo-Welsh border and the emphatic localization of this particular legend in an area like Ergyng /Archenfield, we can draw some valuable implications from Nennius’s deceptively simple mirabilia tale. Much like the Goidelic-language areas of the North Irish Sea and the Germanic-language areas on the continent in the early Middle Ages, the Anglo-Welsh border is an area of prolonged contact and assimilation; that assimilation is seen as threatening or disturbing to some, and this particular folktale speaks to the perceived consequences of those threats well before Nennius produced the Historia Brittonum.

190 ibid. ll. 37-40
We are left, however, with some questions about Nennius’s reference to this particular version of the story: What was the immediate cause for conflict between Arthur and Amr? Was Amr, like Hildebrand, returning from a long-term immersion in another culture? Or, like Conla, was Amr the product of ethnic mixing? Whatever the cause of the conflict, Nennius is quite clear on the outcome of their confrontation: Arthur fought Amr, killed him, and buried him in an area that contemporary readers would recognize as “mixed” and belonging to neither England nor Wales.

Also embedded within Nennius’s description of Licat Amr is an origin story of the River Gamber in modern-day Herefordshire. Scholars have debated whether the name “Amr” predates the naming of the spring or whether “Amr” is derivative of the river to which his name is now associated, but the legend to which Nennius refers is clear: there was no spring, and therefore no River Gamber, until Arthur killed Amr and buried his body in this location. As shown by Figure 2, the River Gamber is one of the larger tributaries to the Wye and neatly divides Ergyng/Archenfield into two similarly sized sections: the land between the Gamber and the Wye to the northeast and the land between the Gamber and the Monnow to the southeast. The Wye flowing through Hereford was perceived of as the “border” between England and Wales in the early Middle Ages and the River Monnow to the south was considered the border in the later Middle Ages—it is, in fact, now the current border. It is not unreasonable to assume that in the constant fluctuations of resettlement and property transfer, the River Gamber was once considered a boundary separating English and Welsh communities in the Ergyng/Archenfield area before their eventual integration.
A boundary river miraculously formed from the death, interment and metaphorical tears of a culturally misrecognized, mixed or otherwise identity-troubled character would be a rather poignant folk story. If that is the case, then Amr's tragic misrecognition by Arthur—a misrecognition possibly caused by ethnic mixing or cultural estrangement—literally creates the imagined geographical and political entity which is intended to enforce widespread recognition and segregation. A lost folk story of the sort suggested would speak to an already present angst over the elision of cultural clarity resulting from long-
term contact on the border and a fantasy of controlling that cultural elision and assimilation through geo-political segregation. Though such segregation fantasy was not to come to fruition—Ergyng/Archenfield would remain mixed for some time—it was effective in another sense: the seeming inability to control the mixed border regions instigated a reactionary conception of cultural and ethnic purity and unity developed by Nennius and the “Pa Gur?” poet some years later.

If we accept this reconstruction of Amr’s legend, we have three separate, pre-Norman imaginative Arthurian works composed on the Anglo-Welsh border which depict Arthur as a defender of British “purity”. These compositions are essentially attempts to define, both by force and imagination, the ideological constructs which allow a culture to demarcate itself into a contiguous community. Arthur and the border are both demiurgic, originative forces behind the creation of a false collective consciousness which is intrinsic to a primeval British nationalism. The concept of Pura Wallia, which is later portrayed as the precursor and victim to an encroaching Marchia Wallia, is actually, and ironically, derivative of mixed border culture and Arthurian literature.

Nennius’s description of Licat Amr speaks to this process in some very subtle but revealing ways. His narrative of going to measure the tomb and never being able to arrive at a consistent, containable measurement is something of a poignant metaphor about the role of Arthurian literature and the March of Wales in medieval identity construction. The Nation State, the Anglo-Welsh border, and the Arthurian legend are all imaginary, ideological constructions constituted by materialist, epistemological thought. Arthur and the border do not actually exist but are ideological constructs which are generative of and generated by the ideological subjects’ material conditions of existence. Because the
ideological subjects assume Arthur/Border/Britain’s existence, it is product/producer of material consequences: manifestos, dykes and the dead bodies of nationalist-driven wars. The metaphysical fantasies of ideology are inextricably linked to causes and consequences in the physical world. This description of Licat Amr is one such formative link, or an attempt at a link. Here and throughout the Historia, Nennius attempts to inscribe the unearthly deeds of the glorious past onto the physical earthen relics which surround him and his readers. On one level, he is inscribing the legend of Arthur’s filicide onto a rocky hole and spring in southwest Herefordshire. On another level, however, he is attempting to inscribe the legend’s moral and the ideological construct of a pure Wales into the physical persons surrounding that rocky hole and spring.

Just as Amr’s tomb changes size every time Nennius returns, however, these ideological apparatuses are ultimately immeasurable and uncontainable. We cannot consistently quantify the causes and consequences of ideological constructs upon actual existence. Nennius’s attempts to control and deter the hybrid bodies which erupt his cleanly segregated and wholly unified Wales eventually prove unsuccessful. The border culture of the following centuries grew even more integrative and individuated despite his and others’ resistance. The miscegenation and mixing he castigates would increase exponentially with the advent of Norman culture. Furthermore, as we will see with Geoffrey of Monmouth’s use of the legend in the twelfth century, the extent to which the Arthurian legend would come to represent intrinsic features of Anglo-Welsh border culture would grow far beyond the original boundaries delimited by Nennius.
2) “Alienos Ortulos”: Geoffrey of Monmouth in the Garden of Others

“Rogatu itaque illius ductus, tametsi infra alienos ortulos falerata uerba non
collegerim, agresti tamen stilo propriisque calamis contentus codicem illum in
Latinum sermonem transferre curaui. Nam si ampulosis dictionibus paginam
illinissem, tedium legentibus inererem, dum magis in exponendis uerbis quam in
historia intelligenda ipsos commorari oporteret....
tua recepias ut sub tegmine tam patule arboris recubans calamum muse mee coram
inuidis atque improbis tuto modulamine resonare queam.”

[So I began at {the Archdeacon of Oxford} Walter’s request to translate that book
into Latin, content with my own lowly style and not seeking to gather gilded
expressions from other writers’ gardens. It would certainly annoy my readers if I
attempted to render the original in flowery speech, since they would dwell more on
unraveling my words than on understanding the history itself...]

{receive this history while} reposing under such spreading boughs and far from the
presence of the jealous and craven, shall I be able to play the reeds that truly belong
to you, my muse, in perfect measure.]191

191 The Historia Regum Britannie of Geoffrey of Monmouth I: Bern, Burgerbibliothek, MS. 568,
rather than the more recent standard edition by Reeve (Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer,
2007) because I am particularly interested in the Bern MS as representative of Geoffrey’s
final emendations of some important sections of his text; in particular I highlight the
dedicator epistle to King Stephen and the epitaph at end of the Arthurian section,
discussed below. Here and throughout this chapter, I have primarily used Michael Faletra’s
translation of the Bern MS, but (where noted) I have occasionally emended his translation
to punctuate certain facets of my own argument; Michael Faletra, The History of the Kings of
Despite his attestations of humility, Geoffrey of Monmouth’s oft-cited dedicatory epistle is an efflorescence of rhetorical finery. This preface to his astoundingly popular History of the Kings of Britain is, in and of itself, a study in the stylistics of political patronage and the medieval humility topos. In the extensive study of this dedication, scholars have largely concentrated on the political complexity of Geoffrey’s appeals for patronage and Geoffrey’s tantalizing reference to a “Britannici sermonis librum uetustissimum” [very ancient book in the British language]. In the following analysis of Geoffrey’s presentation of King Arthur and the Welsh/Norman reactions to this presentation, I also address the importance of this “codicem” and the ramifications of his various appeals to benefactors by framing the Historia within the cultural and political atmosphere of the twelfth-century March of Wales. I argue that by emphasizing this work’s origin and early reception along the Anglo-Welsh border, we can greatly enhance our understanding of its literary and political complexities. However, I first want to draw attention to Geoffrey’s seemingly odd and generally ignored characterization of his text (and the sources for his text) as being a “garden.”

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192 This is, even as he expressly rejects that rhetorical tradition which had typically been tied to a providentialist historical reading; see Kellie Robertson, “Geoffrey of Monmouth and the Translation of Insular Historiography” Arthuriana 8.4 (1998): 42-57.

In describing the composition of his book, Geoffrey claims that he has not gathered “falerata uerba” from the “alienos ortulos” for his own garden of text, but has instead maintained his own “agresti... stilo” of “calamis.” Geoffrey’s very words, of course, belie the very claim they make, as each word germinates and fertilizes the elaborate style which he has supposedly weeded out: “agresti” is typically translated as “rustic” or “humble”, but its etymological roots connect it to the agrarian “alienos ortulos” Geoffrey has sworn off. His “propriisque calamis” simultaneously inhabits the worlds of botanical, musical, and historical development: a *calamus* is literally a “reed” or “cane” but by synecdochic extension is also a “pen” and a “flute”—the reeds which lace the reflecting pools of Classical pleasure gardens are thus the instruments of narrative composition and the musical performance of that narrative. Moreover, he imagines piping this history to the patron in just such an enclosed, arboreal pleasure garden, safe from detractors and critics. The garden is both a metaphor for Geoffrey’s history and a metaphor for the idyllic and ideal reception of that history.

It becomes apparent in his dedication that Geoffrey’s garden does not merely serve ornamental purposes but is to enable and encompass a certain *transformative* potential: “Opusculo igitur meo, Stephane rex Anglie, faueas ut sic te doctore te monitore corrigatur quod non ex Gaufridi Monemutensis fonticulo censeatur extortum set sale minerue tue” [Therefore, Stephen, King of England, accept my little book and let it be set aright by your learning and probity so that it may no longer be considered the work of Geoffrey of

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194 For an overview of Roman pleasure gardens with special emphasis on the waterways see Katherine Wentworth Rinne’s overview of the Gardens of Lucullus in *Aquae Urbis Romae: The Waters of the City of Rome* (Charlottesville: Institute for Advanced Technology in the Humanities, 1998-2014).
Monmouth but instead the product of your own sagacity.]¹⁹⁵ Stephen is not simply to read Geoffrey’s work for his own pleasure and edification, but is to correct it (corrigatur) and create it into his own.

It is easy to dismiss Geoffrey’s appeal to Stephen as political unctuousness. Given Geoffrey’s direct proscription of British historical writing to other historians at the end of his work, I think any argument that Geoffrey somehow actually desires or expects Stephen to take up, read, correct and then subsume the book to his own authorship is untenable.¹⁹⁶ Furthermore, and as I discuss in much more detail in the final section of this chapter, this dedication was originally addressed to Robert of Gloucester and he has retained all parts of the dedication except identifying features of Stephen. However, despite being disingenuous flattery of the highest order, the offer does touch upon a larger truth of Geoffrey’s work: reading history is never a passive, inert process but effects changes in both the reader and the reading. Kings and histories possess an interlinked metamorphic potential, and the figurative space of the garden—natural yet unnatural, controlling yet controlled, safe yet subversive—is an apt metaphor for that potential.

By framing the political reception of his work in garden terminology, Geoffrey is both anticipating future literary gardens (January’s garden in Chaucer’s “Merchant’s Tale” comes to mind as particularly fraught with dichotomy and subversion) and recalling past ones. In particular, Geoffrey’s attention to metamorphosis and an important “codicem” resonates strongly with the garden Saint Augustine wandered into when he was at the height of his internal turmoil. Plagued with his continuing struggle with sin and secularity, Augustine throws himself “sub quadam fici arbores” [beneath a certain fig tree] in the

¹⁹⁵ Bern MS. 3.
¹⁹⁶ See Bern MS. 208.
garden which is adjacent to his house, vehemently petitioning God for guidance. \(1^97\) Immediately after a heartfelt supplication, Augustine hears a small child’s voice: “Et ecce audio vocem de vicina domo cum cantu dicentis et crebro repetentis, quasi pueri an puellae, nescio: ‘tolle lege, tolle lege.’ Stamique mutato vultu ... nihil aliud interpretans divinitus mihi iuberi nisi ut aperirem codicem et legerem quod primum caput invenissem.” [And behold—I hear a voice from the adjacent house, I do not know if it is a boy or girl, singing some words repeatedly, one after another: “Take it, read it; take it, read it.” Immediately my face changed... I interpreted it as nothing less than divine intervention, commanding me to take up the book and read the first section I came upon.]\(^1^9^8\) Augustine does precisely this, of course, and the verse of the Bible he reads (Romans 13:13-14) provokes the lifelong conversion of his soul to superior Christian living.

I draw attention to this passage in the *Confessions* because it helps to illustrate the symbolism implicit in Geoffrey’s own textual gardens. Augustine goes into the garden to *reflect* upon his soul and to find answers to his metaphysical queries; the garden and the book enable and assist in the internal reflection necessary for a miraculous transformation. Prostrating oneself to God beneath a fruit tree in a garden is, of course, entirely appropriate: a garden is where humankind lost the Earthly Paradise through sin, and only by reflecting upon that Original Sin can Augustine’s own sins be reprieved so that he may gain Paradise proper. However, Augustine’s garden, as all gardens, is multivalent—it is the Garden of Eden, yes, but it also recalls the garden of *Confessions*, Book II where Augustine stole some pears for fun, an act he singles out as particularly reprehensible because of its


\(^1^9^8\) ibid., VIII.29.
lack of motive. The ambiguity of Augustine’s garden—being representative of sin and salvation, of past and future, of personal and universal—is the primary quality which enacts its metamorphic ability. Gardens are intentionally constructed as liminal and reflective spaces, spatially individuated for their transformative potential; they are a simulacrum of N/nature, innerspaces of reflection which are themselves endless chains of symbolic reflections.

Much like gardens and historical books, Geoffrey’s March of Wales is a place of reflection and transformative potential. In one sense, its entire existence is a consecutive series of reflections: borders have no primary “Form”—they are modeled upon a model which has no original. We associate the Anglo-Welsh border with the Severn, with the Monnow and with Offa’s Dyke, but the March is only a reflection of these natural and artificial physical divisions in the sense that the March is a reflection of previous borders where rivers and dykes were used as physical divisions. In an Aristotelian understanding, the “matter” of the border material is not separable from the form which precedes it, but the form is itself modeled off of other forms. It is the symbolic meanings attached to these endless series of multivalent physical objects which creates any sense of “border-ness.” As Henk van Houtum says in his meta-critical consideration of European borders: “a line in the sand is not always a limit, as well as a border is not always a line in the sand. A line is geometry, a border is interpretation.”

199 ibid., II.9-14.
However, to say that a border is a reflection without a model is not the same thing as saying that it is not real or that it is somehow ineffectual. On the contrary, the March of Wales is even more of a productive and transformative space than a Classical pleasure garden; it is an exemplum par excellence of Baudrillard’s “hyperreal” or Foucault’s “heterotopia”. A garden is a place of individual reflection, whereas the March of Wales is the insular garden of reflection for British hegemony, British nationalism and British identity. Geoffrey’s Historia, and especially his emphasis on and use of the Arthurian legend, plays a key role in constructing this more-than-real space of identity negotiation by exposing and undermining the multifarious potential of self-identification with Arthur and historical power. It is important to emphasize, however, that though Geoffrey’s gardenic history does indeed provide reflective spaces for both the Norman colonist and Welsh rebel, the reflections engendered by the Historia are inherently misrecognitions. To construct their reflection and fantasized identity in Geoffrey’s history, they must read and recognize selectively, ignoring both the evidence for contrary interpretation and Geoffrey’s more macroscopic articulation of the bleak cyclicity of secular historiography.

My designation of Geoffrey’s Historia as a ‘reflective space’ is by no means a new notion. Siân Echard has repeatedly emphasized the Historia’s place within the “Mirror for Princes” genre and scholars such as Fiona Tolhurst and Paul Dalton have aptly demonstrated the ways in which Geoffrey is self-consciously reflective of the shifting political ideologies of his day.202 Geoffrey’s own claim that he decided to pursue his project

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as a flippant and random whim—“Cum mecum multa et de multis sepius animo eruoluens in hystoriam regum Britannie inciderem” [Tossing around a great many ideas, I set my mind on the history of the kings of Britain]—has been largely ignored by critics for good reasons.  

However, though scholars largely agree that Geoffrey’s work is a reflection of the political atmosphere of his time, the subject and subjectivity of the politics he reflects is far from conclusive. Being “of Monmouth,” a town in the March of Wales, and composing a largely glowing history of the ancestors of the Welsh people has inspired some to paint Geoffrey as a patriotic “Welshman” (or of another Brythonic persuasion—namely Breton or Cornish), who is writing a history of the British out of a sense of proto-nationalistic ethnic sympathy. His wide familiarity with British folklore, important genres of Welsh literature (the Triads, political prophecy, etc.), and with the Welsh language (though to what degree remains uncertain), indicate that Geoffrey actively ‘researched’ his subject matter and that he shows indisputable signs of fondness for that subject matter.

Nonetheless, it is also undeniable that parts of Geoffrey’s history lend themselves well to the Anglo-Norman political agenda in Wales and the Marches. Though Geoffrey undeniably revels in the glorious and unparalleled power and magnanimity of the British kings and people, his description of the descendants of these kings and peoples is hardly complimentary:


203 Bern MS 1.

Supradicta namque mortalitas et fames atque consuetudinarium discidium in tantum coegerat populum superbum degenerare quod hostes longius arcere nequieuerant. Barbarie etiam irrepente, iam non uocabantur Britones sed Gualenses, uocabulum siue a Gualone duce eorum siue a Galaes regina siue a barbarie trahentes. Degenerati autem a Britannica nobilitate Gualenses numquam postea monarchiam insulae recuperauerunt.

[The above-mentioned death and famine, as well as their usual internal strife, made this proud people degenerate so that they could not ward off the enemy any further. As the barbarism encroached upon them, they were no longer called Britons but Welsh, called Welsh after either their king Gualo, or their queen Galaes or else drawn from their barbarism. Degenerated from their nobility as Britons, the Welsh never recovered kingship over the island.]\(^{205}\)

With his characteristic history-by-nomenclature, Geoffrey narrates the damning renaming of the Brythonic-speaking people of Western Britain from the Britones to Gualenses, from ‘British’ to ‘Welsh’. The etymological parallel of wealh [AS ‘foreigner’] and barbarie [L ‘non-Roman/Greek’] that Geoffrey implies here is largely accurate in one sense, but he overlays the etymology with accusations of barbarity/depravity.

Some scholars have been able to work around such comments by stressing Geoffrey’s “outsider” position within Anglo-Norman political circles and downplaying the “real” implications of such comments. Monika Otter, for instance, sees Geoffrey as theoretical and playful in his historiography, and says he does not have “much invested in

\(^{205}\) Bern MS, sec. 207. My translation.
the referentiality of his narrative, its ties to historical reality.”206 John Gillingham suggests that though this particular passage is suggestive of Anglo-Norman colonial rhetoric, we should remember that the condemnation essentially just returns the Welsh to the status of their Trojan ancestors after they had been pummeled by the Greek army: they are savages, roaming in the wilderness without a nation. As Gillingham puts it, “what their ancestors had done, the Welsh could surely do again.”207

On the other hand, other scholars have been less willing to defend Geoffrey from accusations of colonial rhetoric. Michael Faletra has repeatedly and consistently stressed the teleology of Geoffrey’s history and argues that Geoffrey’s history perpetuates “textual myths of innate defeatedness—and the inevitable defeatability—of the British people.”208 Though Echard emphasizes the playful complexity with which Geoffrey articulates his novel version of historiography, she also notes the judgmental implications of Geoffrey’s teleological mode: “throughout the Historia, the Britons are shown to be incapable of achieving a lasting peace; the story of Arthur, at once their greatest king and their most tragic, may indicate that the root of the problem is to be found somewhere in the Britons

themselves.” Geoffrey’s Britons might have once been glorious, but the present state of the Welsh race is a different matter altogether.

It would be helpful to this debate if we separate the largely assumed biographical details of Geoffrey’s life from the more easily comprehensible details of Geoffrey’s history. No matter what ethnicity Geoffrey might be, his history is unequivocally a product of the March of Wales and the cultural interchange which had been going on there for centuries beforehand. It is from this perspective—not that of his Welsh subjects or his Norman patrons—that Geoffrey’s history is told.

Aspects of Geoffrey’s border perspective have already been noted: Michelle Warren sees the “simultaneously nostalgic and prospective” Historia as a product of Geoffrey’s border confusion. Warren explains that at times, such as the passage mentioned above, Geoffrey is caught up in admiring and justifying Norman colonial expansion while at other times he feels pressured to condemn such expansion; he, like his text, is the product of postcolonial ambiguity. In Warren’s description, amid contradictory political pressures, Geoffrey ultimately becomes confused: “Geoffrey cannot decide… between Welsh self-identification and outside judgment, or between the conquered English and the conquering Normans.” Warren’s Geoffrey of Monmouth alternates allegiances in his text in the same manner as the land alternates ownership in the contested warzones along the border.

Similarly, Patricia Ingham notes the inconsistencies of Geoffrey’s text and situates his endeavor as inhabiting a contested space between the Anglo-Norman colonial model and Welsh heritage. However, for Ingham, unlike Warren, Geoffrey’s “ambiguity” is not the

209 Echard, Arthurian Narrative, 52.
210 Warren, History on the Edge: 51
211 ibid. 50.
product of confusion but of "political canniness:" by appealing to a "diverse and fractured audience” Geoffrey is able to skirt political pigeonholing and achieve a wide readership. Provocatively, Ingham draws our attention to the dynamic parallels between Geoffrey's project and Merlin's prophetic speech to Vortigern. The prophecies are derivative of a very anti-colonial prophetic tradition in Wales and are unequivocally contrary to Vortigern (the invasive and ineffectual king). Nonetheless, the prophecies' “divergent interpretations” were contested by both colonial Anglo-Normans and colonized Welshmen. Geoffrey's “oppositional discourse” suggests a “subtle relation between Monmouth's Anglo-Norman patrons and Welsh resisters of Anglo-Norman rule ... [which] explains in part the long-lived popularity of Geoffrey's text.”

I agree with Ingham that Geoffrey is engaged in a conscious “double-speak” of sorts and that Merlin is an appropriate character to compare with Geoffrey's larger project. Geoffrey is able to appeal to multiple Anglo-Norman patrons—often with distinctly different political agendas—while also providing a space for Welsh resistance to the Anglo-Norman colonial model. As I argue, Geoffrey's historical book and the borderland culture from which it arises are, like gardens, spaces of transformative reflection for both country and culture, for sponsor and subterfuge, for monarch and malcontent. However, every recognition engendered by the reflective spaces of Geoffrey's Historia and the March of Wales is inherently a mis-recognition; the images reflected and refracted back upon the reader must be mis-read and mis-recognized in order for these transformative points to transpire. As the Lacanian subject's méconnaissance (their misrecognition of themselves in

213 Ingham, Sovereign Fantasies 39.
the Imago of the mirror) enables their entry into the symbolic realm (language), so too does Geoffrey’s consciously constructed series of misrecognitions enable symbolic negotiation. Nationalism, Empire, and collective identity are all imaginary and arbitrary concepts of the symbolic realm which are being questioned, constructed and hardened in the March of Wales and the Historia. So, if all readers are compelled by Geoffrey to engage in a “national fantasy” of “totam insulam,” as Ingham suggests, it is because they have missed his larger point. Very much like Merlin indeed, Geoffrey sees a larger historical truth than the immediate recipients of his discourse are willing to admit: the fantastic reflections of insular unity and historical sovereignty that the Historia enables his readers to narcissistically indulge in are always as transient as the kings who construct them.

King Arthur and Insular Reflection/Refractions

Midway through his narrative on the reign of King Arthur, after Arthur’s army has ousted the Saxons from the island and defeated the French in their own country, Geoffrey of Monmouth indulges his readers in a long and unprecedented description of a feast in the ostentatious court of (what would eventually become) the border city of Caerleon. There is a long list of notable attendees, a description of the processions and ceremonies, and notes to the styles of dress these ancient noble Britons were prone to. Then, as if he has suddenly noticed that his descriptions are derailing the flow of the narrative, Geoffrey, uncharacteristically (though not without precedence) interjects himself into the history to unveil what we are given to understand is his larger ‘point’ in the long description of the British court:

\[214\] ibid., 40.
Ad tantum etenim statum dignitatis Britannia tunc reducta erat quod copia
diuiciarum, luxu ornamentorum, facecia incolarum cetera regna excellebat.
Quicunque uero famous probitate miles in eadem erat unius coloris uestibus atque
armis utebatur. Facete etiam mulieres consimilia indumenta habentes nullius
amorem habere dignabantur nisi tertio in milicia probatus esset. Efficiebantur ergo
caste et meliores et milites pro amore illarum probiores.
[Britain had at that point attained such a state of dignity that it surpassed all other
kingdoms in its courtliness, in the extravagance of its fineries, and in the polished
manners of its citizens. Every individual knight of fame and virtue in the kingdom
bore a livery and arms of a unique color. The women of those days had a similarly
high style of dress. And those ladies would only grant their love to a man who had
thrice proven his worth in battle.]215

I am not aware of a more fundamental encapsulation of the chivalric idealism with which
we associate the courtly literature of the High Middle Ages. The magnanimous rule of a
powerful king and the military valor of his chosen peers have a ‘trickle down’ effect on
society at large: the ladies are chaste, the knights more valorous for the female chastity, and
the court embodies a superlative ideal that can be emulated around the world. The nobles
dress well and the citizens even excel in good manners.

Scholarship on the Arthurian section has tended to stress the ways in which
Geoffrey’s Arthur appeals to the values of Anglo-Norman aristocracy. As Maureen Fries
describes it, “Geoffrey’s Arthur even eclipsed Charlemagne”—not an easy task given

215 Bern MS, 157.
Charlemagne’s popularity in the twelfth-century francophone world. More recently, Faletra has emphasized the distinctions between the Arthurian court depicted in this passage and the “rough-and-tumble” Arthurian worlds of Welsh texts like *Culhwch ac Olwen, Preiddeu Annwfn, “Pa Gur?”* and the *Historia Brittonum*. For Faletra, the conscious departure away from these models is reflective of Geoffrey’s intended audience, his intent on edification, and his colonial agenda: “Geoffrey’s King Arthur... embodies Anglo-Norman modernity.” The Arthurian Britons, then, are an anachronistic allegory for Anglo-Norman aristocracy. Geoffrey is constructing a political reflection of the ruling class and is exaggerating that reflection in order to inspire his readers to attain a superlative ideal.

It would be grossly inaccurate, however, to suggest that such a superlative depiction of courtly perfection were an *accurate* reflection of the Anglo-Norman elite in the twelfth century; so we must assume that this scene is a reflection of how they *wished* to be seen or is a reflection of an ideal which they might emulate. Such is the assessment by Fries who, correctly, points out that such Arthurian idealization did not stop with the Normans: “[Arthur] served as however partial a corrective to the vices not only of the Anglo-Normans but of other English dynasties in centuries to come.” The Arthurian court is a glorified exemplum, structured to be the fantasized object of desire for Anglo-Norman/English aristocracy.

Though not inaccurate, this line of thought has had the cumulative effect of oversimplifying Geoffrey’s political negotiations here. The scholarly emphasis on this correlation between Geoffrey’s Arthurian world and Anglo-Norman politics logically begs

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217 *Wales and the Colonial Imagination*, 43  
the question: why must idealized reflections of courtly superiority only be relative to
English dynasties? Are we to assume that attributing courtly superiority to the ancestors of
the Welsh princes would be somehow unappealing to Welsh readers? Are the Welsh of the
twelfth century not similarly prone to the desires for Eurocentric superiority and high-
medieval chivalric identity?

On the contrary, the Welsh were in fact voracious readers of "courtly" literature, as
their early translations and adaptations of French Romance suggest. Boeve de Hamptoun
and Amis et Amiles were translated rather early in Wales, as was the Chanson de Roland.219
By the fourteenth century Perlesvaus had been translated into Welsh, and that adaptor
shows familiarity with the prose Lancelot text as well.220 A more genteel and "modern"
Arthurian world is similarly present in the very early cognates of Chrétien de Troyes'
romances: "Owain, neu Chwedyl Iarlles Y Ffynnawn" ("Yvain, le Chevalier au Lion"),
"Geraint mab Erbin" ("Eric et Enide"), and "Peredur mab Efwrg" ("Perceval, le Conte du
Graal").221 Though it is not clear whether these tales are derivative of Chrétien or whether
they and Chrétien’s tales are derivative of a similar source, their presentation of the
Arthurian court in a similarly refined courtly environment to Chrétien’s speaks to the
appeal of that environment to twelfth-century Welsh readers. The English would do well to

219 Katherine Hurlock discusses various dates of these romances in Wales and the Crusades
(Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2011).
220 See Ceridwen Lloyd-Morgan, “Romances in Welsh,” in John Koch’s Celtic Culture: A
221 I use the term "cognate" to abstain from what I see as the yet unresolved debate on the
production history of these texts. See Susan Aronstein, "When Arthur Held Court in Caer
Llion: Love, Marriage, and the Politics of Centralization in Gereint and Owain". Viator 25
Welsh: The Arthurian Legend in Medieval Welsh Literature, ed. Rachel Bromwich et. al.
(Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1991): 159–69; Kristen Lee Over, Kingship, Conquest,
and Patria: Literary and Cultural Identities in Medieval French and Welsh Arthurian Romance
(New York: Routledge, 2005).
note that the Welsh jumped on the “courtly literature” bandwagon decades, and in some cases centuries, before any of these works were translated into Middle English.

Furthermore, it is not as if these concepts are wholly “imported” into Wales through French literature—as they undoubtedly were for the Anglo-Normans. The courtly environment glorified in the Gogynfeirdd (“Rather Early Bards”) praise poetry complements Geoffrey’s descriptions of the Arthurian court in some interesting ways.

The border poet Cynddelw Brydydd Mawr, who was roughly contemporary to Geoffrey, composed over 3,000 lines of verse mostly in praise of the (exaggerated) fabulous courts and military deeds of the rulers of Powys and Gwynedd. Cynddelw’s praise of the Welsh courts combines the eerie imagistic visual poetry of the Cynfeirdd (“Early Bards”) with the elaborate courtly displays of noble power typical of the wider European literary tradition:

“Am hirvryn hivrais eyr;
Am Havren hyuryd gwen gwyrl.
Ar llaw ywein hael hawl dilin gwruallch
Y mae gorvlwch eurin;
Anrydet gwymg arwet gwin;
Anrec brivdec breyeni....
Nis arvait llew o dan lloer
Gwaew crwm yn dyt trwm, trwy fwyrl
Gwan fysc , yn eurwysc yn aer.”

[On Long Mountain the eagle is grand;
On the Severn the men are pleasant and fair.

222 The Gogynfeirdd range from 1087 to about 1300, coming after the Cynfeirdd (“Old Bards”) and before the Beirdd y Tywysogion (“bards of the princes”).
In the hand of generous Owain, who pursues his privilege with manly-pride

There is a golden goblet;
Fine honor it is to bear wine,
The prized gift of kings....
There is not a lion under the moon to harm him
On the day of battle his lance is bent in terror
{dealing} Swift strikes in his golden tunic in war.\footnote{223}

Cynddelw here lavishes praise on Owain Cyfeiliog’s court by praising the wine and food offered, by praising Owain’s lavish golden tunic or chainmail and, as always, by emphasizing the generosity of his host. Much as Arthur’s magnanimity has a ‘trickle down effect’ on his court, so are Owain’s men “gwen” [fair] and “hyfryd” [pleasant] as a reflection of Owain’s rule.

These are, of course, are much the same features which Geoffrey finds cause to praise in Arthur’s court. Without doubt, Geoffrey’s description of the Arthurian court is a bit more classicizing in tone than the descriptive spaces of the Gogynfeirdd poets (the games of the Pentecost celebration recall Vergil’s description of Anchises’ funeral games as much as they allude to medieval jousting tournaments); and Geoffrey is also much more

\footnote{223 Text from Edward Anwyil, ed., \textit{The Poetry of the Gogynfeirdd}, vol. 3 of \textit{The Myvyrian Archaiology} (sic.) of Wales (Denbigh: Gee and Son, 1807): 58-59. My translation. The poem is titled in the edition as “Englynion... Y Ewein Kyueilyawc” [Englynion to Owain Cyfeiliog], nephew of Madoc ap Maredudd and ruler of southern Powys from 1147 to 1195. The “Long Mountain” of the first quoted line is to the east of Welshpool. The “eagle” of the second line is a reference to Owain.}
accessible in terms of diction and allusions than his Welsh contemporaries.\textsuperscript{224} However, “high medieval” courtly culture is of equal value in both of these traditions.

Though Arthur does not feature as prominently in the Gogynfeirdd poetry before Geoffrey’s \textit{Historia} became inordinately popular in the later twelfth century, Arthur is still part and parcel of the Gogynfeirdd’s stock of positive legends they use to compliment princes. See, for example, Cynddelw’s praise of Madoc ap Maredudd’s warriors upon Madoc’s death in 1160: “Teulu madawc mawrglod mur / Mal gawr toryf teulu Arthur” “The warband of Madog, a greatly-praised wall (of defense), / Like the battle cry of Arthur’s warband.”\textsuperscript{225} Similar to the praise of Cynddylan some centuries previous, Arthur and his warband are epitomized as a superlative of defense and Madoc’s accomplishments in that task are favorably compared with Arthur.

Cynddelw was not the only poet of the twelfth century to favorably compare Madoc to Arthur. Gwalchmai ap Meilyr (who may very well be named after Arthur’s famous nephew, rendered into English as “Gawain”) also memorialized King Madoc in Arthurian references: “Arthur gadernyd / Menwyd medrawd / Madawg” [The strength of Arthur and the intelligence of Medrawt (had) Madoc].\textsuperscript{226} Although this poem was written not long after Madoc’s death in 1160, the unambiguously positive comparison of Medrawt to Madoc indicates that Gwalchmai is surprisingly, but almost certainly, uninfluenced by Geoffrey or

\textsuperscript{224} Geoffrey’s accessibility in diction and allusion over the Gogynfeirdd applies even to Welsh readers of Geoffrey, either through the original Latin or the \textit{Brutiau y Brehinedd}, discussed below. The Gogynfeirdd were trained for many years in replicating the language of the earlier poets, and prized difficult linguistic constructions and highly allusive imagery; see John Jay Parry’s overview of the genre in “The Court Poets of the Welsh Princes” \textit{PMLA} 67.4 (1952): 511-520.
\textsuperscript{225} \textit{Myv. Arch.} 44. My translation.
\textsuperscript{226} ibid. 35. My translation.
Wace—otherwise a comparison to Medrawt would be very inappropriate for a praise poem indeed.\textsuperscript{227}

Make no mistake, after Geoffrey's \textit{Historia}—and the vernacular revisions by Wace and Laȝamon—became more widely read in Wales towards the end of the twelfth century, references to Arthur in Gogynfeirdd poetry considerably spiked. Llywarch ab Llywelyn (c. 1160 – 1220), for instance, refers to Arthur in about a third of his (relatively extensive) corpus, and he was writing before Geoffrey's text was translated into Welsh. Many of these references show direct influence from Geoffrey, while others still appear to be referencing the older tradition. As I discuss further in Chapter Five, in reference to Iolo Goch in the fourteenth century, the competing traditions and versions of the legend provided a complex stockpile of "Arthurs" for praise poets to choose from. Geoffrey demonstrably influenced that genre, but the \textit{Historia} seems to have amplified rather than introduced that practice.\textsuperscript{228}

\textsuperscript{227} Medrawt has been associated with the Arthurian legend since at least the tenth century \textit{Annales Cambria}, but Geoffrey's story of him is the first to record the character in unambiguously negative terms—as the captor/lover of Gwenevere and the usurper of the throne. The \textit{Annales} merely report that at the Battle of Camlan, "Arthur et Medraut corruere" [Arthur and Medraut fell]—the authors give no indication as to the causes of the conflict nor do they even imply that the two are fighting against each other. "Breuddwyd Rhonabwy" hints at a similar alternate background to the conflict, and places the blame for the fight squarely on intentional translator error—not adultery or a coup—which opens up the potential for early positivist readings of Medrawt. For the Annales, see E. Faral, \textit{La légende arthurienne: Études et documents, le plus anciens textes} (Paris: Libraire Ancienne Honoré Champion, 1929): 45; for "Rhonabwy," see \textit{Breedwyt Ronabwy allan o'r Llyfr Coch o Hergest}, ed. Melville Richards (University of Wales Press, 1948). I discuss the intentional mistranslation in \textit{Breuddwyd Rhonabwy} further in Chapter Four.

\textsuperscript{228} It is difficult to judge precisely when and how the \textit{Historia} began to really influence the Court Poets. Cynddelw, for instance, mentions Arthur at least twice more in his later poetry (ca. 1200). Once in a poem about Llywelyn ap Iowerth, and once in a religious poem. The poem to Llywelyn, which catalogues and describes his battles, comparing his patron to "Arthur gynt ffluwr luchynt fflam" [Arthur of yore, the gleaming flame of terror]—an epithet which seems to fit better with the pre-Galfridian tradition, though it is certainly not
These compliments, as evidenced by Gwalchmai and Cynddelw, are rarely substantial and are depictions of Arthur which are broadly represented in other Welsh texts. As in earlier references (Y Gododdin, “Marwnad Cynddylan,” etc.), the Gogynfeirdd’s Arthur is generally a point of comparison for superlative military heroism and homeland defense. Geoffrey’s layering of that superlative heroism with overtones of chivalric idealism is certainly innovative to the typical twelfth-century depiction of him in Welsh language literature, but it is far from aberrant to the tradition at large. The presentation of Arthur as a magnanimous warrior king with a stately court, replete with love poetry and noble dress, is perfectly consistent and complementary to the types of anachronistic comparisons Welsh princes would have been used to.

It is also important to point out that there are certain aspects of Geoffrey’s portrayal of Arthur which would have been particularly compelling for a Welsh audience. Most obviously (though interestingly often ignored) is the fact that Arthur is the ancestor of the Welsh nobility who might be reading the Historia. Anachronistic political allegories aside, if Arthur might be representative of what Faletra calls “Norman modernity”, or might be representative of the twelfth-century Welsh princes, as I suggest above, he is most directly representative of Geoffrey’s conception of the fifth-century British. Undoubtedly, Geoffrey’s antithetical to Geoffrey’s Arthur (Myv. Arch. 63, my translation). However, in a later poem which Oliver Padel has written about, Cynddelw mentions Arthur as a powerful but also fleeting king in a list of other major kings and heroes: “Rybu erthyst yn: rybu Arthur gynt; / ryb amgyfrawd gwynt, gwan tra messur. / Rybu Ull Kessar; keissyassai Fflur / y gan ut Prydien, prid y hesgur.” [“We have received a lesson: Arthur existed, once; he was a whirlwind, attacking beyond measure. Julius Caesar existed; he had sought Flora from the lord of Britain—dearly he claimed her”] (Myr. Arch. 68, Padel’s translation). Cynddelw also mentions Bendigeidfran mab Llyr and Hercules in this section. As Padel argues, representing Arthur as a powerful emperor seems more Galfridian (though cf. the previous reference in “Geraint Filius Erbin” to Arthur as “ameraudur” [emperor]). See Oliver Padel, Arthur in Medieval Welsh Literature (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2000): 41.
nostalgic admiration for the glory days of British imperial rule contrasts with his characterization of the current state of Welsh “barbarity”—but nostalgic admiration is admiration nonetheless, and such sentiments do not, to my mind, pigeonhole him as a colonial advocate. Lamenting the contemporary state of Welsh rule in favor of their heroic (Arthurian) predecessors in Welsh literature of the twelfth century was at least common enough for the author of *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy* to satirize such nostalgia in the following century.  

Also, the description of the splendor of the Arthurian court in the *Historia* quoted above is preceded by a long list of the attendees to the Pentecostal celebration which would have particular appeal for a Welsh audience. The first part of the list catalogues the (largely invented) nobility and ecclesiastical elite from far-flung areas of the world while the second part of the list purports to name the “dignitatis heroes” who also attended the feast: “Donaut Mappapo, Cheneus Mapcoil, Pederur Maheridur, Grifud Mapnogoid, Regin Mapclaud, Eddelein Mapcledauc...” and the list goes on. This exhaustive list of warriors and kings who accompany Arthur is consciously modeled on the epic catalogue of Arthur’s warriors Culhwch invokes in *Culhwch ac Olwen*: “Ae hasswynaw awnaf ar dy uilwyr... A Chubert mab Daere, a Phercos mab Poch, a Lluber Beuthach, a Choruil Beruach, a Gwyn mab Esni, a Gwynn mab Nwyfure, a Gwynn mab Nud, ac Edern mab Nud” [I invoke her by the names of your {Arthur’s} warriors... By Cubert son of Daere, and Ffercos son of Poch, and Lluber Beuthach, and Corfil Berfach, and Gwyn son of Esni, and Gwyn son of Nwyfure,

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229 I discuss the satirical aspects of Rhonabwy more extensively in Chapter Four.
and Gwyn son of Nud, and Edern son of Nud.”

For the wider European audience of the *Historia*, the warrior list Geoffrey includes merely demonstrates Arthur’s fame and influence, or perhaps it vaguely recalls epic catalogues in the *Aeneid*. For a Welsh audience, however, the list entailed a more culturally appropriate allusion to this famous catalogue of warriors in *Culhwch*.

Furthermore, as this brief selection of Geoffrey’s catalogue demonstrates, these heroes are very, very *Welsh*, replete with the patronymic “map” in each name. Geoffrey has probably derived these names from contemporary genealogical material which we, unfortunately, no longer have access to. The fact that they are Welsh names is not, in and of itself, particularly unusual—Geoffrey uses Welsh names throughout the *Historia*. Rarely, however, are they preserved in their original but are instead Latinized for clarity: “Gwenhwyfar” becomes “Guenhuuaram” and “Gwalchmai” becomes “Gualguanus.” As Faletra describes the list, the Welsh names of the heroes who accompany Arthur at his pinnacle of greatness “stand naked, unadorned with Latin declensional endings.” They are an unambiguous reminder that the “Arthurian British”—for all their similarities with the Norman elite—are emphatically a *Welsh* race.

Certainly, as Faletra and others have emphasized, the Arthurian courtly celebration—and indeed Arthurian courtliness at large—can be allegorically matched with the Anglo-Norman ruling class. The Arthurian section is an important space of reflection for rule and empire, for historical precedence and cultural identity and the Normans of the twelfth century would certainly put that imaginative space to use. However, Geoffrey’s

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Arthurian garden is a multi-faceted reflective space and the Historia provides similarly seductive appeals to his Welsh audience. Let us not forget that this Pentecostal celebration (a moment which would continue to be recognized as the climax of Arthurian society in literature long after Geoffrey) is only possible after both the Saxons and the French have been thoroughly defeated for the foreseeable future. I find it hard to imagine a more attractive fantasy for a Welsh audience in the twelfth century.

It is precisely this fantasy of insular control by which Geoffrey’s narrative ensnares the narcissistic gaze of both the Welsh rebel and Norman colonist, but in order for the subject to confirm their self images they must misread and de-contextualize the rest of Geoffrey’s narrative. To bask in a positive, self-confirming reflection of themselves as Arthurian Britons, the Welsh and Normans must both either ignore the aspects of Arthur’s rule and British practices which are unsavory or consider them as explicit criticisms.

If, as Faletra argues, “King Arthur constitutes one of the major points of access within the Historia for Anglo-Normans, and Arthur thus stands as a useful measure of the text’s overall ideological sympathies,” then Geoffrey encodes some distinctly detrimental descriptions of the Normans’ ideological sympathies. For all his magnanimity, he is a vicious imperialist and openly states that “extollens se quia timori cunctis erat” [“he rejoiced at being universally feared”]. He invades sovereign, Christian nations not because he has a hereditary right or because God has given him a justifiable mandate, but because “subdere desiderabat” [“he desired to subdue {them}”]. As Daniel Donahue has pointed out, Geoffrey’s Arthur has “a lack of ethics” and his rashness almost leads to the entire

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annihilation of his people. Similarly, Michael Curley sees Arthur’s reliance on force over other diplomatic means as the primary catalyst in the ultimate downfall of Britain. Though the Normans might find a model and precedent for their cross-channel Empire and their refined courtly environ in Arthur’s Britain, they must either ignore his unsavory drive toward self-destruction or regard it as rather disparaging criticism.

For the Welsh to find a glowing panegyric to their race and heritage in Geoffrey’s Arthurian Britons, a reflection Geoffrey seduces them into, then they must needs ignore the implicit criticisms that Geoffrey scatters throughout his narrative—criticisms Geoffrey introduces long before his description of their current state of “barbarity” discussed above. For instance, when Arthur decides to stake his war on France in a single-combat match with their ruler, Frollo (a brash decision that “risks [Arthur’s] followers’ lands” as Donahue suggests), the Britons are portrayed as unruly and untrustworthy. When Frollo cuts Arthur’s horse out from under him, the British army nearly breaks the truce which had been agreed upon: “Britones ut regem prostratum uiderunt, timentes eum peremptum esse uix potuerunt retineri quin federe rupto in Gallos unanimiter irruerent” [When the Britons saw their king lying on the ground they feared that he was dead and could hardly hold back from breaking the truce and rushing headlong upon the Gauls.] It is only because Arthur happens to get up that the Britons decide to maintain their political agreement. The French, for their part, obey the truce to the letter and upon Frollo’s death they immediately hand the city over to their new brash and brutal king.

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233 Donahue, “Darkly Chronicled King” p. 144.
236 Bern MS, 155.
One of the most important and debated points of Arthurian subjectivity in the *Historia* is the conclusion of Arthur’s reign. Upon discovery of his nephew Mordred’s treachery, Arthur goes back to Britain to assault the traitor and reclaim his lands. After heavy losses on both sides, Arthur and Mordred’s armies come together for the final fight and Arthur’s assault on his nephew’s bodyguard results in Mordred’s demise. The battle continues, however, and Geoffrey reports to us—without so much as climactic fight scene—that Arthur has been wounded in the battle:

Set et inclitus ille rex Arturus letaliter uulneratus est; qui illinc ad sananda uulnera sua in insulam Auallonis euctus Constantino cognato suo et filio Cadoris ducis Cornubie diadema Britannie concessit anno ab incarnatione Domini .dxlii. . Anima eius in pace quiescat.

[However, even the illustrious King Arthur was mortally wounded. He was carried away to be healed of his wounds on the isle of Avalon and gave the crown of Britain to his kinsman Constantine, son of Duke Cador of Cornwall, in the year of our Lord 542. May his soul rest in peace.]²³⁷

Without emotion or comment even, our (now) sober historian reports the termination of his most famous and magnanimous king and the transference of his Empire to Constantine.²³⁸ Though we know that the story must end at some point, Geoffrey denies his readers closure and explanation. What is this Avalon place, and is Arthur ever coming back?

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²³⁷ *Bern MS.*, 178. The epitaph is found only in the Bern MS.
On the one hand, Geoffrey does not actually describe the death of Arthur here. Arthur never makes a noble death speech or receives the ceremonial burial that other British kings do. Instead, Geoffrey defers that finality by telling us that Arthur is going to Avalon to have his “sananda uulnera” [wounds healed]. “Sananda” is (by itself) unambiguous: if Arthur’s wounds are “sananda”, then they are eventually going to be ‘sanaverunt’, and Arthur will be alive and able to return. In the Vita Merlini, Geoffrey also touches upon the idea that Arthur manages to survive the Battle of Camlan through a journey to a supernatural island. In that text, Merlin provides us with the name of the fairy healer, Morgen, and gives us an update of sorts on his recovery process, telling us that Arthur will need to stay much longer with Morgen.239 In these provocative pronouncements, Geoffrey’s description of Arthur’s end lives up to his foreshadowing of it in Merlin’s prophecy: “exitus eius dubius erit” [his end will be uncertain].240

This notion that King Arthur is being healed of his wounds on the island of Avalon and will one day return to forcibly remove the Saxon/Norman invaders from Britain is a concept known as the Breton Hope. As a political concept, it has a complicated history in twelfth-century Britain. There is a thimbleful of evidence, mostly deriving from a stray line in the Englynion y Beddau that describes the task of finding Arthur’s grave as an “anoeth” [heroic task], that a section of the British population held on to this belief. It seems more likely that the call for a messianic return of past kings (which did exist in Welsh prophecy) is better understood in figurative, political terms rather than supernatural: anti-colonial Welsh writers throughout the medieval period yearned for a strong, dynamic leader akin to

240 Bern MS, 112.
those in their past who could unite the disparate elements of Welsh society (and often the wider Celtic speaking world) in order to reclaim political sovereignty in Britain. The notion of a ubiquitous belief in the actual King Arthur’s return is the result of caustic exaggeration by other Anglo-Norman historians such as William of Malmesbury and William of Newburgh. Nonetheless, a metaphorical return by an “Arthur-like” figure who could lead the Welsh to victory over their Norman rulers is a powerful and surreptitious notion—one might even say it is akin to treachery on Geoffrey’s part.

Yet, in the very same sentence that Geoffrey toys with an insurrectionist idea of a powerful British king lying in wait, poised to re-take the island of Britain from the Normans, he mentions that Arthur was lethally (letaliter) wounded, and then he subsequently gives Arthur an epitaph: “Anima eius in pace quiescat” [May his soul lie in peace]. Many supernatural events are scattered throughout the pages of Geoffrey’s history, and it would not be egregiously unusual if Geoffrey were to wholly invest in the idea of a political messianic deliverer of the Welsh people; he has certainly been more generous with the notion than other Anglo-Norman historians in the twelfth century. This epitaph however, which only occurs in the Bern MS, allows Geoffrey to distance himself from a politically divisive issue.

A reader coming to the Historia who wishes to find evidence of the Breton Hope, or at least of the expectation that the Welsh will regain the island through the help of some dynamic political leader like Arthur, could certainly compile enough de-contextualized readings from Geoffrey’s Historia to justify that notion. As I discuss in the following chapter,

La3amon was able to cobble together just such a reading, as have numerous other Arthurian writers who are directly or indirectly indebted to Geoffrey’s narrative.

Yet, readers who wish to concentrate on the *permanent* death of King Arthur (and perhaps the permanent death of any hope of successful resistance to Norman rule) are also afforded ample space to confirm their assumptions. Writers throughout the Anglo-Norman world such as Joseph of Exeter, Gerald of Wales, and Wace found enough evidence in the *Historia* to emphasize Arthur’s death. Though Wace is, as usual, evasive about directly commenting on anything contemporary, he cannily notes that “damage fud qu’il n’ot enfanz” [it is a shame {Arthur} had no children]—a verdict which emasculates both the king and the notion of his dynastic return.242

It is in this way, through playful and evasive equivocation, that Geoffrey is able to seduce a self-identifying gaze from both the Welsh and the Normans while not allowing his complimentary portrayals to come off as sycophantic. Geoffrey’s “gardenic” book undeniably enables a space for reflection and historical transformation on an extensive scale; a Lacanian meconnaissance which both enables ingress into the symbolic system of nationalist discourse and collapses the ambivalent relationship between historical book-signifier and the objectified reader. Geoffrey’s border, where a plethora of cultural forces have been colliding, coalescing and compounding over the centuries, is the perfect multi-reflective space for these symbolic negotiations. Geoffrey’s work, and especially his novel re-conception of the Arthurian legend, inhabits and exacerbates this muddled space of border-ness. It is seductive, lulling the reader into self-identification, into a fantasy of

possession of contested literary and territorial spaces and confirmation of the symbolic identity which (we must note) the reader had already presupposed.

“Gormes Saesneg” and Geoffrey’s “dulcia mensis”: Welsh Reflections in the Historia

Geoffrey’s Historia was the first example of a medieval “international bestseller” to come out of the British Isles; it was exceedingly popular throughout the Middle Ages in all areas of Europe.243 However, nowhere was Geoffrey’s history of the British Kings more popular than in the nation where the descendants of his glorious Britons dwelled. The Welsh read the Historia, adapted it, and translated it more than any other linguistic group in medieval Europe. Though it is often impossible to trace the origins and circulation history of Latin manuscripts, thus far the scholarly community has determined five manuscripts of the Historia to have had Welsh provenance.244

Some of these manuscripts, such as Dublin, Trinity College MS 515, demonstrate not only Welsh provenance but also definitive evidence of intense study and thoughtful consideration of Geoffrey’s work.245 Brynley Roberts deftly illustrates that this manuscript did not merely circulate in Wales, but was subject to a long-term scholarly project of sorts for a particular Welsh glossator some time during the fourteenth century. This writer seems to have been intimately concerned with aligning Geoffrey’s Historia with his own

244 Crick, A Summary Catalogue: nos. 48, 55, 67, 70, and 112.
knowledge of the vernacular tradition. Most of his glosses consist of “correcting” Geoffrey’s Latinization of Welsh names, but the glossator also synthesizes Geoffrey’s narrative with Welsh sources, as when he supplements the description of Arthur’s familial relations with a reference to the Welsh tradition of Gwalchmai (Gawain). This concern with connecting the Latin text to native, largely vernacular, sources speaks to the impulse, both within the Welsh vernacular translations of the *Historia* and the production and reception history of Latin versions of the *Historia* in Wales, of incorporating the Galfridian text into Welsh historical consciousness. As Roberts puts it, both Welsh and Latin versions of the *Historia* in Wales are “yn gyd-dystiolaeth ac yn gynnyrch yr un diwylliant” [joint evidence and co-products of the same culture].

The Welsh poet and friar Madoc ap Gwallter provides even more evidence of this culture of positive reception. Madoc is better known in Welsh literary circles for his thoughtful religious poems on the Nativity and St. Michael. Though his vernacular poetry has appropriately received some critical attention, his other humanistic endeavors have been largely neglected. In addition to being a vernacular poet, Madoc was also an accomplished Latinist. At some point in the thirteenth century, Madoc came across two versions of Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *Historia*, versions we now refer to as the Vulgate and the First Variant Version. Though both versions follow the general narrative lined out by

\[246\] “Glosau” 80.
\[248\] I should point out that connecting Madoc to this task is not definitive, but it depends on both the identification of Brawd Madoc with Frater Madoc in the introductory poem. It also
Geoffrey, the First Variant Version departs from the original in some important ways. Instead of simply preferring one version to the other, Madoc engaged in a project which we might (anachronistically and loosely) label “critical editing.” The result is a thoroughly unique version of the Historia which survives in Cardiff, South Glamorgan Central Library, MS. 2.611 (C-Text).

Madoc’s use of the separate versions of the Historia varies throughout his work: the early portions represent what Hammer has called a “mosaic of variant and vulgate elements” with neither version particularly privileged, while in later portions of the text he shifts to using the Vulgate as a copy text and adding certain readings from the First Variant. Additionally, Madoc supplements his new version of Geoffrey’s text with local geographical details (such as the precise location of the hill that Uther Pendragon’s men were driven to by the Saxons in Book Eight), and with material and references gathered depends on identifying the author of the poem with the compilation of the C–Text. I think that this is a tenable identification, but even if it is not the case, both the C-Text and the introductory poem are still early Welsh receptions of the Historia.

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249 See Wright, HRB II, Introduction.
252 As Hammer notes, both the Vulgate and First Variant simply note that Uther is pursued “ad montem Damen,” which Madoc expands to “ad montem Damen, id est Wingates, super caput Chochem” [to Mount Damen, it is Wingates, over the head of the Choket], thus connecting Geoffrey’s possibly invented name to Windygates Hill in Northumberland. Bern MS, 136; Hammer 8.390-91.
from the Bible, the *Æneid*, and Bede’s *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum* among numerous other sources.⁵³

It is also apparent that Madoc had access to a version of the *Brut y Brenhinedd*, though he relies less on this text for supplementary readings than others. Hammer identifies one particular moment which corresponds to the *Brut y Brenhinedd* in Book Ten of the C-Text but to neither the Vulgate or Variant texts. The moment Madoc draws from the *Brut* is when Gawain and his small band of warriors are in a conference with the Roman military leadership. During the conference, Emperor Lucius’s nephew, Gaius Quintilianus, ill-advisedly insults the Britons. Both the Variant and Vulgate versions read: “Britones magis iactantia atque minis abundare quam audacia et probitate ualere” [the Britons were far better-equipped with bragging and threats than they were with courage or skill in battle].⁵⁴ The C-Text reports the same insult, but then Gaius adds a snide, and perhaps more distasteful metaphor: “linguae eorum longiores erant quam glandii ipsorum” [your tongues are longer than your swords]. Madoc has apparently drawn this insult from a *Brut y Brenhinedd* text, which reads, at the same moment in the text: “ymae hwyl lawyer vyd auch tavodeu chwi; noc auch gledyfeu.” [Your tongues are much longer than your swords].⁵⁵ Gaius’s comments on sword length hit home, apparently, because Gawain’s next action (in all of the texts) is to whip out said sword and show Gaius just how long it is by decapitating him! The poetic irony (and phallic imagery) are much more forceful in the *Brut y Brenhinedd* passage; Madoc’s choice to include it here is reflective of both his dark humor

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⁵³ Hammer details much of the additions and supplements throughout his edition, and his meticulous index identifies over 750 references.
⁵⁴ *Bern MS*, 166.
and, perhaps, his critical methodology: his first choice for a reading in this section of the text is the Vulgate, followed by the Variant; yet if his other materials (such as the Brut y Brenhinedd) add depth and complexity to the narrative, he will add them in as well.

Madoc’s endorsement of Geoffrey of Monmouth need not merely be speculated from his extensive supplementation and reinforcement of Geoffrey’s history, however. Madoc tells us himself what he thinks of the Britons and their most famous historian in an introductory poem to Geoffrey’s text. He begins by noting the delight to be taken in studying the great deeds of British history: “Strenua cunctorum delectant gesta proborum in quibus armorum micat ars et laus animorum, Praecipue Britonum” [The vigorous deeds of noble men—in whom glitters the art of arms and the songs of courage—delights all, especially the Britons]. The armies, battles, kings and victories of the Britons are unexcelled. Madoc tells us they “Mente recordanda sunt, quamvis non imitanda” [Are recollected to the mind, although they cannot be imitated.] Madoc continues this lavish, adulatory tone throughout the poem, creating what Hammer has appropriately labeled a “glowing panegyric of the Welsh race.”

Eventually, Madoc moves his poetic preface to praising not only the deeds of the ancient Britons, but also the exemplary accomplishments of their greatest historian, Geoffrey of Monmouth. Geoffrey’s words, Madog says, “Delectatura lectorem, non nocitura” [Will please the reader, not harm]. In openly dismissing the potential of Geoffrey’s history to harm his readers, Madoc is perhaps, if only briefly, recognizing that portions

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256 ll. 1-3. my translation.
257 l. 12.
258 Hammer, 18.
259 l. 18.
one who has studied Geoffrey so intensely, it is in fact surprising that Madoc does not give more warning to his audience. Instead, he encourages his audience to not merely receive Geoffrey of Monmouth’s work into their historical self-conception, but to positively *devour* his words: “Monemutensis Galfridus, acutus ut ensis, Transtulit intensis studiis haec dulcia mensis Frater Walensis Madocus Edeirnianensis ex libris densis collegit nos refovens his.” [Geoffrey of Monmouth, sharp blade, translated these sweets for the table by intense study; Brother Madoc Gwallter of Edeyrn, having collected from thick books, re-warms these {sweets} for us.]\(^{260}\)

Madoc’s dinner-table metaphor is an intriguing one, and one that speaks further to his long-term study of Geoffrey’s text. Without doubt, the metaphor is drawn from Merlin’s prophecy about the Boar of Cornwall, King Arthur: “In ore popularum celebrabitur et actus eius cibus erit narrantibus” [In the mouth of the populace he will be celebrated, and his deeds will feed those who sing of them]. In one sense, these images are simple: King Arthur will be celebrated widely and those who tell his story will receive sustenance from the story. Yet the image also places Arthur directly “in ore popularum” [in the mouth of the people], conflating Arthur’s body with Arthurian stories, his edible corpse with his readable corpus. Geoffrey of Monmouth (via Madoc) provides the Arthurian body to feed and sustain that populace, and their eating is a consumptively generative act: Madoc *incorporates* [L. bring into a body] Geoffrey’s text and the new Arthurian narrative into the collective consciousness of the people. By consuming/reading Geoffrey’s Arthurian narrative,

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\(^{260}\) ll. 25-26. My translation. Hammer has emended the initial line from the manuscript reading of “Monte minutensis” [Little mountain] to “Monemutensis;” an emendation which Echard describes as “destroying the pun;” See Echard, “Naming Practices”: 14-15 and n.22.
Geoffrey and his version of the Arthurian story become inextricably part of the body of Welsh Arthurian literature.

The extent to which this Galfridian/Arthurian body is incorporated into the Welsh historical consciousness, however, is best illustrated by the multiple Welsh language translations of Geoffrey of Monmouth’s work.\textsuperscript{261} The Welsh produced the most and the most faithful translations of the \textit{Historia}, and did so before any other linguistic group.\textsuperscript{262} Early in the thirteenth century, the scriptorium at Valle Crucis Abbey in the northern border area produced two distinct translations surviving in Llanstephan MS 1 and Peniarth MS 44. A somewhat later translation, witnessed by Aberystwyth MS 5266 (the Dingestow Brut), has been associated with Dingestow, a town not far from Geoffrey’s own Monmouth in the southern border area (though the original translation has been speculated to have taken place in Gwynedd).\textsuperscript{263} Later in the Middle Ages, another three independent translations were produced, and the six translation traditions form the exemplars for 21 surviving medieval manuscript witnesses and some 40 post-medieval witnesses, making it, as Roberts has noted, “with the Welsh laws, the most frequently copied texts in Welsh manuscript literature.”\textsuperscript{264}

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\textsuperscript{261} Almost all of the substantial work which has been done on this tradition is owed to the singular service of Brynley Roberts. For an overview of the \textit{Brut y Brenhinedd} tradition, see his introduction to \textit{Brut Y Brenhinedd: Llanstephan MS. 1 Version} (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1971).

\textsuperscript{262} To be fair, Wace’s Jersey French version is first, coming in at 1155, and Laȝamon compiles Wace with Geoffrey for his unique English version around 1200—but both of these versions are versifications which take considerable more liberties with Geoffrey’s story and would be more appropriately described as original works inspired by the \textit{Historia}. The \textit{Brutiau y Brenhinedd} are considerably closer to our modern idea of “translation” than any other medieval version of the \textit{Historia} I am aware of.


\textsuperscript{264} ibid., 111.
An extensive study of the *Brutiau y Brenhinedd* combining codicological evidence with literary textual analysis is well past due. As of now, there exist only a handful of articles and Brynley Roberts’ 1961 dissertation which address the work more than tangentially. Although an extended analysis of all the *Brutiau* is beyond the parameters of this current project, these texts present an important portrayal of King Arthur and Geoffrey of Monmouth along the border and I will briefly touch upon the more important themes present in the earliest iterations of this translation tradition. Since the diverse interpretive potential of Geoffrey’s *Historia* is the primary topic of this current chapter, I read these early translations as, essentially, early readings and reactions to Geoffrey which are representative of a Welsh cultural perspective along the border. That perspective comes through as an overwhelming endorsement of Geoffrey of Monmouth and his history.

Though, as I have argued, Geoffrey’s own political leanings are enigmatic at best and, at times, intentionally contradictory, the early Welsh readers of the *Historia* not only validated Geoffrey’s version of British history, but amplified and reinforced the *Historia*’s themes by subtly reincorporating the text into traditional Welsh folklore.

By and large, the early Welsh translations of the *Historia* are exceedingly close, at times slavishly so, to Geoffrey’s Latin. There are, however, some subtle artistic liberties taken, and those alterations speak to the extent to which Galfridian historiography was received by the Welsh audience on the border. For instance, early in the *Historia* Geoffrey

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gives us a sweeping overview, a précis perhaps, of the history of Britain that he will
enumerate more extensively as his text unfolds:

   Postremo quinque inhabitatur populis: Normannis uidelicet atque Britannis,
       Saxonibus, Pictis, et Scotis. Ex quibus Britones olim ante ceteros a mari usque ad
       mare insederunt donec ultione diuina propter ipsorum superueniente superbiam
       Pictis et Saxonibus cesserunt.

   [In latter days, five peoples inhabited the island: the Normans, the Britons, the
       Saxons, the Picts, and the Scots. Of these, the Britons first settled the island from sea
to sea, until divine vengeance, on account of their overwhelming pride, sent the Picts
and Saxons to drive them out.]

Geoffrey matter-of-factly describes the five races of the island (a traditional description
ultimately derived from Bede) and then in a similarly declarative tone contributes the loss
of British insular sovereignty to divine providence and the British “superueniente
superbiam” (ultimately derived from Gildas).

The Dingestow Brut translator keeps the substance of Geoffrey’s text while making
some ever-so-slight alterations to the implications of the same passage:

   Ac o’r dywed pvmp kenedyl ysyd yn y chyuanhedu, nyd amgen, Nordmannyeyt, a
   Brytannyeyt, a Saesson, A Gvydyl Fychti, ac Yscoteyt. A o’r rei hynny nyd dyledavc
   neb arnei namyn y Brytannyeyt, canys vynt a’e kyunhedassant o’r mor bwy gyllyd
   kyn dyuod neb o’r kenedloed ereyll yn ormes arnadunt. A hynny y dyal eu kamwed
   ac eu syberwyt arnadunt y rodes Dvw y Saesson a’r Gvydyl Fychty a’r Yscoteyt yn
   ormes arnadunt.
[And lastly, five nations inhabit it, namely, the Normans, and Britons, and Saxons, and the Picts, and Scots. And of these, none besides the Britons have a right to it, because they went from sea to sea and settled it before any of the other nations came as a gormes on them. With that God avenged their sins and their pride and sent the Saxons and the Picts and the Scots on them as a gormes.]\textsuperscript{266}

The translator does not, as might be expected, shy away from Geoffrey’s gesture towards providential historiography. His description acknowledges that the British were guilty of the “syberwyt” [pride] that Geoffrey has ascribed to them, and recognizes that because of that pride, God has chosen to punish them.

Instead, the translator emphasizes the primacy of British settlement and notes that the island is owed to them through an inherited right, a less-than-subtle indication that they will eventually regain that inheritance. It is important to recognize, however, that though the translator has demonstrably played with the text to emphasize a Welsh perspective, he is not introducing anti-colonial rhetoric that is not already present in Geoffrey’s text. For instance, much later in Geoffrey’s text, the angel who visits Cadwallader to dissuade him from attempting to regain the island by force consoles the king by assuring him that the Britons will eventually claim their inheritance and retake the island: “Dicebat etiam populum Britonum per meritum fidei ipsius insulam in futuro adepturum postquam fatale tempus superueniret.” [The Angel told him further that the British people would regain the island through their great faith in days to come after the predestined time had passed.] Though the angel relates other news that is of “little comfort,” as Echard describes it, the Dingestow Brut translator recognizes his own perspective in Geoffrey’s comments

\textsuperscript{266} Brut Dingestow, ed. Henry Lewis (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1942): 2-3. My translation and emphasis.
such as these and ignores the rest.\textsuperscript{267} His modification of the passage, though presenting different implications than the Latin original, is not at odds with Geoffrey's overall text. The translator has simply chosen to (mis)read selectively.

More interesting perhaps is this translator's emphasis on the various invaders of Britain as being "gormes" upon the British people.\textsuperscript{268} "Gormes" translates into English as "oppression" or "plague", so the applicability of the term to these invaders is in some sense readily apparent.\textsuperscript{269} However, the term also gestures to a wider tradition within Welsh writing, where "gormes" upon the Britons (which can be historical or supernatural) are used to contextualize the historical progression of British enemies and to connect these historical enemies to folkloric ones.\textsuperscript{270} One of the Triads particularly relevant to the translator's use of the term is the "Teir Gormes a doeth y'r Ynys Hon, ac nyt aeth vrun dracheuyn" [Three Oppressions that came to this Island, and not one of them went back: One of them (was) the people of the Cor(y)aniaid, who came here in the time of Caswallawn (= Lludd?) son of Beli: and not one of them went back. And they came from Arabia. The second oppression: the Gwyddyl Ffichti. And not one of them went back. The third

\textsuperscript{267} Echard, \textit{Latin Narrative} 59.
\textsuperscript{268} Rachel Bromwich mentions this section of the Digestow Brut in her commentary on Triad 36, discussed further below. However, Joshua Byron Smith's doctoral dissertation is the only text I am aware of to note the emphasis the Dingestow translator places on the \textit{gormesoedd} throughout the text, pp. 64-65. Interestingly, but beyond the parameters of my current topic, is his further analysis of the Dingestow Brut's consistent use of "ysgymun" [excommunicated, expelled] to describe the Saxons, pp. 68-69.
\textsuperscript{270} To distinguish between "historical" and "folkloric" enemies is in some sense an anachronistic distinction. Giants and dragons are as much a part of medieval history as are Saxons and Picts. My point is that in describing these enemies as "gormesoedd", the translator is connecting different articulations of the Welsh past.
Oppression: the Saxons, with Horsa and Hengist as their leaders.] Though the Dingestow Brut translator does not mention this Triad, the longer mythological-historical tradition which both of these texts reference is nonetheless clear. The various invaders of Britain are being synthesized within the wider Welsh folkloric tradition, contextualizing the current oppressors within known past oppressions. The Normans are a notable and significant “gormes” upon the British people; however, like the Coraniaid, the Picts and the Saxons, there is no indication that they are not doomed to suffer the same fate.

This connection is also made by the two other thirteenth-century Welsh translations of the Historia witnessed by both Llanstefhan 1 and Peniarth 44. In translating the story of King Lud (Lludd in Welsh), the narrators, following Geoffrey in substance, narrate Lludd’s eponymous renaming of Trinovant to Caer Lludd and note that this was simply the first of many times the city would be renamed:

“Ac ay gelwys oy henw ef ehun. yn gaer llud. Agwedy dyuot ystrawn gedenloed idi. Y gelwitlundene. nev ereill ay galwei yn lundrys. Ac or diwed caer llundein.”

[And he called it Caer Llud, after his own name, and after that foreign nations came here, it was called Lundene, then others called it Lundrys, and at last Caer Llundein.”

Their relation of London’s name changes is largely faithful to Geoffrey’s Latin, but (as is typical of the Brutiau) they alter Geoffrey’s Latinized names to be recognizable within Welsh phonetics and historiography. Within the larger narrative of the Historia, this re-

271 Triad 36, TYP 90, trans. Bromwich.
272 See the Introduction to Cyfranc Lludd a Llefelys, ed. Brynley F. Roberts (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1975).
naming of London is a brief but important moment because it demonstrates both Geoffrey’s emphasis on place-name etymological significance and is a subtle reminder of his wider historical mode: the town is constant, though the name and the people that rule from that town change intermittently.

This renaming description has the potential to be a reminder of not only the past trauma that the Welsh have endured—loss of both insular sovereignty and also the very names of what were their most precious strongholds—but could also be interpreted as providential, linear historiography: consecutive races conquer Caer Lud and alter the name, but there is no mention of a future reversal of those alterations back into Caer Lud. The translators could, as they do elsewhere when such colonial rhetoric rears its head, translate it without comment or choose to ignore it.

Instead, immediately following the description of London’s renaming, these translators insert the native Welsh tale “Cyfranc Lludd a Llyfelis”. This tale has been associated with the core “canonical” collection of Welsh literature, the *Mabinogion*, since at least Lady Charlotte Guest’s inclusion of it with the other “Native Tales:” “Breuddwyd Rhonabwy” and “Breuddwyd Macsen Wledig.” Since the titular character of “Cyfranc Lludd a Llyfelis” is none other than the king whom Geoffrey intimately associates with this renaming of London, the relevance of the story to Geoffrey’s history is in some sense obvious; but there is more to this seemingly innocent tale inclusion than first meets the eye.

“Cyfranc Lludd a Llyfelis” narrates the discomfiture of “teir gormes adygwydwys yn ynys prydein” [Three *gormes* which fell upon the Island of Britain] by Lludd and his brother
Llyfelis, the King of Brittany: the Coraniaid (a diminutive race of supernatural beings who have extremely heightened hearing), a loud scream which causes miscarriages of all pregnant women on each May Day, and a magician who depletes the food stores by magically causing the entire court to fall asleep so that he can steal all the food. In an intrepid anticipation of biological warfare, the brotherly duo dispense with their dwarfish oppressors by sprinkling a deadly insect mixture (harmless to Britons) over the Coraniaid at a feast to kill them. They discover that the scream originates from an annually recurring battle between a red and white dragon and Lludd must capture these shrieking beasts in a vat of mead and then bury them in a stone coffin. To save the Britons from a food shortage, Lludd thwarts the magician by keeping himself awake with a vat of cold water so that he is able to confront the supernatural thief before entering the stores. Lludd is successful in all of his defensive endeavors and the Britons are able to live in peace because of his stalwart leadership.

The second “gormes” resolved by Lludd is particularly relevant for a translation of Geoffrey’s Historia since it provides an otherwise absent background story for the red and white dragon uncovered by Merlin and Vortigern in Book Seven. Geoffrey’s immediate source for this episode, Nennius’s Historia Britonum, does not mention or directly allude to the events in “Cyfranc”, so it is possible that Geoffrey himself was unaware of it. Nonetheless, the Brutiau translators rehearse it as if it is part of the original text and in doing so reinforce the traditional understanding of the various invaders of Britain, those who have variously renamed Caer Lud, as “gormesoedd.”

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274 Llanstephan I, 27.
275 There has not been much scholarly discussion I am aware of about the sequence in which the overall narrative was constructed, but it is possible that “Cyfranc” is a response, a prequel perhaps, of Nennius’s description of the entombed dragons.
Each “gormes” encountered by Lludd is exceedingly problematic in a very relevant way to British history and rule: the Coraniaid threaten British political sovereignty of the island, the screaming dragons threaten the genealogical continuation of the Welsh race, and the magician threatens the capability of Welsh kings to provide food for their people. They represent trials and tests set before an insular people who are consistently beleaguered with various forms of afflictions. Yet, despite the difficulty of the gormesoedd, the moral of the story is clear: each gormes is ultimately resolved by Lludd through perseverance, innovation, and political alliance. For the Welsh translator (and reader) of Geoffrey’s Historia, the Normans are just another gormes in a long line of gormesoedd; there is no reason to think that this most recent of afflictions will suffer any different fate than did the others. The inclusion of the “Cyfranc” in the Brut y Brenhinedd simultaneously validates Geoffrey’s Historia as being part and parcel of the wider native folkloric and historical tradition, and also mitigates the potential for pro-colonialist readings of that tradition—at least as it is encountered in the Brutiau.

The modifications these translators make to Geoffrey’s text do not, however, obviate the potential for pro-colonial readings at large—Norman and English kings continued to adopt Geoffrey’s Historia and King Arthur as justification for insular sovereignty well after the Welsh translations.276 Furthermore, as Faletra has duly noted, Welsh readings of the Historia are not necessarily an indication of Geoffrey’s own political agenda: “the extent of the modifications that the original text of the Historia underwent in (Welsh) translation suggests that the version of the past that Geoffrey devised was recognized by medieval

276 Ingham has explored this tendency well in Sovereign Fantasies.
Welshmen as not entirely palatable.” Faletra is right, of course: the Welsh translators did feel the need to make alterations to the *Historia* here and there, and occasionally they choose not to include passages they did not like—for both political and stylistic reasons. As every other distinct linguistic group who translated the *Historia* and the Arthurian legend in the Middle Ages, the Welsh read Geoffrey selectively.

It should be noted, however, that compared to other translations and adaptations of Geoffrey’s *Historia*, the “modifications” that Faletra points out are few indeed. Wace, for instance, is writing for Henry II’s court—the aristocratic population most ideologically and financially invested in Welsh colonization—yet he makes significantly more changes in his translation than the Welsh ever do, even after the Edwardian Conquest. Furthermore, and more importantly, the changes that the early Welsh translators make to Geoffrey’s text are not contrary to other portions of the *Historia*—they reinforce themes which are already present and contextualize those themes within their own historical and folkloric traditions. Geoffrey’s *Historia* is their cultural mirror, their insular pleasure garden in which they can reflect upon the pre-supposed parameters of their own imagined community.

**Norman Seeds in the British Garden**

Uigebit tamen paulisper set decimatio Neustrie nocebit. Populus namque in ligno et ferreis tunicis superueniet qui uindicat de nequitia ipsius sumet ... Germen albi draconis ex ortulis nostris abradetur et relique generationis eius decimabuntur.

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278 I would direct the interested reader to Jean Blacker’s numerous scholarly works on Wace’s adaptation of Geoffrey for detailed readings of his numerous revisions. The themes and consequences of the *Roman de Brut*’s alterations are too numerous to detail here.
[The Worm shall thrive only a little longer until the decimation of Neustria harms it. A people clad in iron tunics will arrive in a ship, and they will wreak vengeance upon the Worm for its crimes ... The seed of the White Dragon will be completely uprooted from our gardens, and the remainder of its race will be decimated.]

Merlin’s ninth prophecy in Book Seven of the Historia is perhaps the clearest prediction in the entire Prophetia Merlini. “Neustria” is an older term for “Normandy” and the “Albi Draco” has been thoroughly established by this point in the Prophetia as being the Germanic, Anglo-Saxon population of Britain; indeed, just prior to this prophecy, the “Worm” is referred to as the “Germanicus Draco”. The armored Neustrian host arriving in a ship, defeating the White Dragon and destroying its “seed”, then, is a glaring allegory of the 1066 Battle of Hastings and the subsequent subjugation of the Anglo-Saxons. Though there are many prophecies in this book which are unintelligible at even a basic literal level, this particular reference is the exception: any reader of Geoffrey’s work in the twelfth century would need to be politically comatose to misinterpret the “real-world” significance of the destruction of the White Dragon.

Interestingly, though the prophecy is horrendously anachronistic in some respects (as a ventriloquial assumption of an ancient Welsh prophetic voice to praise a twelfth-century Norman army), in some sense it is one of the most imaginative trans-historical moments in the text. If Merlin were real and if he were to have made this prophecy in the sixth century, he certainly would have referred to this particular section of the Western Frankish Empire (ie. Normandy) as “Neustria.” Furthermore, Merlin’s description of the “ferreis tunicis” [iron tunics] is an undeniably imaginative recreation of how a sixth-century British warrior might describe the technologically-advanced armor of the eleventh-
century Normans. The prophecy exudes an uncanny aura of authenticity, an aura which perhaps contributed to its popularity.

It is important that it is at this point in the text, the clearest and most obviously pandering section of the *Historia*, that Geoffrey's horticultural terminology begins to re-blossom. Though separated textually and chronologically from the “alienos ortulos” that Geoffrey forswears and the luxurious arboreal boughs under which he imagines reciting his leisurely history, Geoffrey's reference here to the Saxon seed which is uprooted from “ortulos nostris” is taking part in the same larger conversation about borderland politics and the transformative potential of historical books.

The reference to “Neustria” is the only time, aside from the dedications, that Normans are directly referred to in the *Historia*—and the reference is in the most unambiguously positive terms. The only point-blank mention of the Norman people is at their most glorious and historically cherished moment, the Conquest of England. Even in the twelfth century, less than a century after William I’s overwhelmingly successful amphibious assault on the shores of Sussex, it was obvious to historians and chroniclers that 1066 was a watershed moment in the history of Britain and all of Europe. Geoffrey's representation of the Normans here, just as his representation of Norman aristocrats in his various dedications, is a direct appeal to Norman political sympathy.

Yet, and this is a vitally important qualification, Geoffrey frames this glowing appeal to the Normans in terminology which is, ironically, overwhelmingly positive from a *Welsh* perspective. Merlin's vatic vision of the Norman Conquest is *not* framed by what that military success *eventually* meant for the Welsh people (Norman incursions into Wales followed soon after England’s defeat) but is instead articulated by its most immediate and
symbolically significant consequence: the Normans are the saviors of the Red Dragon, the
vanquishers of the most prolonged and problematic threat that the Welsh had hitherto
faced. The iron-tunic wearing Neustrian commander is a second Lludd, the king who is
finally able to outwit the screaming White Dragon and neutralize its potential to ever again
threaten the Welsh population.

Astoundingly, Geoffrey is able to flatter the Normans’ pride while still maintaining a
safe poetic and political perspective. After reading the *Historia*, even the most ethnocentric,
conquest-driven imperialist of the Norman aristocracy would find *something* admirable in
the deeds of the ancient British Kings. They will have become invested, so to speak, in the
admiration of a culture (or at least a cultural history) which they are contemporaneously at
war with and will find themselves in a conflict of interests. In this description of the
Conquest, Geoffrey is able to rectify those conflicts, albeit momentarily—Merlin’s
comments subsume the Norman race, inextricably, into British (*Welsh*) historiography and
folkloric tradition. In the same way that Madoc and the *Brut y Brenhinedd* tradition
incorporated Geoffrey into Welsh historical thought, Geoffrey is giving the Normans the
conceptual space to invest themselves in Welsh history.

It is no surprise then that Geoffrey’s work garnered popularity among even the most
disparate factions of Norman and European society. His direct addresses to various
Norman aristocrats in his dedicatory epistles are a prime example of his varied appeal.
Three distinct sets of dedications have been determined to be authorial and were written
within a relatively close time frame. As Wright has pointed out, Geoffrey very clearly has
one patron in mind at the beginning of Book Eleven, which he begins with “Nec hoc quidem,
consul auguste, Galfridus Monemutensis tacebit...” [Not upon this subject, Noble Counsel,
will Geoffrey of Monmouth be silent...].\(^{279}\) Therefore, it seems most likely that Geoffrey’s original dedication was the singular one, to Robert of Gloucester, the illegitimate son of Henry I and (eventually) the chief military and political supporter of Queen Matilda, who would oppose King Stephen in the Anarchy Period. For reasons as yet unknown, Geoffrey then modified his epistle to also include, immediately after his appeal to Robert, a second dedication to Walerun of Meulan, whom he describes as the “altera regni nostri columnna” [other pillar of our realm]. Walerun was the Earl of Worcester and an early supporter of King Stephen. Stephen valued his alliance enough to betroth Walerun to his infant daughter, also named Matilda, immediately after ascending the throne.\(^{280}\)

The Bern Manuscript records the final dedication Geoffrey makes, this time to King Stephen and Robert. As Wright has argued, following Griscom and others, the minor stylistic faults in this last dedication betray it as being definitively last, and haphazardly poached from the previous two. I set out the relevant sections of all three dedications below:

\(^{279}\) *Bern MS* 177. Wright, “Introduction,” xiv.

\(^{280}\) An unimportant (for the current discussion) but nevertheless creepy side-note, Walerun was 32 when he was engaged to Stephen’s infant daughter.
The changes in these dedications have been variously analyzed in order to nail down a composition time frame for the *Historia*. Griscom argued that the latter two dedications would have had to have been made before 1138, since it was in that year that Robert officially took the side of his sister, Queen Matilda, in opposition to Waleran and Stephen.282 Wright, however, following Tatlock, notes that when Henry of Huntington received a copy of the *Historia* in 1139 his reaction was one of complete and utter surprise (“stupens inueni”)—and given that Henry is a remarkably thorough historian and he shared the same patron as Geoffrey (Alexander of Lincoln) it seems highly unlikely that the *Historia* would have circulated long without Henry’s being aware of it. Geoffrey, then, most likely made this double dedication while tensions were increasing exponentially between the two factions—tensions which would eventually lead to an incredibly destructive civil war.

Recognizing this, some scholars have sought to rectify Geoffrey’s obviously oppositional political moves within a larger thematic gesture. Wright urges us to draw upon lessons from the *Historia* itself, which “abounds in examples of the folly of civil strife

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281 These dedications are printed in Wright’s introduction and are drawn from Leiden, Bibliothek der Rijksuniversiteit, MS. B.P.L. 20; Cambridge, University Library, MS. ii.1.14 and from the Bern MS, respectively. The italics emphasizing the changes in the final dedication are mine.

282 Griscom “The Date of the Composition,” pp. 149-154.
and the advantages of concord; the dedication of the work to men who newly found themselves enemies might therefore be a powerful, if covert, plea for unity.”

Warren, while emphasizing Geoffrey’s unique position of being subsumed by postcolonial “ambivalence,” argues that Geoffrey’s multi-faceted dedication “negotiates a settlement of differences between political rivals and between empires past and present.”

Geoffrey, the border writer torn asunder by sundry allegiances, is able to see the value of unity and settlement, and uses his history to work towards those goals.

This understanding of Geoffrey as the peace-weaving diplomat who, through his longue durée history of the British Kings, is able to draw from his personal and professional knowledge of strife and reconciliation at the national and international level is attractive to us for some important reasons. As I have endeavored to show in this chapter, Geoffrey simultaneously provides the conceptual space for colonial and anti-colonial rhetoric in his Historia. Under no conceivable circumstances should we imagine that this space was left unoccupied: the Norman/English aristocracy for centuries after would utilize Historia-derived conceptions of the British and Arthurian past to justify political domination; and subsequent generations of Welsh rebels would utilize the pro-Welsh themes of the Historia to justify violent insurrection. Geoffrey of Monmouth is at least partially responsible for the deaths of thousands of English and Welsh people in the medieval and post-medieval period.

In synthesizing Geoffrey’s various appeals—in his dedications and, indeed, throughout his text—as a subtle form of diplomacy, we are able to bracket Geoffrey’s motives from the disturbing consequences of his history. Also, explaining the discursive interpretations of Geoffrey’s text as a vie for unification frames Geoffrey within the modern, conciliatory

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283 Wright, “Introduction”, xv.
This line of thought paints Geoffrey as the “pre-colonial” historian, unencumbered by the cultural and social-psychological effects of centuries of building and deconstructing the British Empire. His pluralistic approach is, thus, made to seem prophetically anticipatory of twentieth-century left-wing politics.

I think this urge to see Geoffrey as perceptive of a wider historical framework is ultimately correct, but I think that his framework is more reflective of twelfth-century historiography than twentieth-century ideology. The Norman colonist and the Welsh rebel each are given their space in the Historia, as are each of the passing political reigns of Britain. In the pages of the Historia, good kings and bad kings come and go. Britain is unified only to be divided again, then reunified under a different set of principles; wash, rinse, repeat. The silent refrain in Geoffrey’s narration of British history is given voice some centuries later by Kurt Vonnegut in Slaughterhouse-Five: Brutus comes to Albion and the race of giants is dashed to bloody bits upon the rocks—“so it goes.” Arthur defeats Rome, rules the world, and goes off mortally wounded to a fairy island—“so it goes.” The Britons become barbarians and Saxons take over, the Normans defeat the Saxons and rule Britain for a time—“so it goes.”

As I describe above, Geoffrey’s appeal to King Stephen encourages us to think about the transformative potential of history in the hands of powerful men: ‘correct (corrigatur) my little book, King Stephen, so that it will no longer be from Geoffrey of Monmouth, but derived of your own mind.’ Geoffrey’s historical book, like the garden he imagines it in and the cultural environment of the March of Wales whence it derives, is a conceptual space of

metamorphosis; an environment of musing and reflection which enacts ideological changes on a national scale. As other Arthurian narratives from the March before and after, the *Historia* mimics the wider symbolic negotiations of the border. All those who try to shape/correct Arthurian border literature—the Welsh “nationalist”, the English “colonist”, and all the varied aristocrats to whom Geoffrey dedicates his history—are themselves ultimately shaped/corrected by that literature. This wider truth of Geoffrey’s History is made manifest by these varying dedications: the book, the *history*, never changes, only the names and titles of the transient rulers who happen to be topical. Brutus, Arthur, Lludd, Walerun of Meulan, Robert of Gloucester, King Stephen—though each have their place, their page in the ever expanding book of British history—they are ultimately interchangeable; merely signifiers in the ominous onward march of Albion’s fate.

As Albion’s fate marched into the next century, Geoffrey’s *Historia* and the thoroughly unique environment of the Welsh Marches continued to shape that fate on both sides of the border. One writer who played an important role in conceptualizing the roles that Arthurian history and the March of Wales played in shaping the English population on the border was Laȝamon, whose parish of Arley Kings in western Worcestershire was only a short distance from the Anglo-Welsh border and the ongoing colonial project; and it is to his unique representation of Arthur and the March of Wales that I now turn.
3) “Prumde to are”: Combining Culture and Prophecy in Lazamón’s Brut

Lazamón gon liðen wide ʒon ʒas leode,
and biwon ʒa æðela boc ʒa he to bisne nom.
He nom ʒa Englisca boc ʒa makede Seint Beda.
Anoþer he nom on Latin ʒe makede Seinte Albin
and ʒe feire Austin ʒe fulluht broute hider in.
Boc he nom ʒe þridde, leide þer amidden,
þa makede a Frenchis clerç,
Wace wes ihoten, ʒe wel couþe writen...
Lazamón leide þeos boc and þa leaf wende:
he heom leofliche biheold –liþe him bëo Drihten!
Feþeren he nom mid fîngren and fiede on boc-felle,
and þa sopere word sette togadere,
and þa þre boc þrumde to are.

[Laȝamon went travelling widely around this land, and seized the noble books he took as a model. He took the English book made by Saint Bede. Another, in Latin, he took which was made by Saint Albin and the fair Austin who brought baptism to this place. A third book he took, and laid among the others, that was made by a French clerk who was called Wace—he could write well!... Lazamon laid these books down and turned their pages: He gazed upon them lovingly—God be
gracious unto him! A quill he took in his fingers and set it upon the book-skin, then, setting the truer words together, he beat the three books into one.]286

Laȝamon’s description of his research and composition process is something of an anomaly in medieval literature. Rarely do authors provide us with a name, rarer still are we provided with their named, verifiable sources or anything of their “research methodology” (to use a rather grandiose anachronism). In addition, Laȝamon tells us his occupation ("an preost"), where he lives ("Ernleȝe... vppen Seuarne staþe"), and even tells us his purpose in writing this book: "he wolde of Engle þa ædelæn tellen, / wat heo ihoten weoren and wonene heo komen / þa Englene londe ærest ahten." If he had only scribbled down a date, we would seem to have at ready hand an authorial answer to the issues which have typically been of most concern to literary critics and historians about medieval works.287

However, as generations of Brut scholarship have taught us, Laȝamon’s comments here have done more to complicate those issues than to answer them. Part of the problem is that Laȝamon seems, in fact, to be misrepresenting both his sources and subject matter.

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287 Indeed, some argue Laȝamon gives us some hints as to the date as well in his phrase “Ælienor þe wes Henries quene” which, given the use of the past tense, might imply that Eleanor is no longer Henry’s queen because Henry is deceased, which Henry became in 1189. However, given that Laȝamon also refers to himself in the past tense a few lines previous (“Laȝamon wes ihoten”), that logic seems flawed. The terminus post quem for the Brut is shortly after Wace writes the Roman de Brut in 1155. One possible terminus ante quem is 1236 (when another King Henry marries another Eleanor, which would seem to require an individuation not provided by Laȝamon), but the only certain terminus ante quem is before the production of the manuscript in the third quarter of the thirteenth century. Following Françoise Le Saux and others, I situate the Brut as a composition of ca. 1200 AD. Among others, John Frankis argues for a later dating in ‘Laȝamon or the Lawman? A Question of Names, a Poet, and an Unacknowledged Legislator’, Leeds Studies in English 34 (2003): 109-132.
Readers of the Brut know that the English people that Laȝamon describes in his work only qualify as “þa ædælæn” on the rarest of occasions and they were certainly not the people who “Englene londe ærest ahten.” Of his named source texts, Wace’s Roman de Brut (“Boc... þa makede a Frenchis clerç, / Wace wes ihoten”) is the only one we are sure he utilized—though, as I discuss further below, he certainly used other sources that he neglects to tell us about. The “Englisca boc þa makede Seint Beda” is, as originally suggested by Madden, undoubtedly a reference to the vernacular translation of Bede’s Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum. However, other than some correspondence between the English names in the Anglo-Saxon Bede and Laȝamon (which would be expected regardless of Laȝamon’s potential consultation of the text) and possibly the famous passage of Gregory’s encounter with the Angle/Angel slaves, there is little evidence to suggest that Laȝamon used much of the Anglo-Saxon translation of Bede if, in fact, he had it at all.288

The book “on Latin þe makede Seinte Albin / and þe feire Austin,” is more confusing still. We have no record of a Saint Albin, nor do we have a book by anyone claiming to be a Saint Albin co-authored (or not) by Augustine of Canterbury. It has long been suggested that Laȝamon mistook the Latin version Bede’s Historia Ecclesiastica for a separate work than the English translation since Bede’s prologue mentions an abbot “Albinus” and shortly thereafter Bede has an extended discussion of Augustine.289 However, other evidence


289 This suggestion was first made by Sir Frederic Madden in his premier edition, translation and study of the Brut, and is still employed by many scholars today. Laȝamon’s
suggests Laȝamon had significantly better Latin skills than to have mistaken Bede’s history for a separate work. Furthermore, the Albinus of the Bedean prologue is very clearly an abbot, not a saint.

E.G. Stanley proposed another solution to this problem by demonstrating the interchangeability of the names “Albin” and “Alcuin” in the Middle Ages and suggested that we should be looking for a book by both “Alcuin” and Augustine, rather than Albin and Augustine, and books of that sort certainly existed if we are flexible about the “Augustine” Laȝamon refers to: “perhaps Laȝamon had really seen some book containing works by both Albin/Alcuin and Saint Augustine (of Hippo, presumably), for such books existed, even in the vernacular.” The problem with this particular theory is that Laȝamon’s Augustine is very clearly not “of Hippo”, but is “pe fulluht broute hider in;” that Augustine (“of Canterbury”) has no surviving writings.

It is also possible that “Seinte Albin” is a slip or a variant of “Seinte Alban,” the protomartyr of the British people. The advantage of such an identification is that, unlike the Alcuins and Albinuses other scholars have suggested, Alban is undeniably a saint and he is thematically linked with Augustine of Canterbury—both were pivotal in bringing the “fulluht” to the island at different times in history. This identification is favored by Andrew Galloway, who supports the point by noting that “Alban” is spelled “Albin” (not “Albinus” or “Alcuin”) in Anglo-Saxon writings of the eleventh century. The disadvantages of this

291 Though Augustine apparently assisted in Ethelbert’s drafting of the oldest Anglo-Saxon laws, those are clearly not what Laȝamon is referring to. See Lisi Oliver’s introduction to her The Beginnings of English Law (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002).
identification are similar to the other candidates—Alban and Augustine lived and died centuries apart (as Laȝamon knew), and neither have any surviving writings we know of which might have been compiled into a combined book. Even if we determine that Laȝamon was referring to this actual saint, Alban, it still seems most likely that a book by that saint and Augustine of Canterbury is Laȝamon’s fanciful invention. Laȝamon’s named sources seem to be participating in a medieval tradition following Geoffrey of Monmouth’s “librum uetustissimum” and anticipating Chaucer’s “Lollius.”

What I want to suggest in this chapter, however, is that despite Laȝamon’s apparently blatant lies about his sources and subject matter, the strangely bibliophilic description of his composition process in the prologue speaks volumes about Laȝamon’s approach to historical composition and the complex state of ethnic politics in the March of Wales around the turn of the twelfth century. First and foremost, we need to recognize that Laȝamon’s named sources are much more important for what they represent about his work than for how they actually contributed as source material for his history. The three books in three languages are derivative of three distinct phases of colonial history in Britain. The Latin book by Saints Alban and Augustine represents the Roman Christian colonization of Britain and the Romano-Celtic Christian culture of the early medieval Britons, while the specifically “Englisca boc ȝa makede Seint Beda” and the book made by a “Frenchis clerc” (my emphasis) are representative of the Saxon and Norman Conquests, respectively.293 As Joseph Parry puts it, “[Laȝamon’s] three named sources... represent a particular version of the three dominant cultures (dare I say, ‘world peoples’) who not only successively take over Britain, but who also come and stay, adding one new race to

293 Galloway makes a similar assessment: “Likely these ‘sources’ are chosen partly to represent the phases of English history defined by its conquests,” “Laȝamon’s Gift,” 721.
Britain’s makeup.” Laȝamon sees the composition of his book, like Britain itself (and especially the March of Wales), as the product of a multi-temporal and multi-ethnic colonization process.

In a sense, seeing that Laȝamon is an English priest translating a Norman poem about Welsh history, the observation his book (like his region) is a product of a multi-ethnic colonization process is something of a given. However, Laȝamon’s description of his composition process reveals that his mixing and molding of multiple cultures and times is not a disinterested musing about the writing of history in medieval Britain, but is a purposeful, politically-driven enterprise. Laȝamon does not merely read these books/cultures, he conquers them (“Laȝamon... biwon þa æðela boc”) and he takes them (“Anoþer he nom”) in the same manner that Arthur (among other strong kings in the Brut) conquers and takes back lands held by other political sovereignties. The various books and cultures which make up the Brut are being violently co-opted by Laȝamon, then beaten and crowded into one purposeful entity: “þa soþere word sette togadere / and þa þre boc þrumde to are.” As has been noted, “þrumde” is one of Laȝamon’s hapax legomena, derivative of Old English “thrymme” [host, multitude] and Old Saxon “heruthrummeon” [hostile power or strength]. Thus, as Kenneth Tiller has noted, Laȝamon’s prologue

295 Brut lines 15 and 17, my emphasis.
296 ibid., 27-28.
297 See OED s.v. “thrum” v.1 and n.1. Both Madden and Allen gloss this word as “set together or compress,” while Barron and Weinberg render the word as “combined” in their translation. The MED, s.v. “þrum,” defines the term as “push together” and notes a Middle Dutch cognate of “drommen” [to push or shove]. Tiller, Laȝamon’s Brut (105), similarly notes “Germanic origins in the act of pushing, shoving or even drumming.” However, cf. Elizabeth Bryan, Collaborative Meaning in Scribal Culture (44), who suggests a gloss of “threed,” derivative of Old English “þrum” [three].
depicts “historical composition [as] a metaphoric invasion, making its source texts the property of the textual ‘conqueror’ in the same way that a military conqueror seizes a land and its inhabitants.”

As Laȝamon indicates here, the intimate relationship between the subjugation of historical sources and the subjugation of historical peoples is all too well known. Laȝamon, however, depicts these “þrumde” books/colonial cultures as not simply source material, but as a “bisne,” as a simultaneously past exemplum and forewarning of further, impending conquests: “þa æðela boc þa he to bisne nom” [these noble books which he took as a model[prophecy]]. He repeats the construction in the opening of the main narrative: “Nv seið mid loft-songe þe wes on leoden preost / al swa þe boc spekeð þe he to bisne nom.” [Now he who was the peoples’ priest says in noble verse all which the book said that he took as a bisne.] That phrase, “to bisne nom,” at once recalls the Old English meaning of “example/model” and anticipates the later English use of it as “portent/warning.”

Laȝamon’s characterization of his source books, and indeed his own book, as a “bisne” might be likened to the Sybilline prophecy of Arthur’s conquest of Rome:

“Sibeli hit sæide –her quides weoren soðe—
and sette hit on bocke uolke to bisne
þat þreo kinges sculden buþen ut of Brutlonde
þa biwennen sculden Rome and al þa riche
and alle þa londes þe þerto liggeð.”

299 *Brut*, ll. 36-37.
300 This latter nuance, like Laȝamon’s name, is derivative of Old Norse. See ON “býsn” [wonder, portentous thing] in OED, s.v. “bysen.”
[The Sybil said it, her sayings were true, and set it down in the book as a *bisne* to the people that three kings would come out of Britain to ravish Rome and all its territories and all the lands that lie before it.]

Laȝamon’s *Brut*, in its ‘þrumming’ of cultures and culturally definitive texts, bequeaths its readers a model and a prophecy not unlike the “quiðes” by Merlin and Sybil which are so often quoted and praised throughout the *Brut*.

In the following chapter, I suggest that one of those “quiðes” in particular is key to understanding the subversive political motives in Laȝamon’s ‘þrumming’ of cultures and texts:

*Bruttes ileueð ȝete þat he bon on liue*

and wunnien in Aualun mid fairest alre aluen;

*and lokieð euere Bruttes ȝete whan Arður cumen liðe.*

*Nis nauer þe mon iboren of nauer nane burde icoren*

*þe cunne of þan soðe of Arðure sugen mare.*

*Bute while wes an wite ȝe Mærlin ihate;*

*he bodede mid worde—his quiðes weoren soðe—*

*þat an Arður sculde ȝete cum Anglen to fulste.*

[The British yet believe that he is living well and lives in Avalon with the fairest of the elves; and the British ever look forward to when Arthur should come again. There was never any man born of any gentle lady that can say more of the truth of Arthur. But once there

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301 *Brut* ll. 12547-12551, my emphasis.
was a prophet called Merlin, he prophesied with words—his sayings were true—that an Arthur should yet come to aid the English].

By the time that Laȝamon wrote these lines at the close of the twelfth century, the idea that King Arthur would return from the grave and lead his people to victory was not a new one. As I discuss above in relation to Geoffrey of Monmouth, the Breton Hope was a well-established motif among writers directly or indirectly concerned with the Arthurian legend and British culture, and it was also associated with sedition and rebellion in Wales.

However, as the notion expanded beyond insular historiography, it became utilized in many complicated ways. The motif is a testament to the power and popularity of the Arthurian legend in insular culture and a recognition of the nearly universal allure of this mysterious British figure to non-British people. That attention took the form of both endearing fascination and derisive criticism, however, as the motif developed under various authorial lenses.

Laȝamon’s reception and redeployment of this motif, along with his appropriation of Welsh political prophecy, represent a unique and important divergence from the established historiographic model. In this chapter, I examine Laȝamon’s development of the legend in relationship to the previous and contemporary characterizations in both Anglo-Norman and Welsh culture circulating in the March of Wales. First, I explore the uses and usefulness of political prophecy to authors in the central Middle Ages, emphasizing how

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302 Brut, ll. 14290-97.
Anglo-Norman historians in particular asserted their authority over written, Latin prophecies and denigrated the authority of oral and vernacular prophecies like those of the Welsh and Laȝamon’s Merlin. Then I explore the development of the Breton Hope in Anglo-Norman historiography and the Mab Darogan in Welsh language political prophecies to argue for both Laȝamon’s intimate familiarity with these genres and his astute adaptation of them for his unique anti-colonial agenda. In short, I argue that Laȝamon adapts the motif of a revenant, messianic Arthur from the antithetical traditions of Anglo-Norman historiography and Welsh political prophecy in ways which are unique to both of these traditions.

Britain. Similarly, this chapter presents Laȝamon as widely read in Latin historiography and Welsh prophecy, and furthermore as a subtle, subversive poet who promoted dangerous, dynamic societal changes—as a poet who is essentially different from the “barbarian” Loomis saw in Laȝamon, and the naive rural priest that Tatlock described.

More pointedly, however, this chapter addresses Laȝamon as a poet near the Welsh border and his poem as an Arthurian border text which functions as a figurative extension of the border itself. Laȝamon’s ethnic, racial, or nationalist sympathies have divided critics for generations—he has been variously understood as a forgotten Saxon poet, as a non-Saxon Angle, as a Francophile, as a Norseman, as the tool of Norman colonialism, and, conversely, as a Welsh nationalist. All of these characterizations have their complications, and others have taken to describing Laȝamon as either an armchair anthropologist “gone native,” as “confused,” or as exhibiting symptoms of a strikingly

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306 Le Saux, in *Laȝamon’s Brut: The Poem and its Sources*, is one of the first and one of the few to comprehensively consider the multi-ethnic concerns and sources of the *Brut*.
postmodern “ambivalence”. By reconsidering these approaches with an eye to the unique geopolitical region Laȝamon emphatically situates himself within (an aspect widely neglected in Brut scholarship), we can begin to piece together some of the more elusive questions about the poem. Only “vppen Seuern staþþe,” among this complex, contested, varied and vibrant border culture, does the prospect of an English priest yoking Welsh-influenced prophecy into a translation of a Norman poem register as sensible situation. There, on the boundaries of three cultures, Laȝamon “biwon” the threat of the Breton Hope from Anglo-Norman historiography and “nom” the Mab Darogan from Welsh Political prophecy and, with “Feþereren... mid fingren,” he “þrumde to are.”

“his quïðes weoren soðe”: Prophetic Authority in Anglo-Norman Britain

In 1136, Orderic Vitalis encountered a document that would redirect the entire genre of historiographic writing for centuries to come. Two full years before Geoffrey of Monmouth’s Historia Regum Britannie was distributed, Orderic read and responded to Geoffrey’s Prophetia Merlini—the work which would eventually become the seventh book of the Historia Regum Britannie. Orderic’s assessment of this document is generally representative of how it was received by most other Anglo-Norman, Latinate historians:


315 Three important exceptions to this neglect, addressed in more detail below, are Michelle Warren’s History on the Edge: Excalibur and the Borders of Britain (Minneapolis: University of Michigan Press, 2000), and Simon Meecham-Jones and Jennifer Miller’s respective contributions to the recent Reading Laȝamon’s Brut: Approaches and Explorations, ed. Rosemond Allen, Jane Roberts and Carole Weinberg (Leiden: Brill, 2013).
Historiarum gnari eius dicta facili peterunt intelligere, qui nouverint ea quae contigerunt Hengist et Catigirno, Pascent et Arthuro. Aedelberto ac Edwino, Osualdo et Osuio, Cedwal et Elfredo, alisque principibus Anglorum et Britonum usque ad tempora Henrici et Grifridi, qui dubia sub sorte adhuc imminentia prestolantur, quae sibi diuinitus ineffabili dispositione ordinatur.

[Men well read in histories can easily apply his predictions, if they know the lives of Hengist and Katigern, Pascent and Arthur, Æthelberht and Edwin, Oswald and Oswy, Cædwalla and Alfred, and other rulers of the Angles and Britons up to the times of Henry and Gruffudd, who still, uncertain of their lot, await the future events that are ordained for them.]

As Julia Crick has recently noted on this passage, Orderic recognizes Merlin's words as “both spent prophecy . . . and live prediction.” The prophecies are a transcendent fulcrum of temporality—simultaneously true history and true future.

This intrinsic connection between the recorded past and the supposed future among medieval authors has been widely noted; Laȝamon’s simultaneous use of “bisne” to mean prior exemplum and future prophecy, cited above, is another such example. Unknown aspects of the past, present, and future exist on a coterminous vatic plane for medieval authors, and require the same qualifications to access. Pope Gregory I, in explaining the use of prophecy to read history, notes the essential, temporal flexibility of the genre: ‘recte prophetia dicitur, non quia praedicit ventura, sed quia prodit occulta’ [It is correctly said to

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be prophecy not because it predicts the future, but because it reveals that which is hidden]. That Orderic saw Merlin as a cipher for the “hidden knowledge” of past, present and future is indicative of Orderic’s professional, historical assessment of a legitimate source.

As Orderic implies, however, the ability to interpret this divinely ordained framework is not ubiquitously available; one must be “historiarum gnari” to pry apart Geoffrey’s Merlin prophecies from their cryptic language and recognize their historical value. Orderic is right, of course on a very literal level: as a complex continuous monologue inundated with enigmatic metaphors and mystical allusions, the *Prophetia Merlini* requires a level of literacy and intellectualism that was simply not available to most people. Even though Geoffrey later incorporates the prophecies into the *Historia* (surrounded by the events the visions are referencing), the prophecies are segregated from the historical narrative without dates or names which might encourage easy connections.

Orderic’s comments about being “well read in history” also, however, imply a sense of exclusivity that is not merely referring to possessing a working knowledge of historical events and people. Laȝamon’s most established source for the *Brut*, Wace, refuses to translate Geoffrey’s *Prophetia Merlini* at all: “Ne vuil sun livre translater / Quant jo nel sai interpreter” [I do not wish to translate his book when I do not know how to interpret it]. Wace is certainly “well read in history,” and he is much more capable of translating and interpreting these prophecies than he gives himself credit for; as Laȝamon himself says of

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the Jersey poet, “þe wel couþe writen.” Wace’s modesty and silence owes more to court politics and professional boundaries than interpretive capabilities. His silence avoids offending those in the court who might feel threatened by the prophecies and does not infringe on the turf of “serious” historians, like Orderic and William of Malmesbury. Other readers, possibly with similar political or professional concerns, excised the prophecies as a whole.320

Laȝamon, however, neither excises the prophecies nor excuses his interpretive abilities. Instead, he selectively translates sections of Geoffrey’s text and incorporates them into the historical narrative with clear and easy connections to their historical references. Consider, for example, Laȝamon’s description of the destruction of Winchester:

And Arður Winchestrę þa burh bilai wel faste
And al þat moncun oflsoh –þer wes sorȝen inoh!
Þa þeonge and þa alde, alle he aqualde.
Þa þat folc wes al ded, þa burh al forswelde,
Þa lette he mid alle tobreken þa walles alle.
Þa wes hit itimed þere þat Merlin seide while:
‘Ærm wurðest þu Winchæstre; þæ eorðe þe scal forswalȝe!’
Swa Merlin sæide –þe witeȝe wes mære.
[And Arthur laid siege to the town of Winchester very strongly and slew all of the people –there was sorrow enough! The young and the old, all of them he killed. When those people were all dead and the burg completely burned, then he ordered all the

walls to be demolished completely. Then it had passed there what Merlin once said:

‘You will be desolate, Winchester; the earth shall swallow you up!’ So said Merlin, the prophet was powerful.]321

The destruction and utter desolation that Arthur brings upon Winchester is justified through its having been foretold by Merlin and Merlin’s vatic prowess is enhanced in the passage. History and prophecy serve complementary purposes: the historical narrative is more authoritative for having been linked to this prophecy and the authority of the prophet is confirmed by citing the historical realization of his prediction. The passage, drawn from section thirty-five of Geoffrey’s *Propheta Merlini*, is also made much clearer by Laȝamon than in its original:

Excitabitur Daneum nemus et in humanam uocem erumpens clamabit: ‘accede, Kambria, et iunge lateri tuo Cornubiam, et dic Quintoniae “absorbebit te tellus; transfer sedem pastoris ubi naues aplicant et cetera membra caput sequantur.”’

[The grove of Dean will arise and in a human voice cry loudly: ‘Approach, Cambria, and join to your side Cornwall, and say to Winchester: ‘the earth will swallow you, transfer the seat of your shepherd to where your navy is placed, and let all the rest of the members follow the head.’]322

The only section appropriated by Laȝamon is “absorbebit te tellus,” which he renders as “þæ eorðe þe scal forswalʒe.” By integrating the passage into the historical narrative at the precise time of the destruction of Winchester (which Laȝamon seems to have invented for

321 *Brut*, 14195-14202.
this very purpose), 323 Laȝamon reads the prophecies for us and removes the enigmatic references of the original. Readers of Laȝamon’s Brut need not be “well read in history” to make the essential connections between Merlin’s prophecy and the historical manifestation of that prophecy. By contextualizing, translating, and “speaking” the Winchester prophecy (“Merlin seide while”), Laȝamon democratizes vatic insight and demonstrates the infallibility of Merlin’s “quiðes.”

Laȝamon was not the only writer to recognize the professional and political potential for specific integrations of the Prophetia Merlini into historical narrative. A fellow border writer, Gerald of Wales, took a similar (though much more exhaustive) approach in his Expugnatio Hibernica. 324 Whatever Gerald might have thought about Geoffrey’s “lying” history, he was not above stripping long sections of the Prophetia Merlini to frame and guide his history of the Anglo-Norman conquest of Ireland. 325 Every major development leading to the subjugation of the Irish people is predicted by and predicated on the prophetic utterance of Gerald’s prophets: Merlin Ambrosius, Merlin Caledonis, and St. Moling. 326 This prophecy/historical narrative structure is so self-reciprocating that Gerald

323 The corresponding section of Wace’s Roman does not depict this scene or prophecy at all.
325 For Gerald’s comments on Geoffrey’s work, see Giraldus Cambrensis, Itinerarium Kambriae, ed. James F. Dimock (London: Longmans, Green, Reader and Dyer, 1868) I.V, p. 58.
326 Gerald distinguishes between two Merlins in Itinerarium Kambroia II.VIII, pp. 133-134. Merlin Ambrosius is the Merlin who prophesies to Vortigern at Dinas Emrys in Geoffrey of Monmouth’s Historia Regum Britanniae, cap.104-119; all prophecies attributed to this Merlin in Gerald’s Expugnatio derive from Geoffrey of Monmouth’s Prophetia Merlini. Merlin Caledonis, also known as Merlin Silvestris is, as in the Merlincic prophecies of the Llyfr du Caerfyrddin, associated with the north and battle of Arfderydd. Saint Moling is a legendary Irish saint from the seventh century; Scott and Martin’s note, n.81 p.301, contains Moling’s biographical details. Though both of these latter figures were associated with vernacular
even suggests his book be called the *Vaticinali Historie*, since he quite literally writes the history as it corresponds to the prophecies he found in the *Historia Regum Britannie* and the "Prophecy of the Eagle", another Latin language Merlin prophecy circulating throughout the twelfth century.\(^{327}\) Gerald’s editors, unsurprisingly, have politely ignored his suggestion.

Gerald does not always defer to the authority of Merlinic vaticinations, however, and he is very wary of populist versions of political prophecy. In an important moment of the text, Gerald vividly illustrates a false prophecy by Merlin: When Henry II passes through St. David’s cathedral in Wales after his conquest of Ireland, a Welsh woman throws herself in front of the King to complain about Gerald’s uncle, the bishop of St. David’s. The king is unreceptive to the woman, and she has to be forcibly removed “illis qui Britannicam linguam noverant” [by those who knew Welsh] from the cathedral for screaming: “Vindica nos hodie, Lechlavar, vindica genus et gentem de homine hoc” [avenge us this day, Lechlavar, take vengeance upon this man for our race and kindred]. Gerald informs us that “alludens illi ficticio vulgari nec vero Merlini proverbio, quo dici solebat Anglie regem, Hibernie triumphatorem, ab homine cum rubra manu in Hibernia vulneratum, per Meneviam reduendo, super Lechlavar moriturum” [she was referring to the prophecy of Merlin current among the people, but fictitious rather than true, in which it was said that a King of England who had triumphed over Ireland would be wounded in Ireland by a man

with a red hand and would die on top of the Lechlavar stone as he was returning by St. David’s]. Henry, of course, does not die upon Lechlavar’s stone but hops briskly on top of it, according to Gerald, and asks the crowd: “Merlino mendaci quis de cetero fidem habeat?” [Who would have any faith in this lying Merlin from now on?] \(^{328}\)

This prophecy and scene have no other corresponding or even similar manifestations in any surviving Welsh, Latin, English or French prophecies. Though we cannot base any argument for a lack of existence on a lack of evidence, Gerald’s episode and prophecy here smack of literary invention. The prophecy is much too clear and specific to be typical of the genre in the Middle Ages. Even when authors compose prophecies about events which have already come to pass, such as the earlier sections of Geoffrey’s *Prophetia Merlini*, the language is riddled with obfuscations and playfulness. Specifying the precise foot-placement of a named king at an exact historical moment is simply contrary to the genre expectations of medieval political prophecies. Gerald has invented this prophecy and included it in his history at, apparently, the expense of the authority of his most important prophet.

Gerald’s motive here for denigrating Merlin’s authority is at first puzzling. He has, after all, rested the authority of Anglo-Norman colonial movements in Ireland upon the veracity of Merlin’s prophecies. It is not, however, *this* Merlin that Gerald needs to be authoritative. Gerald makes such a concerted effort to de-authorize this self-invented prophecy in order to draw a distinction between the Merlin of the “ficticio vulgari” (prophecies which circulate orally among the people) and those authorized by the educated Latinate historian, Gerald, who is certainly “historiarum gnari.” Gerald’s move is

one of political augmentation and professional competition: Gerald and the Norman-Latin historians are the authority for interrogating and propagating the prophetic utterance; that which is spoken (dicere) by the common people in the common tongue is suspect and is not to be trusted. Though prophecy is, indeed, the most certain of historical sources, that certainty must be filtered from the ‘vulgar’ tongue through the written (Latin) word.

Laȝamon’s emphasis throughout his prophetic passages on Merlin’s invariable veracity, orality, and vernacularity flies in the face of the self-proclaimed Norman-Latin authority over prophetic utterance. Historians like Orderic Vitalis and Gerald of Wales, among others (as I demonstrate in the following section), asserted their prerogative over political prophecy and relegated the interpretation of those prophecies to the “historiarum gnari” [those well read in history]. Wace was aware of this authority and carefully sidestepped these issues without ruffling any political feathers or infringing on the professional territory demarcated by Latin historians. Just as we can read the political motives behind the Norman-Latin historians’ claims to prophetic authority and Wace’s claim to be unable to translate prophecies into French, Laȝamon’s approach to translating prophecy speaks volumes about his deeper motives. Even if we bracket the potentially subversive content of Laȝamon’s prophecies, their mere presence in a vernacular text—being “spoken” and interpreted for a wider audience—is a resoundingly seditious political statement.

“An Arður sculde ȝete cum”: The Breton Hope and the Mab Darogan

This distinction between authorized Latin writing and unauthorized common talk lies at the very heart of the Breton Hope. As I will demonstrate in the following section, before Laȝamon wrote that “an Arður sculde ȝete cum,” no writer of prophecy or insular
history—in English, Latin, French or Welsh—gives a positive, endorsing portrayal of the
prospect of Arthur’s return. The Breton Hope is either explored as a playful musing on a
particularly unusual legend or, more often, is deployed as evidence of Welsh barbarity and
used as justification for continued colonization.

Laȝamon would have been familiar with the Breton Hope from a wide range of
twelfth century historians. The most important writer to mention the motif is, of course,
Geoffrey of Monmouth. Geoffrey famously toys with the death of Arthur in Historia Regum
Brittania, noting that Arthur’s end will be “dubius” [doubtful] and that he would be taken
away to Avalon “ad sananda uulnera sua” [for the healing of his wounds]. Obviously, if
Arthur’s death is ‘doubtful’ and his wounds can be healed, we should expect to see him
again. However, Geoffrey simultaneously notes that Arthur’s wounds are “letaliter”
[mortal] and he is given an epitaph: “Anima eius in pace quiescat” [may his soul rest in
peace].

329 Though Geoffrey covers historical events of the British people for some centuries
after this most successful of British kings, Arthur is noticeably absent from those events.

Geoffrey is even more playful in the Vita Merlini, where he expands on the Avalon
story: “nos quo decuit Morgen suscepit honore, inque suis talamis posuit super aurea
regem fulcra manuque sibi detexit vulnus honesta inspexitque diu, tandemque redire
salutem posse sibi dixit, si secum tempore longo esset et ipsius vellet medicamine fungi.”

[Morgen received us with due honor. She put the king in her chamber on a golden bed,
uncovered his wound with her noble hand and looked long at it. At length she said he could
be cured if only he stayed with her a long while and accepted her treatment.] The obvious

329 Geoffrey of Monmouth, Historia Regum Britannia, caps. 112.2 and 178 (my translations).
See also Siân Echard ‘Geoffrey of Monmouth,’ in The Arthur of Medieval Latin Literature, ed.
indication, of course, is that Arthur is still alive and will be prepared for return at some unstated point in the future. However, when Taliesin interrupts Merlin to suggest that “necesse foret populo transmittere quemdam et mandare duci festina nave redire” [the people must send someone to call on our leader to return in a fast ship], his suggestion is expressly dismissed in favor of the future saviors, Conan and Cadwalader, after “temporibus multis” [much time]. Whatever toying characterizations Geoffrey cares to make of Arthur’s “dubious” departure, it seems certain that the king will not be coming back.

“Playing” with the prospect of Arthur’s return is the exception rather than the rule, however. For most twelfth-century authors, the notion is serious and requires a serious refutation. Dozens of authors in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, mostly associated with the Anglo-Norman or French aristocracy and their political milieu, address and refute the prospect of Arthur’s immortality: Herman of Laon, William of Malmesbury, Wace, Joseph of Exeter, Peter of Blois, and Gerald of Wales among many others. William of Newburgh’s blistering refutation of the legend and its proponents (mostly Geoffrey of Monmouth) addresses two important aspects of the Breton Hope and political prophecy which are important for this discussion. First, William addresses Geoffrey’s Merlin and Merlin Prophecies in generally disapproving terms:

\[\text{qui etiam majori ausu cujusdam Merlini divinationes fallacissimas, quibus utique de proprio plurimum adject, dum eas in Latinum transfunderet, tanquam authenticas et immobili veritate subnixas prophetias vulgavit.}\]

[More audaciously still he has taken the most deceitful predictions of a certain Merlin which he has very greatly augmented on his own account, and in translating them into Latin he has published them as though they were authentic prophecies resting on unshakeable truth.]

A few lines later, William addresses the cumulative Galfridian corpus, noting Geoffrey’s wholesale falsity and commenting on possible motives for this propensity for fabrication:

sive effrenata mentiendi libidine sive etiam gratia placendi Britonibus, quorum plurimi tam bruti esse ferunter ut adhuc Arturum tanquam venturum exspectare dicantur eumque mortuum nec audire patiantur.

[The motive was either an uncontrolled passion for lying or secondly a desire to please the Britons, most of whom are considered to be so barbaric that they are said to be still awaiting the future coming of Arthur, being unwilling to entertain the fact of his death]331

Geoffrey’s most egregious sin here is translating the fallacious prophecies into the Latin language “tanquam authenticas.” William recalls here the implicit distinction made by Gerald of Wales between Latin language prophecies and those of the “ficticio vulgari”—the false prophecies of the common tongue/people. By adorning these prophecies with Latin, Geoffrey obscures the boundaries between historical veracity and false rabble. The confusion of Latin truth and vulgar fiction, then, entails confusion of the entire paradigmatic distinction upon which historiography and the justifications for Anglo-

Norman colonialism are founded. For William and for many others in the Middle Ages, the belief in Arthur's immortality remains firmly in the world of the 'ficticio vulgari,' and is a touchstone of British identity ('bruti”) and justification of Anglo-Norman colonization.

The sheer number and the widespread nature of these reports of the Breton Hope has encouraged a scholarly consensus that there was actually an entrenched, irrational belief in King Arthur's immortality among the medieval British people. I argue that we should exercise considerable more hesitancy in addressing the historical Welsh belief in a revenant King Arthur. The motif was overwhelmingly propagated by Norman-Latin historians for the purposes of colonialism and professional competition. In Welsh or Welsh-derived sources from the period, Arthur's death is either confirmed or is not deemed worthy of mention. The shoestring strand of evidence drawn from the “Englynion Y Beddau,” that Arthur's grave is an “anoeth” [heroic difficulty], has been widely misread and its implications have been substantially overextended.

The vast majority of the reports of the Breton Hope among Anglo-Norman historians are repeated from other Anglo-Norman historians, and many of them are, like William of Newburgh above, extrapolating this evidence from Geoffrey of Monmouth’s playful literary musings. The Arthur developed in this motif is an essentially different version of King

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335 See “An Arður,” 90-91.
Arthur than had been developed before—he is an embodiment of anti-colonial resistance writ large and an emblem for a revenant threat from the “ficticio vulgari.”

It is this version of King Arthur which Laȝamon co-opts for his depiction of him throughout the Brut. Instead of dismissing or apologizing for the intense vernacularity and emphasis on orality in the Brut, Laȝamon embraces this oral, vernacular prophecy of a revenant Arthur and develops the character of Arthur in ways which would appeal to a polyglot audience of mixed heritage on the border:

Pa dude [Arðure] on his burne ibriode of stele
De makede on alvisc smið mid aðelen his crafte
He was ihaten Wygar, ðe witeȝe wurhte...
Calibeorne his sweord he sweinde bi his side:
Hit wes iworht in Avalun mid wiȝelefulle crafte.
Halm he set on hafde hæh of stele
He wes Vðeres þas aðelen kinges;
He wes ihaten Goswhit –ælcn oðere vnilic;
He heng an his sweore ænne sceld doere:
His nome wes on Bruttisc Pridwen ihaten...
His spere he nom an honde þa Ron wes ihaten.”

[Then {Arthur} put on his corslet of braided steel which was made by an elvish smith with princely craft. He was called Wygar, that wise craftsman... Calibeorne his sword he hung by his side: it was wrought in Avalon with magical craft. The helm he placed high on his head was of steel, it had belonged to the noble king Uther, and
was called Goswhit—like no other. From his neck hung his dear shield whose name in British was called Pridwen... His spear he took in his hand was called Ron.]\(^{336}\)

As Beowulf and other Saxon heroes have their armor forged by Weland, Laȝamon’s Arthur has armor crafted by a similar “alvish” smith named “Wygar” (>A.S. “wigheard” [battle-hard]) and his helm has a strikingly English name “Goswhit” [Goose-white]. This Germanic armor might seem odd beside emphatically “Bruttisc” weaponry (Calibeorne, Pridwen and Ron), but the intermixture of cultural signifiers is indicative of the popular, “vulgari” Arthur which Laȝamon is crafting throughout the Arthurian section of the Brut. As with all epic arming scenes, Laȝamon’s Arthur is a piecemeal assemblage of cultural identity and history. It is not merely battle gear Laȝamon straps upon Arthur, but the trappings of colonized Marcher culture—Welsh rebels and a long-surviving cultural English resistance to Norman rule. It is \textit{this} Arthur, this violent and vengeful collation of British and Saxon legacy, that will eventually come “Anglen to fulste.”

In addition to co-opting the Arthur of the Breton Hope from Anglo-Norman historiography, I argue that Laȝamon thematically links this culturally amalgamated, messianic hero with important features from Welsh-language political prophecies circulating in the twelfth-century March. Laȝamon’s access to this genre has been the subject of some debate. As early as 1960, Herbert Pilch advocated for a Laȝamon who knew Welsh and read many political prophecies, including the important \textit{Armes Prydein Vawr} (Great Prophecy of Britain) known today through the \textit{Llyfr Taliesin}: Aberystwyth, National Library of Wales, Peniarth MS. 2.\(^{337}\) Given Laȝamon’s geographical proximity to Wales and

\(^{336}\) Brut ll. 10544-10554.

\(^{337}\) \textit{Armes Prydein: The Prophecy of Britain from the Book of Taliesin}, ed. Sir Ifor Williams and Rachel Bromwich (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1982).
the River Severn (recently described by Andrew Wehner as a “highway” for Welsh and English trade in Laȝamon’s area),

Laȝamon’s evident familiarity with Welsh orthography and names, and his undeniable interest in the British people and political prophecy, it is difficult to imagine a situation in which Laȝamon would have not been familiar with the Welsh language and Welsh political prophecy. Still, however, the wider implications of Laȝamon’s familiarity with this genre have yet to be realized.

Many of Pilch’s claims have not stood the test of time, but Laȝamon’s access to some version of this text was confirmed by Françoise le Saux in 1986 and again in her 1989 monograph on Laȝamon’s sources. In one particularly intriguing passage, Le Saux (following Pilch) draws intricate and compelling parallels between Laȝamon’s description of Saxon warriors lamenting their defeat and begging Arthur for forgiveness and the description of lamenting, defeated Saxons in Armes Prydein. One of the most compelling

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338 Andrew Wehner, “The Severn: Barrier or Highway?” in Reading Laȝamon’s Brut: 107 - 120.


340 Le Saux catalogues the extant evidence and arguments for Laȝamon’s access to Welsh literature through a “Welsh informant”. See Laȝamon’s Brut, 118-54. Jennifer Miller astutely points out that the justification for Laȝamon’s use of an “informant” rather than accessing the texts himself is unnecessarily speculative; see “Laȝamon’s Welsh” in Reading Laȝamon’s Brut: 589-622, esp. 618-20.


342 The corresponding passages are in the Brut 10374-10398.
portions of this section is King Arthur’s description of the Saxons, beaten and returning to their ships like foxes:

“Hunten þar talieð, hundes þer galieð
þene vox driueð þeond dales and þeond dunes.
Þenne is þe balde uox blissen al bideled;
and mon him todelueð on ælchere heluen
þenne beoð þer forcuðest deoren alre pruttest.
Swa wes Childriche, þan strongen and þan riche;
he þohten al mi kinelond setten an his æere hond,
an nu ich habbe hine idriuen to þan bare dæðe
whæðerswa iche wulle don, oðer slæn oðer ahon....
And swa heo scullen wræcchen to horen scifen liðen,
sæilien ouer sæ to sele heore londe.”

[Hunters were crying out there, hounds were yelping there when the fox was driven over dales and over hills.
Then is the bold fox’s bliss all buried,
And men dig him out on every side
Then the proudest of all beasts is (made) most wretched.
Such was Childric, so strong and prosperous,
who thought he could set all my homeland under his hand
and now I have driven him to a stark death—
or whatever I wish to do, perhaps to slay him or hang him...
And so they shall, as wretches, go to their ships
And sail over the sea the best of their lands.\textsuperscript{343}

As Le Saux notes, “the fox is not associated with warriors in the Old English heroic tradition, and the simile has no parallel in the \textit{Roman de Brut}, nor in the \textit{Historia Regum Britannie}.”\textsuperscript{344} Nor is the fox, to my knowledge, associated with the enemy warriors in the Old English tradition, Wace or Geoffrey. However, when the defeated, lamenting Saxon warriors are in the same narrative situation in \textit{Armes Prydein}, the narrator of that poem describes the Saxons in some uncannily similar ways:

\begin{quote}
\begin{quote}
Ereill ar eu traet trwy goet kilhyn.
Trwy uwrch y dinas ffoxas ffohyn.
ryfel heb dychwel y tir Prydyn.
Attor trwy law gyghor mal mor llithryn....
naw vgein canhwr y discynnant.
mawr watwar namyn petwar nyt atcorant.
dyhed y eu gwraged a dywedant.
eu crysseu yn llawn creu a orolchant.\textsuperscript{345}
\end{quote}
[Others will flee on foot through the forest:
Into their strongholds the foxes will flee;
War will not return to the land of Britain;
(they will) leave in wretched counsel like the ebbing of the sea...
Nine score hundred soldiers will attack—
Great mockery! Only four will go back.
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{343} \textit{Brut}, 10411-10423.
\textsuperscript{344} “Laȝamon’s Welsh Sources,” 389.
\textsuperscript{345} \textit{Armes Prydein}, ll. 63-76.
They will tell their wives of their wretchedness; they will wash the gore from their shirts.]346

In both passages, the Saxons are “foxes” who flee through the woods to take refuge in fortifications, and then are cast back into the sea to lament to their losses in their own country. Perhaps it was the (relatively unusual) use of an English loan word, “ffoxas,” which caught Laȝamon’s attention or maybe it was the poignant image of Saxon survivors on a ship, wringing blood from their shirts and lamenting their defeat to their wives. Whatever the case may be, as is typical of such borrowings in the Brut, Laȝamon expands on the theme, weaving a throwaway analogy in Armes into an intricate simile.

Some early critics, without the benefit of access to the wide array of Welsh prophecies which have of late been made available, casted serious doubt on the prospect of Laȝamon’s access to any Welsh material or even Laȝamon’s interest in Welsh culture.347 More recent studies, however, have gradually begun to recognize the significance of Laȝamon’s proximity to the March of Wales and the unique cultural and literary environment that area fostered for his text. Michelle Warren, for example, examines the Brut in relation to other “border writing[s]... written most often and most emphatically in relation to boundary pressures.”348 How those boundary pressures influenced Laȝamon’s ethnic sympathies, however, is up for discussion. Warren sees Laȝamon’s work as a “resolutely monolingual composition... that dismisses the polyglot condition of life” and

348 Warren, History on the Edge, xi – xii.
accomplishes a wholesale “Englishing of Briton history.” Michael Faletra, who similarly considers Laȝamon's geopolitical environ, comes to quite the opposite conclusion, namely that Laȝamon “courts a nascent Welsh national consciousness.”

Continuing the ethnic tug-of-war in a recent essay collection, Simon Meecham-Jones and Jennifer Miller both emphasize Laȝamon's knowledge of Welsh culture and law but arrive at somewhat different conclusions as to what that knowledge signifies. Miller advises a reconsideration of the longstanding (troubled) relationship between language and ethnic sympathies in Laȝamon's work, and reevaluates the Brut as an antiquarian construction by an accomplished linguist who was not only familiar with translations of Welsh literature, but intimately familiar with the written Welsh: “how could ‘hearsay’ about Welsh names guarantee a Welsh orthography?” More provocatively still, Miller suggests that Laȝamon had much deeper personal connections to Wales than has previously been suggested: “If Laȝamon's Brut were written in Latin we would ascribe it to a Welshman, based on its ethnic assumptions and political trajectories.” This is a striking suggestion and is a conversation that needs to be had. However, as Miller herself recognizes, our understanding of Laȝamon's authorial narrative is unstable and identifying him as a Welshman is just as (if not more) speculative than our current reconstructions of that narrative deriving from the prologue to the Brut.

Meecham-Jones’s piece similarly considers the culture of the March of Wales, and especially the complex and unique Marcher legal systems, as having influenced Laȝamon's

349 ibid. 14; 114, 117, 119.
352 ibid., 608.
political perspectives. Meecham-Jones makes a formidable case for Laȝamon’s familiarity with a wide range of English and Welsh law codes, and the practices combining these codes in the March; and he even provocatively suggests a connection to the “lahmen” [lawmen] mentioned in a late Saxon law code governing a mixed Welsh-English area on the border (“Ordinance concerning the Dunsæte”).

Meecham-Jones’s conclusion on how this legal knowledge influenced his portrayal of colonial relations is similarly intriguing. Considering the above quoted passage of “An Arður sculde ſete cum Anglen to fulste,” Meecham-Jones suggests that Laȝamon advocates a peaceful, assimilationist version of Norman/English control in Wales:

In drawing this conclusion [ie. that Arthur will aid the English], Laȝamon is true to the fundamental principle of Norman land Law—that all land is held from the crown... the apparently strange reference to Arthur’s future care for the English shows with some clarity the ways in which Laȝamon reflects, perpetuates and, in subtly influential ways, re-points the paradoxes of the English in Wales. In doing so, he offers an assimilationist vision in which the Welsh will cease to be distinguished from the English, but will find their place within a greater “Engelond”, since to be English is a matter of jurisdiction, not race or glory.

“Assimilation” of Wales into England is, indeed, precisely what the Norman government was working toward after the 1066 Conquest of England, and they would eventually attain that assimilation by force under Edward I. I agree with Meecham-Jones that Laȝamon’s consistent references to “þis londe” demonstrate his recognition of a once and future

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354 ibid., 102-103.
unification of what is currently a divided Britain, but I take issue with Meecham-Jones’s
description of the parameters of that unification.

“Engelond” is certainly a matter of jurisdiction and, as far as the application and
interpretation of legal statues goes, perhaps “Englishness” is as well to some degree.

“English,” however, is not a one-dimensional legal signifier, but entails certain
characteristics of heritage, culture and ethnicity. That the French-speaking aristocracy
ruling England thought of themselves as “English” by the late twelfth century is becoming
more and more clear, as John Gillingham, Marjorie Chibnall, and Laura Ashe have recently
argued from a variety of perspectives.355 However, that the Middle English speaking
descendants of the Anglo-Saxons (like Laȝamon) agreed with the Norman aristocracy’s self-
identification as English is far from conclusive. In her broad consideration of continued
Anglo-Saxon writing in the twelfth century, Elaine Treharne warns critics to reconsider
“the obfuscation of the English and their literary output...by those historiographers of the
late eleventh and twelfth centuries whose allegiance was to the Normans.”356 “English”
clearly means different things to different people in the twelfth century.

Furthermore, for his own part, Laȝamon openly distinguishes the Normans from the
English and other ethnic groups inhabiting medieval Britain; and he also very openly

355 See Ian Short, ‘Tam Angli quam Franci: Self-definition in Anglo-Norman England’, Anglo-
(Woodbridge: Boydell, 2000); Marjorie Chibnall, The Normans (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000);
Hugh M. Thomas, The English and the Normans (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003);
and Laura Ashe, Fiction and History in England, 1066-1200 (Cambridge: Cambridge
University Press, 2007).

356 Elaine Treharne, ‘Periodization and Categorization: The Silence of (the) English in the
Twelfth Century’, in New Medieval Literatures 8, ed. Rita Copeland, Wendy Scase, and David
expresses disgust about the cultural changes the Norman incursions have brought to “ðis lond”:

“Seoððæn comen Sæxisce men and Lundene heo cleopeden;
þe nome ilden longe inne þisse londe. Seoððæn comen Normans mid heore niðcraften
And nemneden heo Lundres—þeos leodes heo amærden!
Swa is al þis lond iuaren for uncuðe leoden
þeo þis londe hæbbeð biwunnen and eft beoð idriuen hennen”

[Then came the Saxon men and called it ‘Lundene,’ that name lasted a long time in this land. Then came the Normans with their evil ways and named it ‘Lundres’—they destroyed this land! So has this land fared because of foreign nations that have won this land and afterwards are driven out.]

The Normans to Laʒamon are an “uncuðe leode” who are evil (“nið-”) and responsible for the near genocide of peoples and cultures (“þeos leodes heo amærden”); they will soon be driven from the island (“idriuen hennen”). We should not, as the twelfth-century insular aristocracy attempted, continue to collapse the cultural and historical distinctions between the “English” and “Norman” people in the twelfth century. Laʒamon clearly distinguishes their culture as separate, clearly dislikes them, and is clearly not interested in peaceful assimilation. The “Anglen” who are to receive assistance from “an Arður” are a decidedly different group of people.

I suggest here that by reading Laʒamon’s vatic “quiðes” within the context of Welsh political prophecies, we can work toward a more nuanced understanding of the political orientation of the Brut and the ethnic complexities of its milieu, which has divided critics for some time. These prophecies, along with their corollaries in other insular languages, are
a wide and difficult genre, and scholarship on them has tended toward historicist approaches. Though understanding the real time allusions and historical significance of the original compositions of these prophecies is helpful for our understanding of political history, it is less helpful for understanding how twelfth and thirteenth-century authors like Laȝamon used the prophecies. Laȝamon works in broad thematic brushstrokes and complex figurative representations and he approached these prophecies in a literary-oriented manner; he drew upon broad themes, general character developments and an eerie poetic style to supplement his literary portrayal of Merlin’s prophecies and the character of Arthur. The ‘actual’ historical references made in the prophecies seem to have been of interest to him.

Honing in on specific allusions to prophecies Laȝamon read or heard is difficult to impossible. The “ffoxas” simile Laȝamon drew from Armes Prydein is the exception rather than the rule; Armes Prydein is an uncommonly stable prophecy on both the linguistic and textual levels. Most Welsh political prophecies, as Rees Davies says, were “augmented with the passage of each generation,” and thus, since the versions we have of these prophecies were preserved many decades after Laȝamon encountered them, they have likely been considerably altered in their specific allusions. Also, due to the random

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358 See Sir Ifor Williams and Rachel Bromwich’s “Introduction” to Armes Prydein.
nature of textual preservation, it is also impossible to know if the specific prophecies which survive are the ones which Laȝamon had access to.

Nonetheless, the broad literary motifs and distinct narrative tone which are unique to Welsh language political prophecies are consistent across a wide spectrum of prophetic poems even when composed centuries apart. Margaret Enid Griffiths identified many of these motifs in her pioneering work *Early Vaticination in Welsh with English Parallels*, the first scholarly treatment of this important genre in depth. More recently, Aled Jones has undertaken a near-comprehensive literary study of Welsh political prophecy wherein he confirms and extends many of Griffith’s conclusions while he also contextualizes the prophecies within contemporary metahistorical modes of discourse.\(^\text{360}\) My own overview, below, of some of the more important of these themes is drawn from a wide range of prophetic poems and is consistent with the findings of Jones and Griffiths—though it is not drawn from their respective works.

These are some of the broad motifs which characterize Welsh prophetic poetry that are relative to Laȝamon and other twelfth and thirteenth-century historians.

I. *Oral access to occult knowledge.* The famous opening of *Armes Prydein Vawr* begins “dygogan Awen dygobryssyn / maraned a meved a hed genhyn” [the Awen {prophetic voice} foretells they will hasten and we will have treasure and wealth and peace], followed a few lines later by “dysgogan Myrddin kyueruyd hyn” [Myrddin foretells their meeting].\(^\text{361}\) This ‘voiced’ prophecy and implied access to divine and occult knowledge through an intercessory

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\(^{361}\) *Armes Prydein*, ll. 1-2, 17 (my translations).
figure like Myrddin is one of the primary, basic features of Welsh prophecy. It has its affinities with the Book of Isaiah and the “vox clamantis in deserto” [the voice crying in the desert], but is a distinct, parallel development.\textsuperscript{362}

Even when the genre migrated to written form, as it had done by as early as the ninth century, the spoken word remained the invariable agent of authorization. This is, as discussed above, antithetical to the professional and political agendas of the Norman-Latin historians. Generally speaking, orality and vernacularity can serve to democratize dangerous political ideals; and spreading seditious ideals is, after all, rather the point of Welsh political prophecy.

II. \textit{Widespread popular and ecological reactions to political/military events}: Poets often reference people living in the remote corners of Wales and the Marches by the geographic features of the area. A passage from “Rydyrchafwy duw” will suffice as an example: “Pan welych wyr am lyn aeron. Pan votrwm tywi atheiui auon. Wy gwnant aer ar vrys amlys lonyon” [When few men are seen around Llyn Aeron, when the Tywi and Teivi rivers will be heavy, they will make battle in haste upon Llys Llonion.]\textsuperscript{363} This practice, notable but certainly not exceptional to this genre, at times produces a unique impression that the land itself is rising in revolt—a powerful impression that is perhaps not unintended.

\textsuperscript{362} Is. 40.3.

\textsuperscript{363} Facsimile & Text of the Book of Taliesin, ed. J. Gwenogvryn Evans; (Llanbedrog, 1910): p. 73 (my translation). An edition and translation of this poem, along with most of the other prophetic poems in the Book of Taliesin, is now available in Marged Haycock’s Prophecies from the Book of Taliesin, (Aberystwyth: Cambrian Medieval Celtic Studies, 2013).
III. *Emotive signifiers of legendary battles and heroic poetry:* The names of legendary rulers and battles are spattered all about the pages of Welsh political prophecy. In the Myrddin prophetic poems, many of the references are to battles in the Old North. From “Ymdiddan Myrddin ac Taliesin”: “Llu maelgun bu yscun y doethan, Aerwir kad trybelidiad guaedlan; Neu gueith arywderit, pan vit y deunit, O hid y wuchit y darparan.” [The host of Maelgwn, it was brave that they came, soldiers of battle, brightness of the battlefield; the Battle of Arfderydd, that is the reason, during their life they prepared.]\(^{364}\) Rhetorically speaking, this constitutes a pathos-oriented appeal to audience reaction: the cultural signifiers create a sense of inherited glory and loss for the audience; thus, the emotional turmoil and destruction of the audiences’ ancestors is then directly relative to contemporary and near-future events for the audience.

IV. *An allegiance of current or prior enemies against a common foe:* At its core, the political prophecy genre is most concerned about retaking the island of Britain from “the oppressors”—most often the Saxons, but later the Normans. Oftentimes, this involves a Welsh alliance with another group of people, often their prior enemies, against the new enemy. *Armes Prydein* favors the “gynhon Dulyn,” or the Danish [foreigners of Dublin], while “Daronwy” postulates “kynrein o amtir rufein” [chieftains from the land of Rome].\(^{365}\) More often still, the prophecies appeal to separate areas of the


\(^{365}\) ll. 131, *Armes Prydein*; ll. 9, p. 29, *Book of Taliesin* (my translations).
Wales or other Celtic-language peoples that will come together. The pan-
Celtic theme was so established in Welsh political prophecy that Owain
Glyndŵr alluded to it when asking for military assistance from Robert III of
Scotland in 1400.\textsuperscript{366}

\textbf{V.} \textit{Y Mab Darogan, or Meibion Darogan.} Perhaps the most important and
consistent feature of Welsh political prophecy is the notion of messianic
deliverers, “The Sons of Prophecy,” who will return and save the Welsh from
oppression. The most popular candidates for this position seem to be
Cadwallader and Cynan, often working together, such as in \textit{Armes Prydein}
\textit{Vawr} and “Yr Afallennau” or individually such as in “Yn wir Dymbi Romani
Kar” and “Rydyrchafwy Duw ar plwyff Brython.”\textsuperscript{367} Other figures mentioned
in this role are Llywelyn, Urien, Saint David, and Owain of Mona. King Arthur,
of course, does not make an appearance in this role in Welsh political
prophecy until much later.

Though not all of these features are present in all of the political prophecies, all are present
in some and some are present in all. Not coincidentally, I argue, they are all also important
features that scholars have long recognized as being intrinsic to Laȝamon’s poem. Some,
such as the widespread land/people metaphors (II) and the emotive historic signifiers (III)

\textsuperscript{366} Adam of Usk, \textit{The Chronicle of Adam Usk: 1377-1421}, ed. Chris Given-Wilson (Oxford:
Clarendon Press, 1997): p.72. See also Stephen Yandell, ‘Prophetic Authority in the
Chronicle of Adam of Usk’, in \textit{Prophet Margins: The Medieval Vatic Impulse and Social

\textsuperscript{367} The deliverers are named in lines 89-91, 163 and 182-184 in \textit{Armes Prydein}, ll. 6-9, p.
78, “Yn wir dymbi romani kar” in Evans, \textit{Facsimile and Text}. See ll. 84-85 ‘Yr Afallennau,’
\textit{The History of the Kings of Britain}, provides a respectable modern English translation of ‘Yr
Afallennau,’ pp. 239-241.
are similarly common to Geoffrey of Monmouth and Wace, though they are notably intensified in Læamon’s adaptation. Others, such as the presence and emphasis on a messianic deliverer and a future alliance of the Welsh with past enemies, Læamon introduces to the narrative without precedent and thus necessitate further comment.

As historical scholarship has shown us, all the messianic figures named in the Welsh political prophecies correspond to actual historical people of Welsh history: Llywelyn ap Iowerth of Gwynedd, Urien Rheged of the ‘Old North,’ Saint David, Owain Gwynedd, Cadwallader ap Cadwallon, and Cynan Dindaethwy. Of course, by the time that these figures are ‘foretold,’ they have already come and passed, and to postulate their return is contrary to our common understanding of human existence. Though there are important exceptions for medieval people (such as Lazarus, Jesus Christ, and Judgment Day) bodies which expire generally stay expired and the exceptions are not prevalent enough to form the basis of a military strategy. As Bullock-Davies says, the Breton Hope and the Mab Darogan are both based on “a notion . . . irrational but irresistible.”368 Indeed, prophecies like “Gwasgarderd Vyrdin yny bed” [Song of Merlin from the grave] and Armes Prydein, which sets the time for attack at “pan safhwynt galaned wrth eu hennyd” [when the corpses stand against the other], often lend themselves to such ‘irrationally irresistible’ readings.369

Bullock-Davies makes a good case for the messianic cultural impulse being present in Britain as early as the third century AD, and many readers have suggested that the Mab Darogan is a remnant of pagan messianism. However, we should also recognize that the “cultural hero’s expected return” is an Indo-European folk motif (A.580), common across

many cultures throughout the medieval period, and whether or not the notion is ultimately
derivative of paganism is simply irrelevant for our understanding of its employment in the
central Middle Ages. Any cultural group who utilized prophetic texts and had this motif in
their folk repertoire would be predisposed to incorporating the motif and the literary
genre—obviously, the two work together quite well.

However, though “cultural hero’s expected return” folk motif is the origin of this
notion, neither Laȝamon nor the Welsh prophets are repeating the concept as a mindless
transferrence of received folklore. The references to the Meibion Darogan in Welsh
prophecy and Laȝamon’s Brut are politically-motivated literary motifs, important poetic
themes that gesture toward the cyclic structure of their narrative and their wider rhetorical
goals. For instance, Jones’s compelling analysis of this motif characterizes the Mab Darogan
as a literary hypotaxis, as a hysteron proteron poetic convention which is central to the
prophetic genre as a whole: “The revolutionary citation [of the mab darogan] is the
reaching back into the heroic past to revive a figure of liberty. There is an irony in that the
liberator, the redeemer, the messianic mab is himself an exile: only through exile (and
return) may exile be ended, but this also... becomes cyclical.”370 The Welsh have been exiled
from their own history, therefore only through the messianic return of a historical figure
can they return to / begin their historical existence.

Furthermore, these figures hail from important areas of Britain and beyond which
are, in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, no longer in an active military alliance with the
Welsh. Urien Rheged represents the Brythonic speaking portion of modern-day Scotland

370 Darogan, 231.
and Cynan is famously associated with Brittany in Welsh tradition. Though these areas were often at odds with each other in the Middle Ages, as were the Welsh with their prospective allies in the poems (ie. the Danes and the Romans), it was obvious to many powerful Welsh rulers and poets that these hostilities needed to be overcome in order to face a greater threat.

The *Meibion Darogan*, I argue, are intimately connected to the land/people metaphors (II) and emotive historical signifiers (III) explained above. The implied continuity of ‘land,’ ‘people’ and ‘ancestry’ and the consanguineous nature of past, present and future temporalities within prophecy are plausibly explained by metaphor and metonymy. Put simply: it is not the literally dead body of the hero that is arising to lead armies but the figuratively dead body politic of the Welsh people and their allies.

Linguistically speaking, Middle Welsh has no indefinite article, but I find that Laȝamon’s representation of this motif, “An Arôur sculde ȝete cum Anglen to fulste”, is a perfectly acceptable English translation.

These are, perhaps, the most important connections that Laȝamon makes between his own work and those of the Welsh prophets. The Saxon dogs who are the subject of much derision in Welsh prophecy (and Laȝamon’s poem) are no longer the enemies of the Welsh people. Though the reference to a dead British king coming to aid a former enemy of the British is confusing within the stock, ethnically divisive historiographic model given to us by Norman-Latin historians, it accords quite well with the genre conventions of Welsh language political prophecy.

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Envisioning a Welsh-English alliance against the Normans in the twelfth century is more plausible than it might seem from a twenty-first century perspective. Formal English military resistance to the Norman invasion petered out less than a decade after the Battle of Hastings, but other forms of opposition continued for decades after. Historians have speculated that an underground “war of attrition” against the Normans by Englishmen was carried into the twelfth century.\textsuperscript{372} Such subversive violence was undoubtedly the motive behind William’s re-introduction of the \textit{murdrum} fine, which levied a high price on the entire English hundred if a Norman was killed and the killer was not turned in. That law was not completely repealed until the fourteenth century, and Richard FitzNeal confirms the usefulness of the fine during the later portions of Henry II’s reign (ca. 1180) in his \textit{Dialogus de Scaccario}.\textsuperscript{373} In this text, FitzNeal emphasizes that Englishmen in the servile class were still very culturally distinguishable from the Norman aristocracy and the fine was still necessary:

“...exceptis duntaxat ascriptitiis qui villani dicuntur, quibis non est liberum obstatibus dominis suis a sui status conditione discedere. Ea propter pene quicunque sic hodie occisus reperitur, ut murdrum punitur. exceptis hiis de quibus certa sunt ut diximus seruulis conditionis indicia.” [Excepting only those who are bound to the soil, called ‘\textit{villani}’ {villeins}, who are not free to decide their station against their lords. And for this reason almost anyone who is found slain today, it is punished as murder, except those


{persons}, of which we have said, where there are certain indications of a servile condition.\textsuperscript{374}

The ‘villani’ in the late twelfth century are still a culturally segregated group and the Norman aristocracy apparently felt they had reason to fear being killed by members of that said group. Dissension against Norman rule is still very much an issue in Laʒamon’s time frame and, at least in individual cases, that dissension had the potential to translate into violence.

Underground wars and individual acts of political violence do not a successful insurrection make, however. Such would have been obvious to any historically-minded observer such as Laʒamon. Any large scale, successful resistance to Norman rule would require an alliance such as the ones alluded to in the Welsh political prophecies. And, indeed, an alliance of this sort is not without historical precedent. Laʒamon lauds the success of one such Anglo-Welsh alliance in the later part of the \textit{Brut}, when King Cadwallan allies himself with Penda of Mercia and the king even marries Penda’s sister—meaning that the still continued line of Welsh princes has a matrilineal connection to the line of Mercian border lords.\textsuperscript{375} Laʒamon in fact goes to great lengths throughout this later section to ameliorate the troublesome figure of Penda and to elaborate on the success of this alliance, assumedly because Penda was an important figure of Laʒamon’s regional history and the success of the alliance was an aspect of that history he felt should be emphasized.


\textsuperscript{375} The alliance ceremony between these rulers is much expanded by Laʒamon, ll. 15539-46.
More recently for Lazamon (and perhaps more historically credible) are the alliances between English and Welsh noblemen such as Earl Ælfgar of Mercia and King Gruffydd ap Llwelyn of Wales in the eleventh century. When Ælfgar was outlawed in 1055 and 1058, he was successfully able to regain Mercia from King Edward both times with the aid of the Welsh king. Ælfgar's daughter, Ealdgyth, was even married to King Gruffydd before Gruffydd's death in 1063. After Gruffydd's death, the king's brothers Bleddyn and Rhiwallon continued the Welsh-Mercian alliance, aiding Ælfgar's sons in their protracted resistance to the Norman incursions. Bleddyn and Rhiwallon also provided military assistance to the Mercian earl "Eadric the Wild" when he attacked Norman forces in Hereford and other border cities. Orderic Vitalis's description of Eadric's attack on Shrewsbury suggests that such border alliances against the Normans were not a limited phenomenon:

"Guali et Cestrenses præsidium regis apud Scrobesburium obsederunt quibus incolæ ciuitatis cum Edrico Guilda potenti et bellicosu uiro aliisque ferocibus Anglis auxilio

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376 John of Worcester is the ultimate historical source for this information, see his entries for 1055 and 1058. K.L. Maund analyzes this and other alliances throughout the eleventh century, see her Ireland, Wales, and England in the Eleventh Century (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 1991): esp. 138-142

fuerunt. Idem apud Exoniam Exoniensis comitatus habitatores fecere, et undique coadunata turba ex Cornu Britanniae”

The Welsh and the citizens of Chester laid siege to the stronghold of the king near Shrewsbury. The inhabitants of the city were helped by the powerful and warlike Eadric the Wild and other ferocious Englishmen. The same was done among the citizens of the county Exeter to the city of Exeter, assembled with a throng from the Horn of Britain (Cornwall)]

Of course, these alliances eventually faded into history, but their prominence in the events of the English resistance to Norman colonization and the history of the Anglo-Welsh border may very well have provided Laȝamon and like-minded thinkers with a historical precedent which had the potential to be repeated.

“vppen Seuarne staþe”

In my explorations of Laȝamon’s “ethnic sympathies,” I have concentrated on three important and understudied cultural facets which are pivotal to our understanding of these wider questions: Anglo-Norman historiographic portrayals of the Breton Hope, Welsh political prophecy, and the rich heritage of Anglo-Saxon cooperation with Welsh princes in the March. In essence, I argue that all three are significantly involved in Laȝamon’s “þrumming” of cultures and his portrayal of a revenant Arthur coming to aid the English, but that his political sympathies lie with the latter two of these facets. As many critics have noted, Anglo-Norman historiography was widely employed to reinforce the existent Norman hegemony and justify oppression and colonization through Providential history;
Laȝamon, by contrast, co-opt history and prophecy as a catalyst to significantly alter this model and this continued political situation.

I do not want to suggest, however, that we can pigeonhole Laȝamon into a sentimentalist version of either a Welsh rebel or a Saxon survivor—ethnicity and cultural politics do not make simple correlations in the March of Wales. The rich and recent heritage of the continued production of Anglo-Saxon texts in the far west of England, the reading and interpreting of those texts by figures such as the Tremulous Hand, and the tradition of strong, rebellious Saxon leaders like Eadric in the area certainly indicate the presence of a conservative appreciation and respect for Saxon heritage in the border area. Though Laȝamon is obviously aware of these cultural trends and demonstrates a perceptible attraction to Saxon literature and culture, he cannot be defined solely by that historical respect and that particular heritage. Laȝamon, more than most, is well aware of the shortcomings of the historical Saxons and he is not shy about detailing their transgressions. Consider the pivotal moment late in his history when the Britons are finally beaten into submission by Gurmund and the land is officially renamed England:

þæ wes her sorȝe and muchel care:

Gurmund falde þa munstres and anheng alle þa munkes;

of cnihten he carf þe lippes, of madenen þa tittes,

preostes he blende... alle Sex-leode

þa wuneden i þissen londe mid Gurmunde kinge,

and his men bicone...

Bisiden Allemaine is a lond Angles ihaten;

þer weoren iborne þa ilke þe weorn icorne,
þa Gurmund an hond bitahte al his kinelond...
and þis lond heo cleopeden Ænglelond, for hit wes al on heore honde.
[There was sorrow and much grief: Gurmund destroyed the monasteries and
hanged all the monks; he carved off the lips of men and the breasts of maidens, and
he blinded priests... all the Saxon peoples living in this land became his men... Beside
Germany is a land called Angles; there some were born who had been chosen by
Gurmond to take in their hands all his kingdom... and this land they called England,
for it was all in their hands.] 378

Here is where, as he states in his prologue, “Engle þa æðelæn... / wat heo ihoten weoren and
wonene heo comen”—and they are not complimentary circumstances. The first English
king to come to power and to be primarily responsible for the naming of the land is best
known for heathenism and wide scale sexual mutilation of his virgin-female subjects.

Similarly, we must also hesitate to solely define Laȝamon by his admiration of Welsh
political history and Welsh political goals. Certainly, as Faletra and Miller (among others)
have demonstrated so well, certain aspects of Laȝamon’s work lend well to reading
Laȝamon as a Welsh nationalist (if we wish to employ such an anachronism). Laȝamon
recognizes a rich heritage of British rule and openly praises features of the surviving Welsh
culture. However, Laȝamon also sees the shortcomings of the Welsh in the political and
military fields. Consider Laȝamon’s telling aside after he describes the disastrous defeat of
the Briton Army when the Romans leave the country:

Þus îþæh þis kinelond a þere Bruttene hond!

Whæreñ Bruttes cnihtes icorene,

378 Brut 14650 - 14675
ah nu heo weoren alle swiðe forlorene.

Ne beoð neo neuere hææe buten heo hælp habben
of oðere moncunne, for heo seolf ne cunne.

[Thus prospered the kingdom in the hands of the Britons! Once were the British knights worthy, but now they are completely forlorn. Never will they reach to glory unless they have help from another people, for they cannot do it by themselves.]

Laȝamon acknowledges, early in British history, the propensity of the British nation to lapse in greatness. Undoubtedly, he has the current residents of Wales in mind which he mentions “nu”, and he is much in doubt of their ability to rise to their former glory on their own.

Laȝamon’s hope of a new rise to greatness with the aid of “oðere moncunne,” however, is a different matter all together. Laȝamon’s relationship with the historical cultures of the March of Wales are, as I suggest above, very similar to his relationship with historical books. Admiration and self-identification (“leofliche biheold”) blend with aggression, manipulation, and even exploitation (“biwon... nom... fiede on boc-felle... þrumde to are”). For centuries before Laȝamon’s wrote “vppen Seuarne staþe”, these texts/communities had shaped the diverse cultural dimensions of the March of Wales; yet, as Laȝamon demonstrates in his unique anti-colonial “þrumming” of history—the shaping of cultural history was a vigorously active two-way street.

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379 Brut, 6286-6290
4) “Gware dy chware”: Playing Near the Edge in Fouke le Fitzwaryn and Breuddwyd

Rhonabwy

In his most recent historical study of the March of Wales, Max Lieberman argues that the Marches were primarily developed as a geo-political defensive bulwark to protect England from Welsh incursions: “it may be that the twelfth-century Marchia Wallie came to be thought of as a military buffer zone, initially on the Shropshire borders, later along the Anglo-Welsh frontier.”380 In the initial western push of Norman expansion, the borderlands were considered to be the most dangerous territories to rule over, therefore William and his royal heirs endowed their strongest knights with these lands and afforded those knights considerably more independence than their eastern counterparts. The result was that the Marcher lords waged war and expanded their territory without needing to seek express permission from the king; they enacted individuated systems of legal jurisprudence outside of English law and generally became powerful enough to threaten the English kings themselves on occasion.381 Especially before the Edwardian Conquest of Wales in 1282, when the Kingdom of Wales became royal territory, the unmatched liberty and power of a Marcher lord was seen as a (perhaps uncomfortable) necessity in order to shield England from the persistent threat of Welsh attacks.

381 For the unique legal system of the March, see footnote 26 in the Introduction above. There were various rebellions or threats of rebellions by major and minor Marcher lords throughout the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, including that of Fouke le Fitzwaryn III, discussed in detail below. The two most significant rebellions by Marcher lords were the Despenser War rebellion of Roger Mortimer, 1st Earl of March, and Humphrey de Bohun, 4th Earl of Hereford, in the early fourteenth century and the rebellion of Edmund Mortimer during the Glynŵr Rebellion of the later fourteenth century.
Lieberman presents us with a perfectly accurate and historically acceptable conception of the Anglo-Welsh border, a conception which he supports well throughout his study and which is compatible with medieval English and Welsh primary sources and modern studies of those sources. Although I agree with this description, it is a conception of the border from the perspective of the eastern English and western Welsh aristocracies and is specifically concerned with how those aristocracies utilized the border to their benefit. Such an emphasis, whether it is explicit or implicit, tends to overshadow the competing conceptions of the border by indigenous writers.\textsuperscript{382} Indigenous Arthurian border writers of the thirteenth century complicate that historical narrative and the broad characterization of the “function” of the March of Wales.

In the following chapter, I highlight metaphors of the border given by two indigenous border works which offer intriguing and important counter-conceptions to the ubiquitous characterization of the March as a military buffer zone. These two indigenous border works, \textit{The Romance of Fouke le FitzWaryn} and \textit{Breuddwyd Rhonabwy}, depict the March in often conflicting cultural conceptions. To these authors, the border is less a practical military frontier and more of a tenebrous, segregated arena: it is a liminal area which enables temporal, political, and metaphysical transgression; where the collision of cultures allows the elision of authority. Furthermore, in consistently presenting the border as a liminal, unruly cultural and political zone, these works calculatingly enact the metaphorical potential of that zone by critiquing and reconceptualizing political authority.

\textsuperscript{382} I use the term “indigenous” to distinguish these writers and, in particular, these conceptions from contemporary concepts applied to the Marches which were formulated in England and Wales and (see OED s.v. “indigenous” sense 1b); I am not associating these authors with aboriginal races or writing projects like those of the Native Americans or First Nation peoples.
and cultural identity signifiers. In other words, it ultimately does not matter whether these works are presenting an “accurate” portrayal of the border, the myriad of conceptions create a perception of a liminal and unruly border—and that perception is as effective as if it were true. These literary works from the border—as the others which are featured throughout this study—are figurative extensions of the border itself; they simultaneously divide and combine Anglo-Welsh identities while interrogating the socio-political constructions of British hegemonies.

My decision to read Arthurian border culture through the comparative lens of these two works is not, perhaps, an obvious one. *Fouke le Fitzwaryn* and *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy* differ in language, genre and literary style, and they quite possibly—though not necessarily—have different reading audiences in mind. However, a comparative study of the works reveals considerable more similarities than their ostensible linguistic-nationalistic segregation implies. These works are near contemporaries in composition, they both survive in singular manuscript witnesses which are much later than their original composition, and both were written within about 30 miles of each other. More pointedly, these works are concerned with the same thematic issues: familial and political discord, the inheritance of a heroic and foundational past, regional history and regional historical

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383 Precisely dating the original composition of either of these works is difficult. I follow the editorial and general critical consensus that both of these works derive from the mid to late thirteenth century. See Burgess *Two Medieval Outlaws* 127, and 191-192 of Ceridwen Lloyd-Morgan, “Breuddwyd Rhonabwy and Later Arthurian Literature,” *The Arthur of The Welsh*, ed. Rachel Bromwich, A.O.H. Jarman, Brynley F. Roberts, (Cardiff: The Cromwell Press, 1995) for more detailed discussions on the dating of *Fouke* and *B.R.* respectively. The manuscripts which the works survive in are Oxford, Jesus College MS 111 (*Llyfr Coch Hergest*) for *B.R.* (c. 1400) and London, British Library, MS Royal 12 C. xii (c. 1325). The prominent featuring and detailed knowledge of local landmarks in the text indicates their origins. More detailed elaboration on the geographical origins of *Fouke*, Ludlow, is given in Hathaway et al. (xxvii-xxxvii). For *B.R.*, Welshpool is a general assumed location; see Enid Roberts *Braslun o hanes Llên Powys* (Denbigh, 1965): 42.
figures. Even if neither of these authors was aware of the other, they are both deeply engaged in shaping the perception of the border to export to Wales and England.

Though I am most interested in how these texts shaped medieval readers’ understanding of the March of Wales, as I discuss below, their post-medieval readerships have played a significant role in how we receive the works. Breuddwyd Rhonabwy [The Dream of Rhonabwy], for example, has a wider reading audience than the majority of surviving Welsh language literature because it was compiled and translated by Lady Charlotte Guest in her mid-nineteenth century edition of the Mabinogion. The tale was translated in every subsequent translation of the collection, and it has attracted a moderate amount of critical attention. Guest likely included the tale in her collection because King Arthur features prominently, as he does in most of the other tales she chose to include.

Arthur’s presence, however, is nearly the limit of the tale’s resemblance to the other works in that collection or to other Middle Welsh literary works not included in the


385 It is an unspoken rule that any reference to this translation must retain Guest’s aristocratic title (which emphasizes her gender and her Englishness) and must be accompanied by a pedantic footnote on her “misreading” of the word “mabinogion” as a plural for “mabinogi”, which is already plural. It should be pointed out, however, that “mabinogi” is a very unusual word with disputed translations (though it is vaguely related to “mab” [boy, son, young man]) and “-ion” is a very common plural suffix in Middle Welsh. So common, in fact, that the collection of the Four Branches was referred to as “Mabinogion” a few years previous by the linguist and native Welsh speaker William Owen Pughe, and by the Book of Rhydderch, National Library of Wales, MS Peniarth 4 (White Book of Rhydderch) once at the end of Branch One, f. 10r: “ac yuelly y teruyna y geing hon yma o mabynogyon.” All other witnesses to the Branches retain the correct reading of “mabinogi.” It is now common, if not precisely accurate, to refer to the Four Branches as the “Mabinogi” and to the collection of the Four Branches with the other tales selected by Guest as the “Mabinogion.”
collection. Whereas most of the other tales have obvious origins in oral tradition, *Rhonabwy* is a very literary tale that pokes fun at stereotypical oral-poetry features. It is a strange and sarcastic tale which is at times dark and foreboding and at other times is flippant and hyperbolic. However despite its attractive lyrical prose and popular subject matter, *Rhonabwy* is not referred to by any other medieval Welsh works I am aware of; a fact which is perhaps an indication that its popularity among modern readers of Arthurian and Welsh literature is not a continuation of similar levels of interest among medieval readers. Guest’s inclusion of the tale in a collection which would ultimately be the flagship for Welsh literary culture has perhaps given a false impression of how it might have been received in the Middle Ages.

*Fouke le Fitzwaryn*, on the other hand, is much more colorful in its medieval history than its modern reception. The work was originally composed, like *Rhonabwy*, in the mid-thirteenth century. It is mostly concerned with the historical thirteenth-century rebellion of Fouke Fitzwaryn III against King John, who had disinherited Fouke of Whittington Castle. Due to the work’s provenance (Ludlow) and subject matter (a successful rebellion against the English king), it seems likely that the original poem of Anglo-Norman octosyllabic couplets was composed within the general political milieu of the Second Baron’s War, which has strong historical associations with the Marcher communities. Even more precisely, David Stephenson has proposed a date of 1264 for the composition of the original verse romance, as this was when Simon de Montfort and his allies were at the height of their success, prior to Montfort’s crushing defeat in 1265. See “Fouke le Fitz Waryn and Llywelyn ap Gruffydd’s Claim to Wittington,” *Transactions of the Shropshire Archeological and Historical Society* 77 (2002): 29.
Leland in the mid-sixteenth century. It is quite possible that the copy Leland examined had originally been taken from Thomas Woodstock's library by Richard II after Woodstock's failed rebellion against the king.

This Anglo-Norman verse original was edited and redacted into prose between 1320 and 1335 and copied into London, British Library MS Royal 12 C. XII by a well known scribe from the Ludlow area who was also responsible for copying portions of the important miscellany London, British Library MS Harley 2253. The Royal MS is the sole surviving version of *Fouke le Fitz Waryn*, but the prose retains long sections of the original verse—indicating that the redactor likely did not stray far from his model. For an unknown reason, it is apparent that the scribe began copying the work in the 1320s but did not finish the project for ten or fifteen years. It is still not clear whether the redactor was the Ludlow Scribe himself or another local writer.

Leland also describes another version of the *Fouke* which was translated into alliterative English verse. Though we have lost the complete poem, Leland records small samples, including the opening lines: “William Conqueror toke counsel of Corbet and of

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388 This is the suggestion of Ralph Hanna, “The Matter of Fulk: Romance and History in the Marches”, *JEGP* 110.3 (2011): 355, on the basis of Leland’s well known access to the royal library and an inventory of Thomas’s seized possessions which notes: “un veile livre de Fraunceys appellez la gest de Fouke fitz Waryn.”
Louis Brandin has detected a West Midlands dialect from Leland’s excerpts and, given the general provenance of Middle English alliterative verse in the late fourteenth century, it is apparent that this version derives from the same general area as the previous two French versions of Fouke: from within or very near the March of Wales. As Hanna has noted, the important point to take from Fouke's translation history is that all three of these versions correspond with “moments of acute political disruption,” which are concentrated in or emanate from the Anglo-Welsh border area. As noted, the Anglo-Norman verse original has been linked to the Second Baron’s War; while the Prose Redaction and the English Alliterative verse versions correspond with Edward II’s tyrannical mandates in the west and with Richard II’s dealings with the Lords Appellant, respectively. As I discuss further below, this origin and concern with political discord in the Marches is one of the many features that Fouke shares with Rhonabwy.

These three versions of Fouke, the one English and two French, are the only versions of the story we have documentary evidence of, but there is extensive circumstantial evidence that Fouke le Fitz Waryn was also translated and disseminated in Middle Welsh. “Sir Ffwg” is a common reference for Welsh praise poets in the fourteenth century and the references are widespread enough to discourage attributing them solely to local oral history. The diversity of poets that mention “Ffwg”, from Dafydd ap Gwillam to Iolo Goch to Tudur Aled, is evidence that the story was well known throughout all of Wales, and

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391 “Things excerpted” 234.
that—despite the Fitzwaryns’ occasional conflicts with Welsh militants—Fouke was respected by Welsh writers and rulers for many years after his rebellion.

Iolo Goch’s early reference will suffice as an example. In praising Ieuan ab Einion’s beautiful and hospitable court at Chwilog, Iolo writes: “Chwilog... / Caer fawr rhag gwyr o foroedd / Cost llai yn y cestyl oedd, / Llys Ffwg yn llawes y ffordd” [Chwilog... great fortress against sea faring men, less cost there was in castles, another Fouke’s court by the side of the road.]

Though many of the references to Syr Ffwg are not specifically tied with details of the story, Iolo’s comparison here references a note given at the end of Fouke Fitzwaryn that “Cesti Fouke fust bon viaundour e large; e fesoit turner le real chemyn par mi sa sale à soun maner de Alleston, pur ce que nul estraunge y dust passer s’il n’avoir viaunde ou herbergage ou autre hounour ou bien du suen.” [This Fouke was a good and liberal host, and he turned the royal highway to pass by his manor at Alveston, so that no stranger would pass by without having meat or lodging or other honor or goods of his.]

Of course, it is no surprise that Iolo Goch was familiar with Fouke Fitzwaryn in whatever form it might have taken—the long-lived poet was a voracious polyglot reader and a native of the border. However, that Iolo would expect a minor Welsh lord from the far western reaches of Wales on the Llŷn Peninsula to recognize an obscure detail from the end of a French language romance is more surprising. Iolo’s expectation makes more sense if there was a version of Fouke available in Middle Welsh.

It is important to emphasize here that the vast majority of historical or legendary characters utilized as figurative comparisons by Welsh praise poets are figures who hail

394 Fouke 59-60. All translations of Fouke are my own, but they differ only slightly from Glynn Burgess’s translation in Two Medieval Outlaws (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1997).
from the Welsh literary tradition. Though poets can, on occasion, be astoundingly diverse in their comparisons (including references to classical heroes from the Greek and Roman traditions), even the most far-flung allusion can generally be traced to a textual tradition in Welsh. It might seem similarly unusual for the poets to compare their patrons to thoroughly English literary figures such as Sir Bevis or Sir Roland as they occasionally do. However, we know that both Bevis of Hampton and Chanson de Roland were very popular romances throughout the island and were translated into Welsh very early during their reception history—a similar early translation is certainly possible with Fouke. Though it is also possible that these poets read Fouke in French, the ubiquity of “Ffwg” as a stock reference in the Welsh panegyric quiver (with the apparent expectation that the reference would be readily understood by all the Welsh-language patrons and readers of the poems) makes considerable more sense if we postulate a Welsh version of the tale—one most likely translated from French early in Fouke le Fitzwaryn’s reception history.  

Thus, we have a French romance about an English Marcher lord who was known to more Welsh speakers in the Middle Ages than English speakers today and a Middle Welsh Arthurian dream vision apparently known to more English speakers today than Middle Welsh speakers in the Middle Ages. As in almost every other aspect about these works, their reception history defies normal expectations. Comprehensible conceptions of Welshness and Englishness which we have come to expect from other Middle Welsh tales and Anglo-Norman family romances are not stable entities in these works, nor in the history of their reception—and that cultural fluidity is reflected in both their disparate

396 Had it come through the English version, we would expect an inclusion of an “l” in the name, as in English “Fulk.”
later readerships and their dynamic literary conceptualizations of border history and the border itself.

**Blank Lands: Writing the Border in Fouke and Rhonabwy**

Merlin dit que
En Breaigne la Graunde
Un lou vendra de la Blaunche-Launde;
xii. dentz avera aguz,
Sys desouz e sis desus.
Cely avera si fer regard,
Qu’il enchacera le leopard
Hors de la Blaunche-Launde;
Tant avera force e vertue graunde.
Més nus le savom qe Merlyn
Le dit par Fouke le fitz Waryn;
Quar chescun de vous deit estre ensur
Qe en le temps le roy Arthur
La Blanche Launde fust appelee
Qe ore est Blaunchevile nomee;
Quar en cel pays fust la chapele
De Seint Austyn, que fust bele,
Ou Kahuz le fitz Yweyn sounga
Qu’il le chaundelabre embla
E qe il a un home aconutra,
Qe de un cotel la naufra
E en la coste le playa,
E il, en dormaunt, si haut cria
Qe roi Arthur oy le a,
E de dormir esveilla.
E quant Kahuz fust esveillee,
Si mist sa meyn a son costee;
Le cotel yleqe ad trovee
Que parmi ly out naufré.
Issi nus counte le Graal,
Le lyvre de le seint vassal.
Yleqe recovery ly reis Arthur
Sa bounte e sa valur,
Quant il avoit tot perdu
Sa chevalerie e sa vertu...
Par le leopart puet estre conuz
Le roy Johan e bien entenduz.
[Merlin says that in Britain the Great A wolf will come from Blanche Lande. It shall have twelve sharp teeth, six below and six above. It will have such a ferocious look that it will chase the leopard out of the Blanche Land, such strength and power it will have. But we know Merlin said this of Fouke Fitz Waryn. For each of you can be sure that in the time of King Arthur what was called the Blanche Launde is now named Blancheville. For in that country there was the chapel of Saint Austin, which was beautiful, where Cahuz the son of Yvain dreamed that he stole the candlebra and that he encountered a man who wounded him with a knife and hurt him in the side, and he, sleeping, then cried so highly that King Arthur heard him and awakened him from sleep. And when Cahus was awakened, he placed his hand at his side, found the knife there which had wounded him through. The Grail, the book of the Holy Vessel, tells us this. There King Arthur recovered his courage and his valour, when he had lost everything, his chivalry and his power... By the leopard King John can be recognized].

At the very end of his tale, the author of Fouke le Fitzwaryn repeats a prophecy concerning his titular hero: a wolf will come from “Blanche Laund” and will defeat a leopard. The wolf (as the reader will no doubt recognize by this point in the story) is Fouke and the leopard is King John; the “defeat” referred to in the prophecy is Fouke’s successful rebellion and reacquisition of his ancestral lands from the king. Though the vast majority of the romance is in prose, redacted from a verse original, this prophecy stands out in octasyllabic verse—signaling its generic distinction from the remainder of the text and its elevated importance relative to the other closing details of the story.

397 Fouke 60.11-28
Why this prophecy is especially important is not made readily apparent, however. As discussed in the previous chapter, the medieval prophetic genre has a dynamic temporality, and is often used to anticipate (within history or narrative) future events or to clarify past events. That, however, seems unnecessary here, as the events referenced have both already happened and have just been related in much more intimate detail than the vague heraldic prophecy provides. No “new” details of the historical events are revealed and there is no explicit prediction of related events to come in the audience’s future. We must assume, then, that the primary purpose of including the prophecy is to authorize and validate both Fouke Fitzwaryn and the story written about him by associating them with a common and mostly well-regarded medieval prophetic source.

There is no denial that this belated prophecy, as the romance itself, presents clear and historically factual information. Fouke Fitz Waryn III did, in fact, rebel against King John and was outlawed from 1200 to 1203 after his ancestral lands were taken from him. The heraldic emblems the prophecy explains are perfectly acceptable and Fouke’s “loup” was indeed successful over John's “léopard”—at least in this one, relatively short event of Fouke III’s uncommonly long life. Those base facts, however, are the extent of the prophecy’s veracity.

The poet’s allusion to the eerie Arthurian episode in *Perlesvaus*, for example, is something of an imaginative inclusion. Here, the *Fouke* author repeats a relatively minor plot point from early in the wildly popular twelfth-century French romance: Cahuz son of Yvain dreams that he visits a chapel in the “Blanc Land”, he attempts to steal a candelabra from the church but is stabbed by a shadowy figure; upon awakening, Cahuz finds the shadowy figure’s knife still in his side and dies soon after. The allusion encourages us to
recast our noble outlaw within the Arthurian realm: King John tried to steal the sacred, ancestral lands of the Fitzwaryn family in the same manner that Cahuz ill-advisedly tried to steal from a Christian sanctuary; both are prevented by a noble, powerful, but very mysterious knight. Like Arthur, Fouke is cast as a powerful border figure who regains chivalry and honor in the “Blanche Land” [white/empty land].

This allusion also recasts another important character of Fouke le Fitzwaryn within Arthurian history: the March of Wales itself. The poet emphasizes that the “Blanche Laund” of the Arthurian dreamscape is actually “Blancheville” (or Whittington), which was the core of the Fitzwaryn family lands. Here, as in the rest of the Fouke romance and in other indigenous medieval portrayals of the region, the border is portrayed as a liminal, transgressive and dangerous space—a curious and provocative fusion of the inexplicably fantastic and the inescapably real. Whittington is both a real, fortified city braced for the imminent enemy assault and a figurative, magical creation of Arthurian literature. These ostensibly rival conceptualizations do not negate each other in the text, but reinforce the conception of the Anglo-Welsh border as a truly individuated and complex literary space.

This peculiar combination of fantasy and reality, of “history” and “romance” has been noted in Fouke le Fitzwaryn for some time. Janet Meisel, for example, a historian of the Fitzwaryn family, describes the work in dichotomous terms: “[The romance is a] peculiar combination of fantasy, error and fact.... Condemned for its lack of literary merit as well as its gross historical inaccuracies.”398 Fouke III’s fine of precisely one hundred pounds to maintain Whittington castle, for example, is treated with the same historical seriousness as is his battle with a Spanish dragon and an Irish giant who is “plus long que nul autre de .xii.

pies” [taller than the others by twelve feet]. Fouke combines accurate, indispensible information about border culture and history with literary imaginings of the most fantastical nature.

As Ralph Hanna has recently noted, however, we should perhaps not view Fouke in terms of a conflict between “fact” and “fiction” but appreciate the provocative infusion of the two as a reflection of the author’s larger conflicted-yet-infused environment:

Thus, rather than fret about inaccuracies in Fouke, it might be worth asking what two such inherently different, we should think, discourses [History and Romance] share that renders them so much like Marcher culture, each side of a supposedly fixed boundary capable of occupying the space of the O/other.

Fouke’s confusion of the boundaries of History and Romance are, thus, reflective of the ethnic, political and cultural boundaries which are both divided and combined in Anglo-Welsh border culture. Hanna’s comments here are comparable to Roger Pensom’s earlier suggestion that, like the March of Wales, Fouke crosses narrative/cultural boundaries in a creative format of “marvelous” and “folktale” shells surrounding a core historical chronicle at the center of the tale.

Though I agree with the assessment that Fouke’s intersection of fact and fiction, fantasy and reality, Romance and History, is relative to the prevalent cultural intersections of the March of Wales—Fouke’s “reflection” of these intersections is not quite as passive as these scholars suggest. The “confusion” between reality and fantasy in border works such

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399 Fouke 58.23-24. Fouke’s fine is mentioned in Fouke 24.14-16, Meisel confirms the veracity of the statement on 133-134. The dragon episode is in Fouke pages 46-48.
400 “The Matter of Fouke” 352.
as Fouke is more accurately a self-conscious refraction and exploitation of the border’s constructed ineffability for political purposes. Furthermore, the construction behind that ineffability is evident in the figurative portrayals of the border these authors make and is supported by the historical circumstances contextualizing the literary texts.

Case in point, the Fouke author’s allusion to Cahuz’s somnambulism is more than a creative metaphor for the story of Fouke Fitzwaryn III, it is a pointed warning for those who might wish to meddle in Marcher affairs. Recall also that the textual productions of the French and English versions of Fouke generally correspond with periods of serious political upheaval in the Marches: the original was composed in the Second Baron’s War, the prose redaction after Edward II’s favorite, Hugh le Despenser seized vast tracts of Marcher land, and the Alliterative Middle English Version may very well be related to Richard II’s dealings with the Lords Appellant. The self-conscious mixture of fantasy and reality in Fouke’s story creates an effective and subversive literary space for discourse about cultural and political resistance. The Fouke author does, indeed, turn the March into a “Blanc” land: it becomes empty of authoritative inscription, indefinable and thus ungovernable.

Though Fouke is sui generis in most respects as a literary text, in this pointed and peculiar conceptualization of the border it is not. The combination of history and fantasy in Breuddwyd Rhonabwy is similar in both scale and purpose. Much like the author of Fouke, the author of Rhonabwy is both intimately familiar with the region and politics of the Anglo-Welsh border, and he is clear to distinguish that topic from the opening lines of his work: “Madawc uab Maredud a oed idaw Powys yn y theruyneu. Sef yw hynny, o Porford hyt yg Guautan yg gwarthaf Arwystli” [Madog son of Maredudd was over Powys unto its
limits. That is to say, From the length of Porfforrd to Gwaftan to the top of Arwystli.] In situating his tale in eastern Powys during Madog vab Maredudd’s twelfth-century rule, the author eschews the vague, romantic settings common to other Middle Welsh literary tales in the *Llyfr Coch Hergest*; the border and border figures are his main concern.

Also like *Fouke*, the fictional story of *Rhonabwy* is predicated on an actual historical rebellion, by Madoc ap Maredudd’s brother and personal translator, Iorwerth Goch. In a display of fraternal discord relatively common among medieval Welsh royalty, Iorwerth refuses Madoc’s offer of a very prominent position in court (“y pennteuluaeth a chystal ac idaw ehun” [the leadership of the king’s retinue and equality with himself]) and instead goes on a rebellious raid. Iorwerth crosses a literal and figurative border when he invades the Marches against Madoc’s wishes, and members of Madoc’s retinue (including Rhonabwy) are sent east to find him. On their journey, Rhonabwy and his companions take up lodging in a filthy cottage near the border and Rhonabwy falls asleep on a “yellow ox-hide” and has a dream vision. In the vision, Rhonabwy and his companions arrive abruptly in another time, riding towards Rhyd y Groes ar Hafren [Ford of the Cross on the Severn, near Welshpool] while being pursued by an enormous giant on horseback.

The giant grants them mercy and explains that he is known as Iddawg the Embroiler of Britain (Idawc Cord Prydein), who, desirous of battle, set strife between Arthur and Medrawt. Iddawg’s technique in setting strife between the two warriors was intentionally miscommunicating the messages exchanged between the two parties: “phan dywettei

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Arthur yr ymadrawd teckaf wrthf o’r a allei y dywedwn ynneu yr ymadrawd hwnnw yn haccraf a allwn wrth Vedrawt” [when Arthur said the most beautiful words which he could, I spoke those words in the ugliest (manner) I could to Medrawt.] This misrepresentation, Iddawg tells us, eventually incited the battle of Camlan. For that grievous sin, Iddawg undertook seven years of penance.

Taking Iddawg as intermediary and guide, Rhonabwy and his companions make their way to modern day Welshpool and the nearby ford across the River Severn which was an important border crossing throughout the Middle Ages: Rhyd-y-Groes ar Hafren. There, on the ford—literally on the border between England and Wales—sits a gigantic King Arthur with massive armies surrounding him. Armies so massive, in fact, that one of Arthur’s men note: “gantaw bot yn ryued kysseingaw llu kymeint a hwnn yn lle ky gyfyghet a hwnn.” [how strange it is that a host as great as this may be contained in a place as narrow as this].

We soon discover the reason for filling “lle ky gyfyghet” [so narrow a place] (ie. the Severn Valley) to the brim with elaborately decorated armies: Arthur is preparing for the Battle of Badon Hill against Osla Gyllellwawr.

The student of Arthurian history will note that there are some significant discrepancies in the narrative timeline of this story: first, in this version of the Arthurian world, the battle which was to mark the end of Arthur’s empire and life, the Battle of Camlann, has already taken place more than seven years previous, while Arthur’s greatest victory, the Battle of Badon Hill, has yet to occur. Furthermore, Osla Gyllellwawr is presented as Arthur’s ally in Culhwch ac Olwen, as one of the many who assisted Arthur and

403 BR. 8.21-23
Culhwch in the hunting of the mythical boar, Twrch Trwyth. Yet, in Rhonabwy, Osla is apparently the head of an enemy host.

As Lloyd-Morgan has noted, “all the normal rules are broken” in Rhonabwy and the story displaces conventional conceptions of the Arthurian time line. Some critics have tried to make sense of the inversions; Edgar Sloktin, for example, suggests that Rhonabwy's narrative runs continuously backwards.\(^{404}\) Though an inverted chronology might explain the incongruence of the two battles, Osla’s presence at the head of an enemy force, which should by all accounts be a Saxon army, still defies explanation. This Arthurian dreamscape, much the same as the one reported in Fouke’s prophecy of Cahuz and the candelabra, is a dangerous and disorienting literary spectacle.

The disorienting time-line, otherworldly colors and gigantic stature of the characters in the tale provide a striking contrast to the consistently accurate and explicit geographic detail which surrounds the characters. As in Fouke, the historical precision and logical chronology give way to a more playful and complex literary atmosphere as the characters tread deeper into the very heart of the March of Wales—but the geography remains precise throughout. Rhonabwy and his companions travel across “Maes Argyngroeg” (the plains above Welshpool) where they can see “Cefn Digoll” (Long Mountain) southeast of the Rhyd y Groes (Ford of the Cross, near present day Buttington Bridge). The author’s intimate familiarity with these features suggests his association with

the Strata Marcella abbey which once lay only a brief stroll from the setting of the
Breuddwyd Rhonabwy along the River Severn ford.\(^{405}\)

As many critics have noted, the story which unfolds along this border becomes
deeply satirical and cynical of both the governing aristocracy and the oral folktale culture
which promoted that aristocracy.\(^{406}\) When Rhonabwy and his companions are brought
before the gigantic king, Arthur sneers jeeringly at them: “Nyt chwerthin awnaf namyn
truanet gennyf vot dynyon ky vawhet a hynn yngwarchadw yr ynys honn gwedy gwyrr
kystal ae gwarchetwis gynt.” [I am not laughing but I am sad that men as shitty as these
guard this island when great men guarded it in the past].\(^{407}\) Arthur’s snide comment invites
the reader to draw comparisons between the leaders of the thirteenth-century Welsh and
the Arthurian heroes of the days of yore described in the dream.

Neither the present or past protectors of Britain, it turns out, are particularly
deserving of the praise which has been heaped upon them hitherto. Arthur and his
warriors are pompous, flashy, overdressed and utterly stagnant. The great impending
Battle of Badon Hill—the apex of the Arthurian Golden Age—never happens and the armies
have been gathered in vain. Instead of clashing in battle with Osla, the allies and two most

\(^{405}\) Enid Roberts was the first to make the suggestion that the author came from Strata
Marcella, Braslu o Hanes Llên Powys (Denbigh: Gwasg Gee, 1965).
\(^{406}\) Sarah Lynn Higley, “Perlocutions and Perlections in the Dream of Rhonabwy: An
Untellable Tale” Exemplaria 2.2 (1990): 547-561; Siân Echard, Arthurian Narrative in the
Latin Tradition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), esp. 193-231; Brynley f
Gwilym Rees Hughes (Swansea: Christopher Davies, 1976). Helen Fulton “Cyd-destun
Fabula, Story and Text of Breuddwyd Rhonabwy,” Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies 18
(1989): 89-112; Ceridwen Lloyd-Morgan “‘Breuddwyd Rhonabwy’ and Later Arthurian
Literature,” The Arthur of the Welsh, ed. Rachel Bromwich et al. (Cardiff: University of Wales
\(^{407}\) Rhonabwy 6-7.
beloved kings of the Welsh past, Arthur and Owain, go inside their tent and play gwyddbwyll [a board game] on an elaborately wrought golden game set. While the game goes on, Arthur’s best warriors and Owain’s magical ravens (another feature of the author’s parody of the magical, heroic past) become embroiled in a full-scale battle. Arthur and Owain only reluctantly interfere, and eventually the internecine squabble begins to take its toll on the army. Arthur crushes the board game, calls off the Battle of Badon Hill and orders his armies to return to Cornwall. In praise of this day, the bards chant a new poem about the greatness of Arthur, but only one person can actually understand the poem. It is at this point that Rhonabwy awakens on the yellow-ox hide and the author informs us in his colophon that no one can recite *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy* without the aid of a book.

The strange ending of *Rhonabwy* has attracted the bulk of scholarly commentary on the tale, mostly due to its explicit critique of oral culture in medieval Wales. Siân Echard suggests Geoffrey of Monmouth’s famous “ancient book” as a comparison to *Rhonabwy*’s colophon, where “the author is flaunting his creative skill” and also appealing to the authority of a written text.  

Sarah Lynn Higley suggests an even wider target of *Rhonabwy*’s satire, arguing the author pointedly destabilizes communication to “an almost parodic concept of speaking and writing.”  

This story, the most literary of the Mabinogion texts, directs its satire toward the very oral folktale culture from which it draws its constituent parts.

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The conservative oral poets and often unintelligible bards are an easy target of Rhonabwy’s parody and, as scholars have noted, the text reveals an important moment in a long transitional period of Welsh literature from being predominantly oral to predominantly literary.\textsuperscript{410} However, the more substantial target of Rhonabwy is the governing Welsh aristocracy who were so often the subject of that unintelligible bardic praise throughout the Middle Ages. Rhonabwy reveals his scorn for Madog ap Maredudd, Iorwerth Goch and the other princes like them through his vehicle of Arthurian border writing. They are consumed with self-aggrandizement and internecine squabbles, much to the detriment of the population dependent on their defenses; they are often, as Arthur himself so bluntly points out, “vawhet” [shitty] protectors of Britain. Directly comparing Welsh kings—and especially Madoc ap Maredudd—to figures from the Arthurian legend is a long established motif in praise poetry—and it is precisely that overwrought practice that the poet is turning on its head here. Such a pointed and caustic criticism of Welsh aristocracy is possible in this tale because it is wrapped in a literary montage of fantasy and reality as conflicting and fascinating as is the tale’s geopolitical setting.

Thus, the “Blanc Land” of Cahuz’s dream finds its corollary in Rhonabwy’s Rhyd-\textsuperscript{y}-Groes ar Hafren: both are metaphoric microcosms of the March which interrogate the supposedly fixed boundaries of fiction and reality and, in doing so, elide authoritative inscription. They are powerful images, and impressive counter-conceptions to mainstream

\textsuperscript{410} Sioned Davies marks the moment rather cryptically: “It is perhaps appropriate that [Rhonabwy] is the last tale in our Mabinogion ‘collection’, for with it medieval Welsh narrative moves in a new direction.” It should be emphasized that this statement, as my own above, is a generalization. That Welsh literature moved from mostly a “oral culture” to mostly a “reading culture” in the Middle Ages—like most Northern European indigenous cultures—is largely true. There is not, however, any single watershed moment and oral narrative culture continued well after Rhonabwy and even well after the Middle Ages.
descriptions of the March of Wales. I do not want to suggest, however, that these
metaphorical conceptions of the March are totalizing—even within their own narrative
confines. The border is, appropriately, an enigmatic and fluid concept within these texts
and each elaborately constructed concept meticulously deconstructs itself as the story
unfolds.

For instance, in a moment that is really too good to pass up, the Fouke author
explores another metaphorical construction of the March of Wales, encapsulated within a
foundation narrative of the Fitzwaryn family holdings. In an imaginative reconstruction of
an early foray to the border by the “who’s who” of the conquering Norman aristocracy, the
author depicts William Bastard and his best nobles moving largely unimpeded through
western England, improving infrastructure and defensive positions. Their party meets with
a marvelous adventure when they reach the border between England and Wales. After
noticing a prominent hilltop fortification which has been abandoned and “laid waste”
(“gastée”), the Norman dream team approaches a helpful Briton who informs them of the
local history:

Le chastiel fust jadys apellee chastiel Bran; mes ore est apelee la Vele Marche. Jadys
vindrent en ceste pays Brutus, un chevelar mout vaylaunt, e Coryneus... e nul n’y
habita ces parties, estre trelede gentz, grantz geans, dount lur roy fust apelee
Geogmagog.. Le geant a la premere venue enbraca Coryneus si estriotement qu’il
debrusa ces trois costees. Coryneus se coroca si fery Geomagog del pee qu’il chay de
un grant roche en la mer; e si fust Geomagog neye. E un espirit del deble meyntnant
entra le cors Geomagog, e vynt en ces parties, e defendy le pays longement, qe unqe
Bretoun n’osa habiter.”
Long ago, the castle was called Castle Bran, but now it is called the Old Border. Long ago Brutus, a most valiant knight, came to this country along with Coryneus.... No one lived in these parts except for a horrid race of people, great giants, whose king was called Geomagog. At the first engagement, the giant grasped Corineus so tightly that he broke three of his ribs. Infuriated, Corineus kicked Geomagog so hard that he fell from a great rock into the sea, and then Geomagog drowned. And an evil spirit immediately entered Geomagog’s body and he came to these parts and defended the area for a long time, so that no Briton dared live there.]411

The author here makes some interesting modifications to Geoffrey of Monmouth’s famous tale of Corineus’s wrestling match with Geomagog.412 Where Geoffrey’s story leaves Geomagog’s corpse to be washed away by the sea and moves on to narrate the rise of British sovereignty in their newly conquered island, the Fouke author describes a reanimation of Geogmagog by a demon. The possessed Geogmagog then establishes his kingdom inside Castle Bran (near present day Llangollen).413 When Payn Pevery (purported to be the Fouke’s ancestor in the tale) goes into the castle to confront the giant, Geomagog brandishes a club, spits fire at the knight and boasts about his rulership over the March:

E pus ayvnt qe tote ceste countré fust apellee la Blaunche Launde, e moy e mes compagnons enclosames la launde de haut mur e parfounde fosse, yssi qe nul’ entré fust si noun parmy ceste ville, qe pleyne fust de mavoys espiritz, e en la lande

411 *Fouke* 3.
412 For comparison, the author is drawing from section 20 in the *HRB, Bern MS.*, 13-14.
413 *Fouke* 5. For the connection of this historical site to the story, see Hathaway et al.’s note on p. 66.
As Timothy Jones has argued, this episode capitalizes on the Trojan foundation myth popularized by Geoffrey and extends that narrative to the Anglo-Welsh border landholdings. The anecdote justifies Norman rule in the Marches in general and Fitzwaryn rule of Whittington in particular.\footnote{Fouke 6.6-11}

Certainly, justifying Fouke’s familial inheritance and Norman rule is one concern in this entertaining foundation narrative. However, the presentation of the “Vele Marche” [Old Border] has further implications about how the author sees his “new” border functioning in relation to English and Welsh sovereignty. The scene not only extends the purloined British foundational narrative to the Welsh Marches, it also inscribes a supernatural, mythological fantasy onto a real and recognizable geography and local populace. Geoffrey of Monmouth indulged in tall-tales of giants roaming Albion as well, but they remain in the distant days of yore—not long after the Trojan War. Castle Bran, however, was (and is) a prominent feature of the local landscape and the initial Norman ventures into the Marches happened only a few generations prior to Fouke’s original composition date. Instead of creating a

mythology to fill the painful void of British prehistory, Fouke overwrites known history and known topography with a chaotic border allegory.

Geomagog’s Vele Marche is fraught with liminality and supernatural inversion: within the fortified enclosure of his segregated borderland, devils become kings, evil spirits become jousting knights and onlookers are permanently trapped within the March’s carnivalesque confines. Like the Blank Land of the Cahuz’s Arthurian dreamscape and the magical ford of Rhonabwy, this depiction of the border is replete with transgressions of fantasy and reality which elide authoritative inscription. Ultimately, Fouke’s ancestor kills Geomagog and dismantles the demonic playpen. Nonetheless, Geomagog’s rebellious romp in the Old March, prominently absent of external authority and divine law, sets an eerie precedent for Fouke’s celebrated outlawry and the more recent historical cognates for the various audiences of Fouke.

‘Your Move’: Dangerous Games

One of the more unique ways in which both of these texts conceptualize the borderlands is through board-game metaphors. Board games feature prominently in both works and their function as motifs within the tales has been long noted by scholars. In Fouke, some scenes which are central to the plot revolve around chess games and in Rhonabwy the very few actions which are taken by the stagnant Arthur and Owain occur over a game of gwyddbwyll. Though employing board games as a literary conceit is far from exclusive to these particular works, the connections these authors make between the board games and cultural identity invite some intriguing connections between the other

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conceptions of the border the texts explore. Furthermore, the board game in particular provides a provocative conceptual space for the authors to reflect upon the consequences of political and social identity “playing” in the March of Wales.

In Fouke, the board game first appears when a young and precocious Fouke III is residing at the court of Henry II, where he has been raised with the future King John. After a game of chess goes poorly for John, the prince hits Fouke in the head with the board and Fouke responds in kind: “Avint qe Johan e Fouke tut souls sistrent en une chambre juauntz a escheks. Johan prist le eschelker, si fery Fouke grant coupe. Fouke se senti blescé, leva le piee, si fery Johan enmy le pys qe sa teste vola contre la pareye, qu’il devynt tut mat, e se palmea.” [It happened that John and Fouke were sitting in a room playing chess. John seized the chess-board and struck a great blow upon Fouke. Fouke became aware of his wound, lifted his foot, and struck John in the middle of the chest so that his head flew against the wall, and he lost consciousness and fainted.] John whines about his injury to the king but is silenced by Henry for complaining. Prince John harbors the game loss and the impressive return blow by Fouke for many years: “Johan fust molt corocee a Fouke, quar unqe pus ne le poeit amer de cuer” [John held much anger towards Fouke, to the point that he was not able to have heart-felt love for him.] This childhood spat has extended consequences for Fouke, far beyond his tenure in the royal court. When the then King John is deciding on whether to dispossess Fouke of his Marcher estate, he specifically cites the chess-game brawl as his motive: “e se remembra de le coupe qe Fouke ly avoyt eynz donee”

417 Fouke 22.30-31.
418 ibid. 22.32-36
419 ibid. 23.4-5
["and he remembered the blow that Fouke had given him before"]). The board game is thus the impetus for John’s deprivation of Fouke’s land and, subsequently, Fouke’s outlawry.  

This chess game, at one level, is a typical foreshadowing device: the conflict of the game represents the military conflict which will follow later in the text and it indicates that Fouke will ultimately get the better of John. The chess game also helps to color the predominant features of the main characters; as Hanna says, John’s defeat by a “baronial brat... does not bode well for a properly ruled kingdom in the future.” Chess—a game of aristocratic leisure, organization and military strategy—is a microcosm of the realm of royal authority; Fouke’s defeat of John on the board and in the scuffle after the game favorably positions Fouke as the better ruler. The figurative “play” of the battle-style chess game mirrors the physical battle of the characters in the text and establishes an essential link between the board game and the deeper identities of the players—identities the players are not even aware of yet.

The chessboard resurfaces again in Fouke during the hero’s outlaw/pirate phase. While circumnavigating Britain, they encounter a strange island inhabited by gigantic shepherds, one of whom invites the crew to dinner. At the call of a horn blast, six gigantic “vilaynz” [peasants] enter the house: “sis gros e grantz vilaynz e fers, vestuz de grosse e vyls tabertz, e chescun avoir en sa meyn un gros bastoun dur e fort” [“Six large, tall and fierce peasants, dressed in large and wretched tabards, and each had in their hands a large


club, hard and strong”]. Interestingly, the peasants immediately go and change into “un escarlet vert e sodliés de orfreez” [“a green scarlet and shoes of orphrey”] so that they were “atireez com num roy poeit estre” [attired just as kings would be”]. Then, after clothing themselves in regal garments, they demand that Fouke’s party play them on a golden chessboard:

Les sis vyleinz... demanderent les eschez, e um lur porta un molt riche eschecker ou meyné de fyn or e argent..... Donqe dit un des plus fers berchers a Fouke: ‘Volez vous juez?’ ‘Nanyl,’ fet il. ‘Par foi,’ fet le bercher, ‘vous juerez ou luttrez, malgré le vostre.’ ‘Par foi,’ fet Fouke, ‘maveys vileyn bercher, vous y mentez, e, depus qe je dey luttre ou juer malgré mien, je jueroy ou vous en la manere qe j’ai apris.’ Si sayly sus, haunça l’espee; si ly fery qe la taste vola enmy la place, pus un autre, pus le tierce, issi qe Fouke e ces compaignouns ocistrent tous les vileynz gloutouns.

[The six peasants... demanded to play chess, and a very rich chessboard was carried to them with chessmen of pure gold and silver.... Then said one of the more fierce shepherds to Fouke: ‘Do you want to play?’ ‘No’ said he. ‘By the faith,’ said the shepherd, ‘you will play or wrestle, against your wishes.’ ‘By the faith,’ said Fouke, ‘wicked peasant shepherd, you lie, and if I must wrestle or play against my wishes, I shall play with you in the manner that I have learned.’ Here he leapt up, raised his sword, then he struck him so that his head flew into the middle of the space, then an other, then a third, in this way Fouke and his companions killed all of the churlish peasants.”]

422 Fouke 43.23-29.
423 ibid. 43.30-33.
The social dynamics in this scene are of particular concern here. The shepherds are unquestionably “vilayns”—a fact which Fouke deems necessary to emphasize before decapitating them—yet when they sit down to chess they are dressed as kings. It is especially interesting that, after Fouke and his party have massacred the whole lot, the author refers to the players as “vileynz gloutouns”. “Glutun” can have the same meaning as in Present Day English “glutton” or “greedy”, like Modern French “glouton”, but in Anglo-Norman can also mean “evil-person” and “monster”. These peasants, in “playing” with royal intentions, represent a peculiarly populist and consumptive breed of monstrosity. The board game reveals a deeper, hidden identity in the players and the metaphorical battle in the game is realized in the violent physical actions by the characters. This foggy island is another liminal space, filled with barbarian giants who “play” at being aristocracy, in the same way the demonic jousters of the Vele Marche play at being chivalrous knights.

The connection of the players’ essential identities with the game board and the reflection of game conflict into physical conflict in this scene has strong correspondences with the gwyddbwyll board in Rhonabwy. As noted, instead of preparing their troops to engage with the enemy, Owain and Arthur decide instead to play on a game board with “gwerin eur a clawr aryant” [men of gold and a board of silver]. When Arthur and Owain are “uelly yn digrifaf gantunt eu gware uch yr wyddbwyll” [thus in the pleasure of play over the gwyddbwyll], their personal retinues begin to fight amongst themselves, and squires come to the leaders to request intervention:

Ac yna y dywawt y mackwy wrth Owein, ’Arglwyd, ae o’th gennyat ti y mae gweisson bychein yr amherawdyr a’e uackwyet yn kipris ac yn kathefrach ac yn blinaw dy

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424 Anglo-Norman Dictionary online, s.v. “glutun.”
vrein? Ac onyt o’th gennyat, par y’r amherawdryr eu gwahard.” “Arglwyd,” heb yr
Owein, “ti a glywy a dyweit y mackwy. Os da genhyt gwahard wynt ywyrth vy
mranos.” “Gware dy chware,” heb ef.

[And then the squire said to Owein, ‘Lord, is it with your leave that the young men of
the Emperor and squires are struggling with and harasing and troubling your
ravens?’... ‘Lord,’ said Owein, ‘you hear what the squire says. If you please, call them
away.’ ‘Play your game,’ said he.”

Both Arthur and Owain are warrior-kings, and their retinues are logical extensions of their
royal selves. The somewhat odd detail of Owain's retinue being formed of ravens further
reveals the connections of the board game competition to a deeper identity conflict; the
connections between Welsh cultural identity and ravens are widespread and longstanding,
but the character of Owain retains particularly strong connection to the noble black
birds.\footnote{See Davies, \textit{Age of Conquest} note to p.221.} As the gaming continues, more squires come into the room to report on battle's
progress. Owain orders his squire to “Dos ragot, ac yn y lle y gwelych y vrwydyr galettaf
dyrchaf yr ystondard y vynyd” [Return back, and in the place where you see the hardest
assault of the battle, raise the standard.] This action turns the tide of the battle in his favor
and Arthur soon asks Owain to call off his ravens, but Owain's response is the same: “Gware
dy chware” [play your game]. When the battle has effectively decimated both sides, Arthur
 crushes the board game into dust, and the battle ceases. The figurative violence in the
board game is thus reflected in the literal violence of the battling armies.

These depictions of game-play in \textit{Fouke} and \textit{Rhonabwy} are certainly a reflection of
the immense growing interest in board games among European aristocracy and writers of
romance in the thirteenth century. Nearly every European romance of the period contains at least one scene in which the hero or heroine is described as playing at a board-game, and in some romances the game functions as an astoundingly complex and varied literary motif.\(^{426}\) The board game in *Fouke* and *Rhonabwy*, nevertheless, seems to be of a different ilk than the more common ones of continental romance. Indeed, there are some particular correspondences of these works with the Welsh literary tradition and folklore surrounding “gwyddbwyll” which are worth considering further.

Although references to gwyddbwyll are quite common in medieval Welsh literature, descriptions of the game pieces or game play are rare. Since gwyddbwyll is Modern Welsh for “chess”, past translations have equated the two; however, we now know that is not correct. Gwyddbwyll is a much different game than chess and, though many of the important details of the game have been lost, the surviving evidence suggests the game was probably similar to the Irish game “fidchell” and the Breton game “gwezboell.” All three of these names, in fact, derive from a Common (Proto) Celtic form of the word meaning “wood+intelligence.” In their examination of Roman influence on gaming in Britain, Mark Hall and Karen Forsyth point that this name for the board game was necessarily present in the Celtic language before the sixth century AD, and the names for it in the different Celtic language branches cannot be translations of each other after that date since “the equivalence of the elements would not have been obvious.”\(^{427}\) Thus, the board game which

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\(^{426}\) See Leitch, “Ritual, Revenge and the Politics of Chess”, 129-131; Adams *Power Play*, 1-14; Serina Patterson’s recent edited collection, *Games and Gaming in Medieval Literature* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), reaches more broadly than medieval romance, but Patterson’s introduction (1-22) and article therein (79-104) emphasize the importance of games within Romance.

\(^{427}\) 1332-1333.
Arthur and Owain are playing in *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy* encapsulates, at least in its name, the board game played by Celtic people nearly a millennium prior.

It is apparent that the game was played, like nearly all medieval board games, between two people on a board at least conceptually similar to the more familiar chess or checker-board. The entry in Cormac’s Glossary for fidchell describes the playing surface as “four-cornered, its squares are right angled, and black and white are on it.”\(^\text{428}\) However, as is apparent in the story of *Mac Da Cherda and Cummaine Fota*, unlike chess or checkers, the opposing pieces are taken via a flanking maneuver. One of the players explaining the game in this story describes the capturing method as such: “a black pair of mine about one white man of yours on the same line (?) disputing the attack from the other side.”\(^\text{429}\) This mechanism of attack, and the description, thus implies that the pieces are largely homogeneous in terms of movement on the board and were anthropomorphic in conception if not also appearance. Whether players used small stone cones carved with human faces and armor, such as those found in Shetland, Scotland,\(^\text{430}\) carved pieces of wood or even unimproved rocks as counters, the pieces themselves were considered “men.” This is, indeed, consistently the name for the pieces in both Welsh and Irish (*gwerin* and *fir*, respectively).

The pieces, however, were not homogeneous in identity. In a praise poem to Hugh O’Donnell, Tadhg Dall O hUiginn describes his subject as “a golden branán among fidchell-men”.\(^\text{431}\) As Niehues says, this implies “a piece of special importance in this game, possibly

\(^{428}\) Stoke’s translation in Niehus, p.51.

\(^{429}\) O’Keeffe’s translation in Niehus, p.51.

\(^{430}\) See Hall and Forsyth 1333-1334 for discussion and photograph. The pieces date from the “fifth- to seventh-century AD”.

\(^{431}\) Niehues, 52. *branán* means “king” in Old Irish; compare Middle Welsh *brenin*. 
one to each side.”432 If there is a special piece, a “king” for only one side, the game probably resembled *ludus lutrunculorum* or the Norse game *tafl-bord* in set up, if not also in play.433 These games are played on a checkered board with a “king” in the middle surrounded by his own “men,” and pieces are taken in the same flanking maneuver described of fidchell, with two pieces of one player on the sides of a piece of the other players.

The inclusion of a special piece in the game, as Niehues suggests, might weight the game to one side and would thus explain the many references to players winning the game alternatively.434 Cormac’s Glossary, quoted above, additionally indicates that “moreover, it is different people that in turn win the game.”435 If the advantage is to one side, and the players alternate sides each game, then probability suggests players of roughly equal skill would typically alternate winning each game. This does not, of course, mean that it is impossible to win more than one game from both sides, multiple descriptions are extant of characters doing so, it only means that winning is more difficult when playing the disadvantaged side.

Thus, like chess, fidchell (and probably gwyddbwyll) was a game between two players on a quadrangular, checkered board with pieces that were both anthropomorphic and militaristic in nature. There are certain tactical advantages afforded to one side and winning the game is often alternated because of that tactical advantage, and playing the game was considered an enterprise of nobility. An important facet of both of these games which the authors of *Fouke le Fitzwaryn* and *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy* capitalize on is how the games manipulate player identity. Games with various anthropomorphic identities (men,  

432 Niehues 51
433 Niehues 48-51, 53
434 Niehues 52
435 Stokes’ translation in Niehues, 51.
kings, knights, etc.) require the players to alternate identities within game-play. In picking up one of the pawns or “gwerin,” the player momentarily must assume the identity role of that piece and the psychosocial implications of that identity role; that role-play then switches when the player moves the “brenin” or king.

Games—both medieval and modern—necessitate more personal investment from the player than a work of literature does from the reader. As game theorist Espen Aarseth says of “cybertext games” (his term for games of all eras which play with reality and identity): “The cybertext puts its would-be reader at risk: the risk of rejection. The effort and energy demanded by the cybertext of its reader raise the stakes of interpretation to those of intervention.”

Games and game-like entities coerce subjects into identifying with a character/piece and operating (at some level) within the abstracted identity of that character/piece; when multiple players and pieces are involved then an often complex series of identity alternations are required to play. Such alternations of player identity are in many ways similar to the “hyperidentity” complex described by game theorists of electronic role playing games (RPGs), user-intensive games “in which subject and object, and what is real and imagined, are not clearly separated, the player loses his identity, projecting himself inward, becoming the ‘other,’ and identifies with the characters in the game.”

For these board games to be played at all, the players must invest a certain portion of their identity into the pieces on the board and the constant switching of characters and

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pieces can be both exciting and disconcerting. The typical black-and-white piece segmentation ostensibly exaggerates the sense of cultural distance between the player and the “other”, between the Us and Them—but in requiring various identification with different pieces, different sides, and different moves, the game-play entails a certain befuddlement of that same black-and-white segregation.

This psychological aspect of identity-play in board games is obviously applicable to both chess and gwyddbwyll. Perhaps because of the international appeal of chess compared to the isolated distribution of gwyddbwyll, the implicit and complex connections of the board game to cultural and national identity are more prevalent in portrayals of the latter. Gwyddbwyll’s connections to cultural and national identities are especially illuminating in another Middle Welsh dream vision which predates Rhonabwy by a century or so, Breudwyt Maxen Wledig. In this story, the emperor of Rome, Maxen, takes a nap on a hunt and receives a marvelous vision of crossing out into the sea and over a beautiful island where he encounters a great castle. In the hall of that castle there are two finely dressed young men playing gwyddbwyll. Like in Rhonabwy and on the shepherd’s island in Fouke, the board game is composed of precious metals: “Claur areant a welei y’r wyduyll a’e gwerin o rudeur” [“(Maxen) saw a silver game board for gwyddbwyll with men of red gold”]. Further down the hall he travels until he sees a “gur gwynlwyt” [“Gray-headed old man”] sitting in a throne-like chair in front of a golden gwyddbwyll board, carving men for the game: “Claur gwyduyll a oed rac e vron a llath o eur en e law ac a lliwyey dur en torri gwerin gwyduyll o’r llath” [A board of gwyddbwyll was before him and a rod of gold

439 BMW, 53-54. All translations of BMW are my own.
in his hand, and hard files for the cutting of gwyddbwyl men from the rod.] 440 Sitting across from this old man is a beautiful woman, whom Maxen immediately falls for: “A chyuodi radcaw a oruc e vorwyn o’r gadeir eur a dodi a wnaeth enteu e dwy law am e mwnwgl hi ac eisted a wnaethant ell deu en e gadeir eur. Ac nyt oed gyvyngach udunt ell deu e gadeir noc e’r vorwyn ehun” [The maiden did rise on account of him from her golden chair, and he placed his two hands about her neck and the two of them sat in the golden chair and the chair was not more confined for the two of them than for the maiden herself.”] 441 After this strange physical merger between himself and the maiden, Emperor Maxen wakes.

Maxen is plagued by the thought of this beautiful woman for months and eventually sends off messengers to find the island and the maiden by path he remembers in his dream. They travel according to his description and eventually find the great castle in present day Caernarfon where, in eerily similarity to Maxen’s dream, there are still young men playing gwyddbwyll in the hall and an old man in front of a gwyddbwyll board, carving men for the game. Again, across from him sits the beautiful maiden in a golden chair. Immediately they address her: ‘Amperodres Ryuein!’ [Empress of Rome!] 442 The lady sends them back to fetch their emperor, and he returns with them to find them in the exact position he dreamed of them and the messengers left them. Maxen takes the maiden to bed and he begins his life as sovereign over Britain and Rome.

A core issue in this story is the identity, ethnic and political, of the characters of the work and the historical identity of the Romano-British people. As the messengers’

440 *ibid.*, 64-66.
441 *ibid.*, 76-79.
442 *BMW* 182.
Althusserian “hailing” of Elen reveals, Elen is interpolated and becomes Roman in identity when she is connected to Maxen. For his part, Maxen becomes British because of his intimate attraction to Elen and is eventually deprived of his Roman citizenship by the Roman Senate—an event which sparks a full scale British invasion of Rome and the forcible settlement of Brittany by British men who remove the tongues of the women they conquer so as not to corrupt the progeny of their own language. The connection of the board game to this motif of cultural and historical identity is apparent in the rather heavy-handed image of the couple embracing each other in front of a gwyddbwyll board while a hoary paternal figure carves “gwerin” for the game. The couples’ identity is recreated at the moment a piece is created for the game.

Maxen and Rhonabwy both present a comparable view of gwyddbwyll in terms of the game’s supernatural connection to cultural and personal identity, but (as with most things) the tone is much different in Rhonabwy. Maxen presents a narrative of identity stability and control, especially evident in the linguistic control of the Breton women and the trans-European empire established by the Romano-British king. Of course, that identity stability necessitates extreme violence—Rome is sacked and the Breton women’s tongues are cut out—but it is within the interests of and commanded by British hegemonic control of language and land. Rhonabwy and Fouke instead emphasize the free-play of those identity signifiers and the lack of identity control along the border. Iorwerth crosses the border, dismissing Madog’s offer of equality; Owain, Osla and Arthur fight each other rather than the true enemy; Fouke’s character switches from landed gentleman, trickster outlaw, knight errant and pirate while his political allegiance switches from English to Welsh to
French to Saracen and back to English. In these texts, the game signals, instead, a plurality of endlessly deferring identity signifiers in arenas of meticulously constructed liminality.

**Word Play**

At the outset of this chapter, I emphasized the shortcomings of our mainstream, historical definition of the March of Wales and I suggested that these texts give us a glimpse of more complex negotiations of self-definition from within the March of Wales. It is fitting then, that I return to this premise to note whether our conceptual range for the borderland has been expanded. I do not assert that the historical conceptualization of the March as a military and cultural buffer zone between the two countries is incorrect; indeed, the earlier literary works I examine in this project, especially the *Historia Brittonum* and its contemporaries, extend the segregationist role of the border retrospectively to the pre-Norman period of British history. However, the range of metaphors explored by *Fouke* and *Rhonabwy* aptly demonstrate that the vibrant culture which flourished along the border was not content to allow eastern and western aristocracies a unilateral authority in defining the role of the March within the discourse on British culture and politics.

The metaphorical images proposed by these works are alternatively poignant, powerful, ludicrous and flippant; they are also, at times, incredibly accurate. The carnivalesque war-torn estate, where demons resurrected the foundational past rule on in unchecked aristocratic play is, if not literally true, an impressive commentary on the terrifying liberties afforded to Marcher lords in the thirteenth century. The distorted and disorienting *Rhyd-y-Groes* of *Rhonabwy* describes almost every feature of the Arthurian realm inaccurately—excepting the geography, of course. Yet, in drawing our attention to
the self-destructive stagnancy and inverted reality which characterizes Arthur’s retinue, the author demonstrates a deeper truism about the problems of internecine strife in border communities. Yet, though these indigenous metaphors are often powerful and accurate, they are also inherently self-destructive. Payn Peverel defeats Geomagog, Arthur crushes the gwyddbwyll board, and the authors move to other definitions and metaphors. At its core, authorial inscription on the border, even from within the border, is unsatisfactory and definition leads only to redefinition. The March, like the Arthurian legend which flourished there, is hardly a homogeneous or consistently definable entity.

Certainly, as post-structuralism has taught us, the consistent dismantling of border conceits is an inherent feature of metaphor and, indeed, of language itself. The March can only be defined in relation to other definitions of the March and when we push those metaphors it reveals only a free-play of signifiers defined by (con)text. A border is a metaphor; any conceptualization of the border is an endlessly differing/deferring metaphor of a metaphor. The “play”—of identity signifiers, of concepts of the border, and the endless deferral of both—elides the presumed author(itative) control of inscribing meaning.443

However, the self-destruction of border metaphors and cultural identity in these texts is not merely a reflection of the always-already present specter of linguistic anxiety I describe of these texts, as Derrida consistently recognized, is nothing particularly new to the human writing experience and is well represented in the pre-modern corpus. An early and important (if not particularly clear) description of that anxiety can be found in Derrida’s “Speech and Phenomena,” Speech and Phenomena: And Other Essays on Husserl, trans. David B. Allison (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973).

443 I recall the prominent terminology and tenor of Jacques Derrida’s collective work on deconstruction in my description here not in order to invoke a totalizing theoretical model on the above analysis of Fouke and Rhonabwy, but in order to provide a comparative archetype with which many readers will have some passing familiarity. The sense of linguistic anxiety I describe of these texts, as Derrida consistently recognized, is nothing particularly new to the human writing experience and is well represented in the pre-modern corpus. An early and important (if not particularly clear) description of that anxiety can be found in Derrida’s “Speech and Phenomena,” Speech and Phenomena: And Other Essays on Husserl, trans. David B. Allison (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973).
disintegration—these authors are more self-conscious than most about highlighting and emphasizing the dangerous potential of linguistic manipulation. Recall how our guide for Rhonabwy’s Arthurian dreamscape, Iddawg Cord Prydein, brought about the disastrous Battle of Camlan by acting as linguistic intermediary between Arthur and Medrart: “phan dywettei Arthur yr ymadrawd teckaf wrthyf o’r a allei y dywedwn ynneu yr ymadrawd hwnnw yn haccraf a allwn wrth Vedrawt” [when Arthur said the most beautiful words which he could, I spoke those words in the ugliest (manner) I could to Medrart].444 Note that Iddawg does not lie to Medrart; he manipulates the tone and tenor of Arthur’s message to actuate his own personal bellicose goals.

Very similar anxieties are present in Fouke as well. In one particularly pregnant moment, Fouke’s retainer John de Rampaigne infiltrates King John’s court by dressing himself as an Ethiopian minstrel in order to rescue the captured Sir Audulf de Bracy. When he greets the king he tells him: “Je su un menestral ethiopien, nee en Ethiopie” [I am an Ethiopian minstrel, born in Ethiopia]. When the king asks John about his reputation in foreign countries, John responds very slyly: “‘Sire’ fet yl, ‘vous estez le plus renomee roy de tote la cristieneté, e pur vostre grant renoun vous su je venu vere.’... Johan dist qu’il fust renomee plus pur mavesté qe bounté; mes le roy ne l’entendi point” [“‘Sire,’ said he, ‘you are the most renowned king in all of Christendom, and it is for your great renown I have come to see you.’... John said that he was renowned for his wickedness than his virtue; but the king did not hear that bit.”]445 What is impressive about John’s response here is not so much the blatant lie he tells (being Ethiopian), but the astounding amount of truth he tells the king. He is very much a minstrel, as the narrator emphasizes: “Johan de Rampaygne

444 BR 5.7-9.
445 Fouke 37.35-39; 38.1
savoir assez de tabour, harpe, viole, sitole e jogelerie.” [John de Rampaigne sufficiently knew the tabor, harp, fiddle, lyre, and the skills of a jongleur.]446 Also, the king is, in fact, very ‘renowned’ in foreign countries, though for his ‘wickedness’ rather than his great rule, and his ‘renown’ is, in fact, the very reason John has come to visit him. Like Iddawg, the jongleur pushes the linguistic boundaries of the truth without falsifying the information.

Certainly, in an area like the March of Wales, where translators, multilingual entertainments, and private messengers are part of everyday life, intermediaries like Iddawg and John are a constant threat and source of anxiety; therefore their presence in two border texts concerned with border affairs is not surprising. However, I do not think it is a coincidence that these self-reflective musings on the boundaries and anxieties of language are placed in the mouths of a singing-story teller and our guide through the dream—both of which are obvious analogues of the authors themselves. Fouke and Rhonabwy are our intermediaries and guides through Arthurian border literature, and it is imperative we consistently recognize their own potentially subversive goals in presenting Arthur and the border to us.

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446 ibid., 37.23-24
5) ‘i-medled to gidres’: Arthurian Border Identities in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and the poetry of Iolo Goch

Also kyng Offa, forto haue a distinccon for euermore bytwene þe kyngdoms of Engelond and of Wales, made a longe deche þat streccheþ forþ oute of þe souþ side by Bristowe vndir þe hilles of Wales norþward... Þis diche is ȝit in many places i-
seyn. In Seint Edward his tyme Walsche men schulde not passe þat diche wiþ wepoun uppon a grete payne... Bot now in eiþer side boþe of ȝond half and on þis half þe diche, and specialliche in þe schires of Chestre, of Schrouysbury, and of Herford in meny places beeþ Englische men and Walsche men *i-medled to gidres*.

Neither Ranulf Higden’s *Polychronicon*, composed in Cheshire in the 1330s, nor John Trevisa’s 1387 translation of Higden’s work, written in Berkeley, dwell often upon local history or topography. One can hardly blame the writers for these omissions, given their self-assigned task of recording ‘placis and countrees and londes and all þe world wide,’ but it is nevertheless unfortunate they did not make more commentaries like the one above.

This tantalizing aside is one of the few surviving commentaries on Offa’s dike and the people who live around it in the fourteenth century.

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447 John Trevisa, trans., *Polychronicon Ranulphi Higden Monachi Cestrensis: Together with the English Translation of John Trevisa and an Unknown Writer of the Fifteenth Century*, II. ed. C. Babington (London: Longman Green and Company, 1869): 1.43 (p. 35), my emphasis. Trevisa’s translation of Higden is rather close in this section, with only minor distinctions, on which I elaborate below. The corresponding section in Higden’s original is also in Babington’s edition and can be consulted there.

448 *ibid.* vol. I. 1.3 (p. 27).
Trevisa and Higden’s commentary expresses a curious mixture of pleasure with continuity and distaste at adulteration over time. In their eyes, the dyke—the embankment itself—has changed little in the 600 years since Offa had it made, it is ‘ȝit in many places iseyn.’ One can trace the construction over time and extrapolate Offa’s purpose and sentiments (‘forto haue a distinccion euermore bytwene þe kyngdoms’) — sentiments obviously shared by these authors. The English and Welsh people who have inhabited that land since then, however, have failed to uphold the historical purpose of the ditch — they have ‘i-medled to gidres.’

What Offa thought he had created was a line, a clear segregation of ‘English’ and ‘Welsh’ which was also defensible. As I have detailed in the previous sections of this study, however, the culture that grew around Offa’s trench resisted his linear and bipartite conception of political geography. The Welsh settled, peaceably and otherwise, in various portions of ‘England’ to the east of the dike and the English—and later the Normans—settled in portions of eastern and southern Wales throughout the following centuries creating a ‘diverse and nebulous frontier region [where] the innocent incomer could never be certain whether he had entered Wales or not.’

Borders, even when decorated with ditches, lines, and defensible positions, are ultimately imaginary; one must believe in a border for it to exist. The degree to which the historical inhabitants of the March of Wales believed in that line and the restrictions it implied is questionable at best.

Both Trevisa and Higden reiterate a fantasy of the segregated past, when the Welsh kept to their side of the ditch and the English kept to theirs. We, however, know that this was rarely the case ‘in Seint Edward his time’ or in any other. Welsh intellectuals such as

Asser worked with English nobility, even when their respective societies were expected to be in conflict.450 As I discuss in Chapter One, the “Ordinance Concerning the Dunsæte” in tenth-century western Herefordshire demonstrates sustained collaboration and shared jurisdiction in, at least, that portion of the border.451 As I discuss in Chapter Two and Three, certain major Arthurian works of the long twelfth century such as Geoffrey of Monmouth’s Historia regum Brittaniae and Layamon’s Brut would not have been possible without cultural contact and the multicultural appeals of the authors. As Fouke le Fitzwaryn and Breuddwyd Rhonabwy demonstrate, the March continued to be a distinctive, individualized cultural arena in the thirteenth century as well—a time frame which would have been within the recent cultural memory for Higden and probably Trevisa as well. The inhabitants of the Anglo-Welsh border had always been ‘i-medled’ (an adjective with sexual undertones perhaps not as prevalent in Higden’s ‘permixti’).452 However, if this intermixture in Trevisa and Higden’s time is just a continuation of a common, historically-noted practice, then why do they seem so anxious and concerned about it?

In this chapter, I would like to suggest that, though the intermixture of ‘English’ and ‘Welsh’ is not a new phenomenon in the fourteenth century March, the idea of what ‘English’ and ‘Welsh’ might signify was undergoing some significant alterations and

450 Asser, King Alfred’s biographer, even notes that his decision to move into Alfred’s circle was largely based on a hope of securing military protection for St. David’s from northern Welsh raiders. See Asser’s Life of King Alfred, ed. W.H. Stevenson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1904), pp. 65-66.


452 Ranulf Higden, Polychronicon 1.43 (p. 34).
intensifications. ‘English,’ as an identity, was becoming more and more bound to a (false) sense of racial and insular solidarity that had simply not been applicable in previous centuries, and the ‘Welsh’ were now colonized and ruled by a ‘stranger of whose language, manners and laws they were entirely ignorant.’ Though Higden and Trevisa’s March of Wales was no more ‘i-medled’ than it had been in previous centuries, the perception of the constituent identity factors undergoing mixture and mediation here (the ‘Englishness’ and ‘Welshness’) had changed, and thus a renewed and exacerbated sense of discomfort and angst can be detected in their descriptions of the border and the literature to derive from that border.

The central, though not solitary, historical event to redefine those cultural signifiers—and the borderlands’ mediations of them—is the Edwardian Conquest of Wales in 1283. Though the military actions taken in that war had been past for some decades by the time Trevisa and Higden are writing, the psychological traumas and cultural wounds made in Edward’s incursion lingered yet. A sea change in the histories of Wales, the Marches, and England followed the results of this conflict, and the later fourteenth-century poets of March had much to reflect on after the figurative dust had settled.

Historians have traced the effects of this Conquest in many important ways: through the changes in governmental systems in Wales and the Marches, through the effects on

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the ecclesiastical systems of the two sovereignties, through changes in urban
development and immigration/emigration in both countries, and through the effects on
the Welsh and English militaries in the Post-Conquest era. Scholarship has also been
directed at post-Conquest literary production, and has demonstrated that England’s
annexation of Wales and large sections of the March was more than a ‘territorial’
conquest. Edward I, for instance, has long been acknowledged as an ‘Arthurian
enthusiast’ (to use R.S. Loomis’s rather euphemistic phrase) and the willingness of later
monarchs and aristocrats to appropriate Arthurian narratives and symbolism saw a
manifold increase in the decades following the Conquest.

In a move even more devastating than his appropriation of Arthur, Edward snatched
the most prized relic in all of Wales from Aberconwy abbey, Y Groes Naid [The Cross of
Neith] (a supposed fragment of the True Cross), and, after his victory, took it on a parade
through London. When Edward had Caernarfon Castle built—the shining jewel in the
‘Iron Ring’ of castles he built throughout post-Conquest Wales—his men ‘discovered’ the
body of King Macsen, and purposefully built Caernarfon to resemble both the Theodosian

457 A. Chapman, Welsh Soldiers in the Later Middle Ages (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2015); Ralph
Griffiths ‘Part One: Assimilation and Rebellion,’ in Conquerors and Conquered in Medieval
Wales (London: Alan Sutton, 1994).
458 See C. Lloyd-Morgan, ‘Literary Borrowing in Wales and England,’ in Authority and
460 Davies, Age of Conquest, pp. 355-356.
Walls at Constantinople and the description of Maximus's castle in Breuddwyd Macsen Wledig:⁴⁶¹ ‘ac en aber er auon ef a welei prifgaer decaf o’r a welsei den eryoet a phorth e gaer a welei en agoret... Peithyneu e neud a debygei eu bot en eur oll. Kant e neuad a debygei e vot en vaen gwerthuaur llewchedic’ [and at the mouth of the river he saw a great castle, the fairest that any man had ever seen, and the gate of the castle he saw was open... The roof tiles of the hall, he thought, were of gold. The walls of the hall he thought were of precious, glittering stones.]⁴⁶² As we can now see, retrospectively of course, these castles were the stone nails in the coffin of Welsh sovereignty and cultural independence. And, as the ‘gwerthuaur llewchedic’ [glittering stones] of Caernarfon Castle demonstrate, Edward’s notorious imperialism was not merely an expression of militaristic sovereignty over native Welsh culture, but in many cases was an expression of sovereignty ironically drawn from Welsh culture.

It is difficult to overestimate the trauma endured by this and subsequent generations of the conquered Welsh people. As Rees Davies has consistently noted, the 1283 Conquest is still the most traumatic experience Wales—as a political, social, and cultural entity—has ever undergone.⁴⁶³ Such sentiments were shared, on a much more

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personal level, by Gruffydd ap yr Ynad Coch in his elegy for Prince Llywelyn ap Gruffydd, the last native prince of the Welsh people, who was killed during the Conquest:

Poni welwch-chwi’r haul yn hwylaw-’r awyr?
Poni welwch-chwi’r sŵr wedi ‘r syrthiaw?
Poni chredwch-chwi i Dduw ddyniadon ynfyd?
Poni welwch-chwi’r byd wedi ‘r bydiaw?
Och hyd atat-ti, Dduw, na ddaw mor dros dir!

[See you not the sun sailing through the air?
See you not that the stars have fallen?
Believe you not in God, foolish men?
See you not that the world has ceased existing?
Oh, God, how long till the sea comes to drown the earth?]\(^{464}\)

For many Venedotians like Gruffydd, Llywelyn’s death and Wales’ defeat entailed a sense of personal psychological devastation that would be passed through the generations.

As has been the case for so many colonized societies throughout history, it was this utter devastation that brought a sense of solidarity to the people in Wales. The widespread unification and sense of oppositional identity to ‘Englishness’ within Edward’s holdings in Wales is apparent in the differences between Welsh attacks against the English before and after the 1283 Conquest. In the 1277 rebellion, Edward had been able to concentrate his forces on Llywelyn with support from Llywelyn’s Welsh enemies and was able to temper the piecemeal insurgency relatively quickly. The Rebellion of 1294, however, as historians have noted, stretched ‘from Anglesey to Glamorgan, which manifested the depth of

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resentment generated by the experience of conquest.’ Oppressive military rule and extensive castle building prevented this western unity from translating into military success, but it did not suppress the sustenance and intensification of ‘Welsh’ identity in opposition to ‘English’ in the fourteenth century.

For the English, who in the previous century had lost all continental holdings, the English Channel was wider than it had ever been before. The Treaty of Paris in 1259 had seen the last of ‘England’ disappear from the continent, and angst over the lack of insular control over Wales and Scotland began to rise. The 1283 Conquest confirmed and rejuvenated a desire for total insular control, and was a major contributing factor in the widely acknowledged resurgence and intensification of Englishness and English nationalism in the fourteenth century. That intensification has been linked to several iterations of cultural production, from Middle English historical writing, to Middle English Romance, to Middle English as a language, and to the reign of Edward I in general. As Geraldine Heng succinctly states: ‘Medievalists agree that from the thirteenth century onward, discourses of the nation are visible and can be read with ease in medieval England.’ It is easy to see how the long-awaited Welsh defeat in 1283 and the

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subsequent Edwardian appropriation of British myths of insular unity instigated and exacerbated this cultural phenomenon.

All of this—the intensification of English and Welsh identities, the rise of post-colonial culture in Wales, the Edwardian appropriation of aspects of Welsh culture—has been well researched and documented by English and Welsh literary and historical scholars. However, in the process of documenting these issues in England and Wales, the peculiar situation of the ‘i-medled’ people along the Anglo-Welsh border has been overwritten. That same solidified sense of homogeneous identity experienced by the English and Welsh in post-Conquest Britain was simply unavailable to the residents of the March of Wales. They were a mixed people with a mixed heritage, legally and culturally segregated from Wales and England and yet inextricably bound to both. The Conquest only further amplified their sense of identity fragmentation and exacerbated their political individuation from the remainder of the realm. In previous iterations of this cultural intermixture on the border, there is a notable lack of anxiety about intermixture; Geoffrey of Monmouth could make sly appeals to both the Angevin and Cambrian courts, and Læamon could cobbled together English and Welsh cultural signifiers in a hybrid text, and it was hardly problematic for Fouke to fight for the Welsh king. The sense one gets from Trevisa and Higden, however is different; though Trevisa and Higden’s truly segregated border has never really existed (in terms of border individuals), the Conquest incited a more intense segregation of the border (as an individuated cultural entity) from the political principalities which surrounded it. For Trevisa, an Oxford-educated man raised in a Cornish-speaking region of Cornwall, the intermixture must have been all too personally felt.
Though ideas of an ethnically contiguous ‘Englishness’ may seem a foregone conclusion in Ricardian English literature, and Dafydd ap Gwilym could write with a playfully derogatory and separatist tone about the ‘Drisais mewn gwely dreesawr... Hicen a Siencin a Siac’ [Three Englishmen in one smelly bed... Hinken and Jenkin and Jack], this clarity of ethnic division is not so easily assumed in border literature.\(^471\) There is, instead, an implicit awareness of the segregation of ‘i-medled’ border people from the people in the ‘distinct’ kingdoms of England and Wales; and there is an awareness that multiple senses of cultural identity may constitute (and confound) a single character. It is thus in this individuated, ‘i-medled’ arena where the recently intensified conceptions of social, political and personal identity of fourteenth-century Britain were, yet again, inadvertently questioned, complicated and mediated.

To some degree, these effects of border culture are apparent in Higden and Trevisa’s respective works. Though the *Polychronicon*’s direct interrogation of the March is fleeting, the ambitious macroscopic lens the work casts upon world history is an inherent product of being born in the junction of three colliding cultures and histories. However, more extensive manifestations of this simultaneously mixed and divided border identity are to be found in the Arthurian literature of the fourteenth-century March. Although the Arthurian legend was more widely dispersed than ever in the fourteenth century, Arthur’s connection with the March of Wales is stronger than with any other region in the world, a fact which I hope has become abundantly clear throughout this study. The importance that Arthur holds for Anglo-Welsh border culture is paramount, and therefore the choice of that

genre as a venue for the mediation of these particularly ‘marginal’ identity issues makes a good deal of sense.

In this chapter, I discuss two major authors of the fourteenth-century March of Wales: one a Welsh language lyrical poet, Iolo Goch, and the other the author of the long Middle English romance, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Similar to the *Polychronicon*, these works reflect their distinctive origin on the Anglo-Welsh border and reflect some inherent idiosyncrasies of border identity in the fourteenth century. Unlike the subject matter of the *Polychronicon, Piers Plowman*, and other major works of fourteenth-century border culture, however, the figure of Arthur is more than merely reflective; he is a tool for the active interrogation of British identity on both sides of the border. Much like the fourteenth-century March of Wales itself, these ‘Arthurs’ encompass a plurality of competing and contrasting identity signifiers—muddling any dichotomous notions of English and Welsh identity.

**The Fractured Arthurian Identities of Iolo Goch:**

In a sense it is unfortunate that Iolo ap Ithel Goch ap Cynwrig ap Iorwerth ap Cynwrig of the Vale of Clwyd in Denbighshire, known as Iolo Goch for his red hair (coch=red), had not been born a couple centuries earlier. Had he been born in the ninth or tenth century, he would have undoubtedly been at home and well rewarded as one of the Cynfeirdd or, if he were active in the eleventh century, one of the Beirdd y Tywysogion in the courts of the Powysian royalty. His lot was less lucky in that sense, however. His poetry spans from the 1330’s to about 1398, from the military campaigns of Edward III to just before the Glyndŵr rebellion, when there were no Welsh kings or native princes to house
and feed poets. Instead, Iolo’s patrons ranged from the native Welsh ‘uchelwyr’ (high status gentry) to bishops in various parts of Wales and the Marches, to English lords and kings. He was largely itinerant, as was required of professional Welsh poets in this age, and he seems to have maintained that itinerant career until he was well into his seventies.

Though all of the writings we have from Iolo are in Welsh, his poetry contains a large number of borrowings from French and English (due to his contact with French and English speakers in the March), and a handful from Greek and Latin (derivative of his early ecclesiastical education). He was very well versed in British history, theological debates, major political happenings and the literary traditions of Welsh, French, English and Latin. He was, in short, a talented, widely read, highly respected poet who was able to move fluidly among the different social and political atmospheres in Wales and the March of Wales.

Though he is still generally regarded as one of the most talented poets to write in the Welsh language, Iolo’s dates happen to correspond with Dafydd ap Gwilym and Geoffrey Chaucer, and this coincidence has contributed to his relative critical neglect. This is partly due to practical reasons (Chaucer and Dafydd are much less context-specific than Iolo), but it is also due to an implicit critical impulse to map a homogeneous cultural and political identity onto medieval poetry—a homogeneous identity which Iolo seems to always resist. Iolo is a Welsh-language poet, highly educated in the laws, folklore, and history of Wales, but he vacillated between honouring Welsh culture and praising English nobility, between championing Welsh independence but advocating a staunchly social and political conservatism. During his lifetime, Iolo wrote praise poems for both Owain Glyndŵr (who would eventually lead one of the most radical rebellions against the English
throne ever) and Edward III (grandson of the Conqueror of Wales), while casually drawing allusions from such disparate sources as the *Mabinogi* and *Fouke le Fitzwaryn*—as I discuss in the previous chapter. In a very productive way, Iolo is disturbing and troublesome to our neat disciplinary and nationalistic categories—a thoroughly talented and thoroughly complicated personality.

Despite (or perhaps because of) this complexity, the majority of the critics who study Iolo have tended to nudge his political complexities into more comprehensible categories. The first editor of his poems, Henry Lewis, excised many of the poems attributed to Iolo in the manuscripts due to their discrepancies with an appreciable political normality. Since ‘most of Iolo’s patrons had fought for the king of England,’ the long-attributed *cywydd* and prophecy which expressly advocated the legitimacy of the Welsh rebel Owain Lawgoch was not included in his edition, nor in subsequent editions thereafter. The poem draws heavily on political prophecy (a genre we know Iolo was familiar with) to expressly advocate Owain Lawgoch as a champion of his native cause. Lewis’s desire to find a homogeneous ideology among Iolo’s poems may have contributed to his editorial decisions in this and other poems, perhaps even as much as the linguistic and textual evidence he cites.

E.I. Rowlands, by contrast, favors Iolo’s Welsh political and cultural leanings and reminds us that ‘[bards] were the most politically aware element in Welsh society, fanatical perhaps, but both intelligent and knowledgeable.’ In Rowland’s assessment, Iolo must

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473 Rowlands, ‘Iolo Goch,’ p. 130.
have 'longed for the arrival of the fleet of Owain [Lawgoch],’ and his praise of English nobility merely demonstrates his desire for an independent Wales, practically separate but officially beholden to the crown, as it had been before the Conquest. From the perspective of the fourteenth century, this would not have been an unreasonable hope according to Rowland.

D.J. Bowen and Iolo’s most recent editor, Dafydd Johnston, have both tended to emphasize Iolo’s Welsh allegiances as well. Johnston, for instance, suggests that Iolo’s early poem to ‘Brenin Edward y Trydydd’ [King Edward the Third] is ‘a purely rhetorical device,’ and Bowen argues that the same ‘unusual’ poem was likely composed at the behest of Rhys ap Gruffydd, a Welsh nobleman whom had personally benefitted from Edward’s success. Iolo’s praise of the ‘duliwr Brynaich’ [hammerer of the Scots] seems a distant and rhetorical affair in their assessment—exceptional, unusual, and potentially dismissible.

Patricia Price contextualizes Iolo with Adam of Usk, a fellow border dweller of Welsh descent who wrote for English nobility, and advocates Iolo’s allegiances with English aristocracy, or, more accuracy, with anyone who could advance his career: ‘he could expect patronage, if not from Edward himself, from Welsh members of Edward’s court and perhaps, at Richard II’s death, from his heir, the Earl of March.’ In Price’s assessment, Iolo is a savvy court politician who expressly gave the English nobility his allegiance, though more in hopes of an advantageous patronage rather than any heartfelt admiration.

The critical tug-of-war for Iolo’s political allegiances illustrates our desire to figuratively choose a side for Iolo, to force him to fit within our preconceived notions of

474 ibid., p. 134.
476 P. Price, ‘For Wales, See England: Two Native Welsh Authors in the Age of Chaucer,’ Medieval Perspectives 14 (1999), 177-190, 184-185.
cleanly segregated British identities. Identity in the March of Wales, however, is hardly a homogeneous or easily definable entity. There are certainly poems of Iolo’s that seem to suggest that he was Welsh-oriented in his politics and patronage and it is also undeniable that he wrote serious, thoughtful and adulatory poems to powerful English lords. Instead of outwardly favoring one set of these principles over another, is it not possible that both are potentially applicable? Was Iolo not capable—perhaps even compelled—to inhabit a range of political complexities throughout his long career in the March of Wales? 

I would suggest that the peculiar context of the fourteenth-century March, and especially the cultural identities explored by the Arthurian legend in this area, can help us to appreciate and respect Iolo’s contradictions of politics and personality. Iolo’s own engagement with the Arthurian legend, though sporadic, provides a touchstone to gauge and illuminate his own identity mediations over a wide swath of political and social changes in fourteenth-century Britain. Indeed, I suggest that Iolo’s varied engagement with the Arthurian legend and identity politics is illustrative of the wider identity mitigations ongoing within border culture and border literature in the post-Conquest March of Wales.

In ‘Cywydd y Llong’ [Cywydd on the Ship], for instance, Iolo contrasts a miserable journey on a France-bound ship to the wondrous court of Rhys ap Robert (the father of Owain Lawgoch’s chief lieutenant). Iolo unlocks his extensive satirical repertoire to describe the turbulent ship, with metaphors ranging from the dark and poignant (‘cyst y llongwyr’ [sailors’ coffin]) to the hyperbolic and humorous (‘Henfon hoyw’ [sprightly old cow]). In the middle of his diatribe, Iolo describes the boat’s erratic motions in an Arthurian allusion: ‘Caiff serthedd cyffes Arthur, Yn y tyllfaen, maen fal mur [She is ribald
as Arthur’s confession, in the hollow stone, stone like a wall]. As Johnston points out, the ‘tyllfaen’ is likely a reference to C. 75 of Nennius’s Wonders, which describes a ‘hollow stone on top of a mountain which filled up with water and emptied as the sea-tide ebbed and flowed.’ Thus, the boat is as unstable as the turbulent sea upon which it sits.

The reference to ‘cyffes Arthur’ [Arthur’s confession], however, is more enigmatic—though it is clearly related to the adjective ‘serthedd’ [wanton, ribald]. Iolo seems to be invoking the tradition of Arthur as an ethically and morally frivolous secular ruler, most notably encountered in Welsh hagiographic tradition. Lifris of Llancarfan’s depiction of Arthur as a king who has insatiable lusts for a virgin princess and must be restrained from raping her by Cai and Bedwyr is, perhaps, the most striking example of that tradition. The miserable ship tossing and turning on the ocean is thus akin to a hypothetical confession of the libidinous and ethically-questionable King Arthur.

Iolo’s reference to Arthur in ‘Cywydd y Llawfurwr’ [Poem on the Plowman] is similarly negative and is drawn from comparable sources, but represents a distinctly different King Arthur. This poem is one of Iolo’s more famous works, primarily owing to its recognizable correspondences with the contemporary English poetic tradition. The Cywydd is an appraisal of the idyllic worker, the ploughman or the laborer, who represents

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477 ‘Cywydd y Llong,’ Iolo Goch Poems, pp. 133-137; l. 37. All translations of Iolo’s poetry are my own, though not out of disrespect for Johnston’s reliable translations which accompany his edition; Iolo’s language is sufficiently complex to merit multiple translations.
the apex of Christianity and civilized society. Honouring the working class for their inner nobility is often an implicit criticism of inherited aristocratic rulers and there was a wide range of ‘ploughman literature’ of this sort for Iolo to draw from in the fourteenth century; the most famous example being by Iolo’s fellow border-dweller and contemporary, William Langland.480

‘Cywydd y Llawfurwr’ is of a decidedly different ilk than the poems of the ‘ploughman group,’ however. As Morgan Davies says of the poem, Iolo’s poem here is ‘nothing if not supportive of the established order;’ it is deeply socially conservative and fundamentally invested in the rule of the land-holding nobility.481 As Johnston, among others, notes, the poem seems to be profoundly fearful of ‘threat[s] to the stability of society... [such as] the peasants demands for greater freedom and better working conditions,’ demands which ultimately culminated in the Peasant’s Revolt of 1381 in England.482 Indeed some critics have posited ‘Cywydd y Llawfurwr’ as a direct reaction to that event.483 Regardless of direct historical references, the poem is certainly part of the same international conversation about the role of class and rulership that instigated and followed the rebellion.484

480 A. Breeze tentatively offers this poem as an addition to the Ploughman Tradition in ‘A Welsh Addition to the Piers Plowman Group?’ Notes and Queries 40 (1993), pp. 142-51.
483 Breeze, ‘A Welsh Addition,’ 150-51. However, cf. Davies, ‘Plowmen, Patrons, and Poets,’ p. 55, who questions the potential relationship of Iolo’s poem with the Peasant’s Revolt in favor of ‘factors peculiar to native Welsh society.’
484 For a broader consideration of the role of labor—agricultural or otherwise—and the literature of the fourteenth century after the institution of labor laws, see Kellie Robertson,
For Iolo, the role of the ploughman in this role was very clear. When he stood before God at Judgment Day, he would be praised for upholding peaceful, humble Christian virtues: ‘O gardod drwy gywirdeb, O lety ni necy neb... Ni ddeily ryfel, ni ddilyn’ [through honesty he withholds neither charity nor lodging from anyone... he does not make war, he does not persecute.]\textsuperscript{485} The plough, and the man who wields it, stand at the apex of Christian civilization; all power and sustenance derives from his work and, importantly, his obedience:

\begin{verbatim}
Nid bywyd, nid byd heb ef.
Gwn mai dirifach ganwaith
Gantho, modd digyffro maith,
Gelyn, ni'm dawr, heb fawr fai
Yr aradr crwm â'r irai
Na phe bai, pan dorrai dŵr,
Yn rhith Arthur anrheithiwr.
[There is no life, there is no being without him
I know that he infinitely prefers
with a long pleasant manner,
{that which} I care not, following without much reward
the curved plough with the goad
than if he were, when breaking a tower,
\end{verbatim}

\textit{The Laborer’s Two Bodies: Labor and the Work of the Text in Medieval Britain, 1350-1500} (New York: Palgrave, 2006).
\textsuperscript{485} ‘Cywydd y Llafurwr,’ ll. 15-19.
in the guise of Arthur the ravager.]

The image of Arthur here is, as in ‘Cywydd y Llong,’ primarily negative. The ploughman derives his innate virtue from being unlike King Arthur. Laborers should not find inspiration in Arthurian nobility—theirs is a different lot. Wars, destruction and ‘ravaging’ are the vices of rulers, not ploughmen.

When compared with its source, this reference takes on an even deeper layer of symbolism. ‘Arthur anrheithiwr’ recalls a peculiar description of Arthur in the Triads:

Tri Ruduoavc Ynys [Prydein]: Run ap Beli, a Llew Llaw Gyffes, a Morgan Mwynuawr, ac vn a oed rudugach no’r tri. Arthur oed y henw; blvydyn ny doy na gvellt na llysseu y ford y kerdei yr vn o’r tri. a seith mlyned ny doy y ford y kerdei Arthur.

[The Three Red Ravagers of Britain: Rhun son of Beli, and Lleu Skilful Hand, and Morgant the Wealthy. But there was one who was a Red Ravager greater than all three: Arthur was his name. For a year neither grass nor plants used to spring up where one of the three would walk; but where Arthur went, not for seven years.]

Medieval society has little use for land that cannot be cultivated. The ploughman is the fulcrum between heathen desert and Christian produce: he follows the curved plow to bring life and sustenance and order to the world. Arthur’s tyranny is the herbicidal antithesis to plowing; where he walks arable land is made barren.

Iolo’s depiction of Arthur is not unilaterally negative, however. Another of Iolo’s poems that bridges the perceived gap between English and Welsh society is his ‘Moliant Syr Rosier Mortimer’ [Praise of Sir Roger Mortimer]. Roger was the Fourth Earl of March and

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486 ibid., ll. 24-30
the head of the Mortimers, a powerful family which had held lands in Denbighshire and throughout the March. The Mortimers had gained an inordinate amount of influence and power in England through wars in Wales and Ireland and had been a powerful military force in the March for generations.488 Now, Welsh praise poetry of any generation is stereotypically excessive, but Iolo is more adulatory than usual in his praise of Mortimer. Iolo praises Roger as ‘Calon engyliwn Englont’ [heart of the angels of England], recalling Bede’s Angel/Angle correlation, and the ‘gorau iarll ym myd’ [best earl in the world].489 Iolo dotes on Roger with vigor and intensity, and he expressly advocates Roger as the heir to the throne of England after Richard II—a proposition which was far from a foregone conclusion at the time.

The culmination of Iolo’s praise for Mortimer, however, is his comparison of him to Arthur: ‘Gras Arthur a’i gadlys i gyd, Gorau lle, ail Gaerllion, Y sy uwch o’r ynys hon.’ [{you are} the grace of Arthur, of all his camp, the best place, a second Caerleon, which is higher of this island].490 Interestingly, Iolo connects Arthur’s court here to Caerleon, as in Geoffrey’s Historia, despite Iolo’s otherwise association of the Arthurian court with Celliwig in Cornwall, which is more typical of the Welsh tradition.491 This is simultaneously the only time Iolo connects Arthur to Caerleon and the only time his portrayal of Arthur as an individual is primarily positive.

488 R.R. Davies covers the Mortimer family, including Roger, throughout Age of Conquest, esp. 402-408.
490 ibid. ll. 103-106.
491 Iolo Goch, ‘I Ieuan ab Einion o Chwilog,’ l. 44; ‘Marwnad Meibion Tudur Fychan,’ l. 68. Celliwig is also associated with Arthur in Breuddwyd Rhonabwy, Pridded Annwn, and Culwch ac Olwen.
As Johnston notes, the presence of Caerleon under Roger Mortimer’s rule certainly influenced the connection with the Arthurian court the Iolo emphasizes.\textsuperscript{492} Yet it is also important to recognize that the Mortimer family had self-identified with this particular flavour of the Arthurian legend for many generations, and Iolo would have almost certainly been aware of that self-identification. For instance, Wigmore Castle (the base of Mortimer power) once held a Latin Brut manuscript and miscellany which is now in the University of Chicago Library (MS 224).\textsuperscript{493} This manuscript was originally compiled in the later part of the fourteenth century with an eye towards justifying Roger’s claim to the throne after Richard II’s death.\textsuperscript{494} To this history of the kings of Britain is appended a genealogy of Roger Mortimer (b. 1374, the subject of Iolo’s poem) which traces his lineage through Ralph Mortimer (b. 1198) and Princess Gwladus Ddu (Ralph’s wife and the daughter of Prince Llywelyn the Great of Wales), ultimately to King Arthur and Brutus. As the elaborate rubrication and illumination on f.51v to 52r demonstrate, Roger’s biological link with Arthur and the ancient British kings seems to have been largely the point of this genealogy, and Gwladus’s ancestry is the only maternal line to be so elaborately traced in the manuscript.

\textsuperscript{492} Johnston, \textit{Iolo Goch Poems}, n.105, p.175.
\textsuperscript{494} Giffen, ‘Cadwalader, Arthur,’ p. 111.
Figure 4: Chicago, University of Chicago Library MS 224, f.51v-52r. The 'Regis Brittonum' of Mortimer's ancestry begin at the bottom of 52v; King Arthur's place in Mortimer's genealogy is rubricated for emphasis in the far bottom right of 52v. Image courtesy of University of Chicago Library Special Collections Research Center; used with permission.
The Mortimers did more than merely trace their lineage to King Arthur. The same manuscript records many events in the life of Ralph and Gwladus’s heir, another Roger Mortimer (b. 1231), including an intriguing description of a knighting ceremony for his sons in 1279 on f.53v. Roger entertained hundreds of guests for three days at Kenilworth where he held a Round Table and an Arthurian style tournament in which, the manuscript notes, Roger was unsurprisingly victorious. A contemporary chronicler describes the tournament with no small amount of contempt: ‘Dominus Rogerus de Mortuo Mari, innumerabili multitudine militum et dominarum apud Kennilewtake congregata, famosissimum celebravit convivium profusissimis expensis, inutilibus tamen, quod rotundam tabulam milites vulgari nomine consueverant appellare, armorum exercitio valedicens. Celebratio rotundae tabulae facta est die Jovis in vigilia Sancti Michaelis et post dies paucos sequentes’ [Lord Roger de Mortimer, having gathered together an innumerable multitude of soldiers and lords in Kenilworth, celebrated the most renowned—however useless—feast with lavish expenses, which knights used to call by the common name ‘Round Table,’ with valedictions and drills in arms. The Celebration of the Round Table took place on Thursday on St. Michael's Eve and followed for a few days].

The Mortimer family continued this tradition of holding Round Table style tournaments for years to come: ‘Anno gratiai MCCCXXVIII, anno regni regis Edwardi tertii secundo apud Bedfordiam Rotunda Tabula tenetur per Rogerum de Murtuo mari.’ [In the year of our grace 1328, the second year of the reign of King Edward III, Roger Mortimer

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held the Round Table at Bedford.) It seems that the Mortimer Round Table tournaments were common enough by the fourteenth century that the chronicler had no need to define the origins or describe the events which typically occurred at a Mortimer ‘Round Table.’

To the Mortimer family, the Arthurian legend was a source of power and prestige, a signifier for the pan-insular legitimacy necessary to rule Britain. As always, the legend is inspirational and infinitely adaptable—molding perfectly onto Roger Mortimer’s mixed cultural heritage. By comparing Mortimer to King Arthur, Iolo is pandering to Roger’s imperial and literary assumptions; he is confirming the validity of Mortimer’s claim to the throne and, importantly, he is acknowledging that some versions of the Arthurian legend lend themselves to that validity. However, though it is obvious why Mortimer would appreciate being called ‘gras Arthur’ by Iolo, it is not precisely clear why Iolo would wish to employ a version of the Arthurian legend that conflicts so starkly with ‘Arthur anrheithiwr’ [Arthur the ravager] and the ‘serthedd... Arthur’ [wanton... Arthur] he describes elsewhere. Given the above evidence of Iolo’s life and preferences for patrons, however, I would like to suggest that these varied employments of the Arthurian legend reflect something of Iolo’s ‘i-medled’ border identity.

As we have seen, Iolo would be among the first to recognize that describing someone as ‘Arthur’ has deep rooted symbolisms with both positive and negative connotations. Anyone familiar with the varied Arthurian tradition in Wales and the Marches would recognize the potential, however slight, for an implicit criticism in the comparison. We might assume, given the complex allusions of his poetry and his previous

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characterizations of Arthur, that Iolo expected his Welsh-language audience to recognize the subtext of ‘Arthur’ and extrapolate a backhanded compliment from this reference. Iolo is nothing if he is not shrewd, and it is tempting to read Iolo’s Arthurian ‘compliment’ as the quip of a colonized Welshman, secretly laughing at the overlord who has only superficially perused and tragically misread the cultural heritage of his subjects.

Though I would never completely dismiss the potential for a captious subtext of some sort in this or any other of Iolo’s poems, the remainder of Iolo’s compliments to Mortimer here (and there are many) lack the interpretive range to support that particular subtext. If Iolo is being sly in comparing Mortimer to Arthur, it is the only instance of such double-speak in the poem. Moreover, it should be emphasized that Roger Mortimer is precisely the assertive, domineering, conservative style of ruler that Iolo favored in both Welsh and English patrons. However, if we accept that Mortimer is being genuinely and amiably compared to an unequivocally positive King Arthur, then (given the previous examples of Arthur Iolo has employed) we are forced to question the very nature of the ‘Arthur’ that Iolo has in mind. Is Arthur the antithesis of a dutifully laboring plowman, that apex of Christian civilization? Is he the lustful and wanton foil for saints? Or is he the superlative of monarchial virtues, the head of the Round Table, ‘uwch o’r ynys hon’ [more advanced/higher than this island]? 

It is not that Iolo is being disingenuous in his admiration of Mortimer, nor is Iolo confused about the Arthurian legend; he has simply chosen a different King Arthur to compare Mortimer to than he contrasts rebelling peasants to. There is certainly a tradition of the Arthurian legend in which Arthur is a powerful and positive king, just as there are traditions of Arthur as a destructive and sinful warlord. These multiple Arthurs coexist
precariously within the same poetic repertoire in the March of Wales; equally powerful and useful but continuously slipping beneath their woefully inadequate signifiers. We can see Iolo shifting between versions and traditions of the Arthurian legend as he moves from one poetic topic to another—one tradition does not nullify the other, but their multiplicity calls into focus the inherent tension between discordant traditions and cultures in a multicultural environ such as the March, a tension which is certainly appreciable in Iolo’s poetic corpus.

Iolo’s Arthurian mediations are symbolic of the identity mediations ongoing within the March of Wales as a whole, including his own. Poets of the fourteenth-century March of Wales like Iolo have just as many identities as does King Arthur. Iolo’s Arthur is the lascivious Arthur of the saints’ lives and Arthur the Ravager and the Arthur of Caerleon who holds magnificent chivalric tournaments and leads Grail quests. Iolo may seem to be contradictory when he praises Edward III as having ‘anian Bedwyr’ [Bedivere’s nature] and then praises Owain Glyndŵr’s court as ‘nef yn nes’ [near to heaven], then admonishes rebelling peasants for acting like ‘Arthur anrheithiwr’ [Arthur the ravisher]—but the contradictions are illuminating rather than deceptive: they are vestiges of the fractured state of identity in the fourteenth-century March of Wales, where the recently intensified conceptions of political and ethnic identity simultaneously create and divide the identities of those caught in the figurative middle. Iolo must bracket and mediate the competing Arthurian traditions in the same way that he must bracket and mediate his own allegiances and identities—identities which are shaping and are shaped by the Arthurian legend.
'I be not now he pat ȝe of spoken’: Identity Mediations in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*

The poem widely hailed as the superlative of Middle English romance, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, is roughly contemporary to the poetry of Iolo Goch. The Gawain Poet and Iolo differ in language, style, immediate subject matter, poetic genre and probably (though not necessarily) intended audience. There is no hard evidence that either poet was aware of the other’s work, and I will not argue for one’s influence or even knowledge of the other here.\(^{497}\) My presentation of them together owes to their shared geo-political origins and their similar presentation of Arthurian literature as a constitutive ideological entity within a fractured and ‘i-medled’ border culture.\(^{498}\) Like Iolo Goch, the Gawain Poet explores the plight of the individual immersed within competing border identities, identities which he contextualizes through the mixed cultural heritage of the Arthurian legend in the March contact zone.

My reading of the poem’s mediation of identity draws from and contributes to two important trends in the rich history of *Sir Gawain* scholarship. At least since Donald Howard’s seminal essay ‘Structure and Symmetry in *Sir Gawain,*’ the focus upon Gawain as an individual immersed within immensely powerful yet inherently conflicting ideologies has been a primary focus for scholarship: ‘the poem suggests in this way how the worldly

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aims of chivalry and the other-worldly aims of Christian life are ideally interrelated, but, for fallen man, potentially incompatible.'\textsuperscript{499} In Howard’s formalist approach, the elaborate structure and symmetrical symbolism in the poem emphasize the inherent contradictions between the culturally dominant forces of ‘chivalry’ and ‘Christian life’ for the individual who must navigate them: the ‘fallen man’. More recently, but along similar lines, Laura Ashe has explored these Christian/chivalric conflicts in SGGK within the context of the historical evolution of chivalric virtue and ‘Christianity, that rival moral code’\textsuperscript{500} Gawain’s dilemma, as Ashe writes, elaborately problematizes some of the core values of medieval romance—and, by extension, the values of the audience of medieval romance: ‘this finest of the English romances functions, ultimately, to expose the absurdity of its inherited ideals.’\textsuperscript{501}

Though chivalry and Christianity are the most cited examples of the conflicting hegemonies troubling Gawain, scholars have identified other ideological structures that the \textit{Gawain} Poet interrogates. Taking as his focus the various translations of ‘luf talkyng’ in line 927, Conor McCarthy demonstrates how Gawain is precariously positioned between the expectations of courtly love (‘conversations about love’) and the host(ess)/guest relationship (‘noble conversation’)—both of which are perfectly acceptable understandings of the phrase. The boundary between courteous, noble conversation (which is often about platonic love) and sexualized, amorous repartee are blurred, and the expectations of Gawain to be true to Bertilak (the knight-lord relationship) conflict with the expectations of Gawain to be true to the Lady (the courtly love/love service relationship). The poet even

\textsuperscript{500} L. Ashe, ‘\textit{Sir Gawain and the Green Knight} and the Limits of Chivalry,’ \textit{The Exploitations of Medieval Romance}, ed. L. Ashe et. al. (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2010), pp. 159-172 (p. 171).
\textsuperscript{501} ibid., p. 172.
expressly calls this ideological tension into focus: [Gawayn] cared for his cortaysye, lest craþayn he were, And more for his meschef ȝif he schulde make synne And be traytor to þat tolke þat þat telde aȝt.\textsuperscript{502}

Expanding the range of Sir Gawain's individual negotiations of hegemonic structures even further, Randy Schiff's explores the efficacy of 'Troy' as symbolic capital in the poem. Scholarship derivative of Rees Davies and Thorlac Turville-Petre's respective works has long associated the 'Trojan origin' framework in Sir Gawain as a nationalist enterprise, whereby this 'English' writer appropriates the 'Celtic' Arthur and Brutus to encourage a fantasy of singular, stable descent from Trojan rule to fourteenth-century English monarchy. Instead, Schiff argues the elaborate Trojan framing complicates any 'teleological assumptions of English insular dominance' and 'assumes the constitutive undecidability of British ethnicity.'\textsuperscript{503} The 'Trojan foundations,' which in other works might gesture towards a historically viable and totalizing sense of individual and societal identity, under the Gawain Poet's lens becomes the vehicle for exposing the fictions of ethno-historically contiguous narratives. Political and ethnic difference within the British archipelago are exposed rather than elided by the 'Trojan' heritage.

My own reading recognizes that poet's negotiations of 'chivalry', 'Christianity', 'courtly love', 'Trojanness' and other identity markers are of central concern to the poem, and I offer further evidence for these negotiations below. However, I do not see the Gawain Poet as \textit{sui generis} in his deconstruction of totalizing hegemonies through Arthurian themes. By emphasizing the poet's 'i-medled' provenance and contextualizing Gawain's

\textsuperscript{502} Sir Gawain and the Green Knight (hereafter SGGK), ed. M. Andrew and R. Waldron, The Poems of the Pearl Manuscript, 5\textsuperscript{th} edn, (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press), ll. 1773-75.

\textsuperscript{503} Schiff, 'Unstable Kinship: Trojanness, Treason, and Community in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,' College Literature 40.2 (2013): 81-102.
trials of character through the inherently divisive and fractured state of the Welsh March, I hope to ground this important theme within a more comprehensive framework. Put simply, I do not think we should find it especially surprising that one of the densest and most nuanced explorations of individuality within competing ideologies occurs in an Arthurian work from the Anglo-Welsh border—the Gawain Poet had plenty of precedents to draw from.

If the above particular scholarly trend has, perhaps, neglected to emphasize the poet’s provenance as being relative to these identity negotiations, the same cannot be said for the second trend of Sir Gawain scholarship my reading draws from and contributes to. Indeed, I would venture that there are more readings of Sir Gawain’s origin and regionalism than any other work within the Middle English corpus. Though other locales have been put forward, by far the most preferred location associated with the dialectal features of the poems of London, British Library MS. Cotton Nero A.x is ‘somewhat north of Staffordshire,’ in Cheshire. At least since James Hulburt’s early assessment of the poem, a sense of regional distinctiveness and superiority has been an implicit acknowledgement in many following readings of Sir Gawain: the baronial ‘patriotic’ readers of Sir Gawain in the culturally distinct north were politically and culturally opposed to the southern French-based politics and poetry.

Honing in on specific historical events, situations, and people, Michael Bennett and John Bowers have also read Sir Gawain as a conflict between regions—Camelot/London

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and Hautdesert/Cheshire.\textsuperscript{506} Turville-Petre sees the initial, acknowledged difference between the two regions systematically elided by a cohesive chivalric community at the end of the poem: ‘perhaps we live in the north-west Midlands, or perhaps we live in Logres; the matter is of no consequence because our regionality is subsumed under the international chivalric code to which we all adhere’.\textsuperscript{507} Under Turville-Petre’s assessment, the localism of the poem is initially asserted so that it can be suppressed by a more expansive nationalist ideology.

In contrast, Robert Barrett has emphasized regional identity in \textit{Sir Gawain} both in the broad context of nearly 500 years of Cheshire writing and within the particular context of the Scrope-Grosvenor controversy, a court case in which a shared coat of arms provoked affirmations of regional superiority and distinction for the Cheshire plaintiff. Barrett likens the battle to the symbolic functions of the pentangle and the green girdle in \textit{Sir Gawain}. The fantasy of national cohesion in the beginning of the poem unravels into ‘a mixed cultural situation, one in which the regional and the national coexist alongside a great many other categories of identity’.\textsuperscript{508} As Barrett demonstrates, \textit{Sir Gawain}—like other writings from the region—is self-consciously aware of its distinctiveness from other localities.

Though situating \textit{Sir Gawain} within its English regional context has constituted the bulk of the localist readings, the proximity of the poet and the poem to Wales and Welsh


\textsuperscript{507} T. Turville-Petre, \textquoteleft The \textquoteleft Pearl\textquoteright- Poet in His \textquoteleft Fayre Regioun.\textquoteright\textquoteright Essays on Ricardian Literature: In Honour of J.A. Burrow, ed. A.J. Minnis, Charlotte C. Morse, and Thorlac Turville-Petre (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), pp. 276-294 (p. 289).

\textsuperscript{508} R. Barrett, \textit{All Against England: Regional Identity and Cheshire Writing, 1195-1656} (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2009), p. 150.
culture has also been explored. As the poem features perhaps the most prominent
description of Wales in Ricardian poetry, it is hardly surprising that critics have generated
a number of post-colonial readings of the poem and its portrayal of ‘British’ culture. Most of
these readings tend to center around Gawain’s journey from Camelot to Hautdesert in Fitt
III:

    Now ridez þis renk þurþ þe ryalme of Logres,
    Sir Gauan, on Godez halue, þaþ hym no gomen þoþt—
    Oft leudlez alone he lenez on nyþtez
    Þer he fonde noþt hym byfore þe fare þat he lyked;
    Hade he no fere bot his fole by frythez and dounez
    Ne no gome bot God bi gate wyth to karp—
    Til þat he neþed ful neghe into þe Norþe Walez.
    Alle þe iles of Anglesay on lyft half he haldez;
    Ouer at þe Holy Hede, til he hade eft bonk
    In þe wyldernesse of Wyrale. Wonde þer bot lyte
    Þat auþer God oþer gome wyth goud hert louied...
    þe knyþt tok gates staunge
    In mony a bonk vn bene.
    His cher ful oft con chaunge,
    Þat chapel er he myþt sene.509

The strange mix of very vague geography (Logres, contrayez straunge) and specific (Norþe
Wales, the multiple iles of Anglesay, and Wyrale) has attracted some fascinating

509 SGGK, I. 690-712.
interpretations of the poem.\textsuperscript{510} As Patricia Ingham has argued, the journey is an important conflation of the strange and familiar which is peculiar to border areas such as the March: ‘ethnic difference is fantasmatic; it appears and disappears.’\textsuperscript{511} Similarly, Ordelle Hill argues that the journey metaphorically prefigures England’s engagement with the Welsh people; it is ‘not only a path for understanding a land and people that had hitherto been known only as difficult and barbaric, but also a means of understanding themselves.’\textsuperscript{512} For these scholars and many others, the scene (and the poem as a whole) is an encapsulation of England (figured by Gawain) developing and confirming its own identity and ideology in opposition to the distinctive areas of Wales, Cheshire and the border region in general.

I agree with Ingham and Hill that there is a strong element of national political allegory in this journey, but the emphasis on the broader nationalistic concerns has inadvertently overshadowed the individual negotiations within those national hegemonies that the poem explores. Gawain’s journey is primarily a personal one. As all medieval journeys, it is a compilation of internal and external steps to a comprehension of oneself within the wider social world. The ‘wormez’, ‘wolues’ and ‘wodwos’ he battles are the monsters of his psyche, the evils that plague all great men.\textsuperscript{513} The border serves as the locus, or at least the gateway (‘gates straunge’), to this internal journey which began at Camelot and will continue even after he arrives at Hautdesert. If on one level Gawain


\textsuperscript{511} Ingham, \textit{Sovereign Fantasies}, p. 118.

\textsuperscript{512} Hill \textit{Looking Westward}, p. 76.

\textsuperscript{513} \textit{SGGK}, ll. 720-721.
represents England, he is also an individual immersed in a region of competing allegiances, ideologies, and opposing explanations to those ideologies—a region very much like that of the Gawain Poet. Like the other poems within Cotton Nero Ax, Sir Gawain is predominantly concerned with the negotiation of individual identity within competing hegemonies and interpretations of the world. The polyvalent individualities of Gawain and other characters in the text (to which I now turn) are implicit reflections of the complex state of identity politics in the fourteenth century March of Wales.

Gawain’s trials of character and identity do not begin or end with his journey to Hautdesert, and the establishment and mediation of identity is not limited to our titular hero. No major character of this work has a stable or singular sense of selfdom; behind every character lies another personality, another dimension, and another existence. This multiplicity acknowledges the divisiveness that competing hegemonies and mixed heritages have upon the each individual; and, as is the case with Iolo Goch’s corpus, the multicultural Arthurian legend is an important touchstone by which characters negotiate their own identity within that mixed environment.

As a minor example to begin with, early in the poem, when the Green Knight learns it is the famous Sir Gawain who will take up his challenge and strike the blow, he is surprised and pleased enough to blurt out a curse: “‘Bigog,” quoþ þe grene knyȝt, “Sir Gawan, me lykes þat I shal fange at þy fust þat I haf frayst here.”’514 The line is almost a throw-away, essentially a rephrasing of what the Green Knight said in the wheel of the previous stanza: ‘Sir Gawan, so mot i þryue As I am ferly fayn þis dent þat þou schal dryue.’

514 SGGK, ll. 390-391.
The Green Knight is pleased that Gawain will deliver the blow and the poet emphasizes that pleasure by repeating his praise.

The curse, ‘Bigog’, is an odd one, however. Most translators render it as ‘By God’, and there are plenty of examples of ‘gog’ as a corruption of ‘God’ from sixteenth century English texts to support that translation. However, there is only one other text in Middle English which apparently uses ‘gog’ as a corruption of ‘God’, from a Towneley play, and that example is also rather unusual.\textsuperscript{515} If the Green Knight’s ‘bigog’ is a corruption of ‘By God’, then the \textit{Gawain}-poet records the oldest example of it by nearly a century and never repeats the phrase. However, ‘Bi God’ in its uncorrupted form is repeated throughout \textit{Sir Gawain} by other characters numerous times, and when the Green Knight unambiguously references the supreme deity of Christianity in line 2239, the normal spelling is used.

Perhaps a more literal rendering of the line would keep ‘Gog’ as a proper noun. The noun appears throughout the Bible as referencing individual people and wide regions, but was primarily understood in late antiquity and the Middle Ages to be a city, frequently aligned with another city, ‘Magog’, which together take particular prominence in the Book of \textit{Revelations}. Understood as a reference to the corrupt and fallen Biblical city, whom Satan will gather together for the Final Battle, the Green Knight’s allusion could be taken as an insulting comparison with the luxuriant and immature court of Camelot in \textit{Sir Gawain}.\textsuperscript{516}

\textsuperscript{515} Oxford English Dictionary Online (OED) and The Middle English Dictionary Online (MED), s.v. ‘gog.’
\textsuperscript{516} The line is from \textit{Revelations}, 20. 7, reads: ‘et cum consummati fuerint mille anni solvetur Satanas de carcere suo et exibit et seducet gentes quae sunt super quattuor angulos terrae. Gog et Magog et congregabit eos in proelium quorum numerus est sicut harena maris’ [And when the thousand years shall be finished, Satan shall be loosed out of his prison and shall go forth and seduce the nations which are over the four quarters of the earth, Gog and Magog: and shall gather them together to battle, the number of whom is as the sand of the sea.] Douay-Rheims translation.
I would also like to suggest that the reference to Gog recalls the giant Gogmagog (or the plural giants Gog and Magog, as they later developed into), derived from Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *Historia regum Britanniae*. Given the elaborate staging of British history a few hundred lines before the Green Knight’s curse, where ‘Felix Brutus’ encounters ‘werre and wrake and wonder’ while founding Britain, that allusion would certainly not be out of context. For it is, indeed, in the context of founding Britain that Brutus and Corineus encounter the giant Gogmagog. In that text, after the remainder of Gogmagog’s race has been slaughtered by the Britons, Brutus stages a wrestling match in front of the entire court between Corineus and Gogmagog. In the match, Gogmagog manages to break the ribs of Corineus, but that feat does not afford him any tactical advantage:

‘Vnde Corineus compulsus in iram reuocauit uires suas et imposuit illum humeris suis et quantum uelocitas pro pondere sinebat ad proxima littora cucurrit. Deinde, summitatem excelsae rupis nactus, excussit se et praedictum letabile monstrum, quod super humeros suos ferebat, infra mare proiecit. At ille, per abrupta saxorum cadens, in mille frusta dilaceratus est et fluctus sanguine maculauit. Locus autem ille, nomen ex praecipitatione gigantis adeptus, Saltus Goemagog usque in praesentem diem uocatur.’

This goaded Corineus to fury and, summoning all his might, he lifted the giant on his shoulders and ran to the nearby shore as fast as his burden would allow. Coming to the edge of a high cliff, he hurled over the fearful monster he bore on his shoulders, casting him into the sea. As he fell down the rocky crag, the giant was torn into a
thousand pieces and stained the sea red with his blood. This place took its name from the giant’s plunge and is still called Goemagog’s Leap.\(^{517}\)

The structural symmetry between Gogmagog and the Green Knight is similar enough to warrant further comment: the king of Britain’s most enthusiastic knight readily takes up a challenge of single-combat with a ‘giant’ from a far-flung region of Britain, a giant who is exceptional in strength (‘tantae uirtutis existens quercum semel excussam uelut uirgulam corili euellebat [so strong that he could loosen and uproot an oak tree as if it were a twig of hazel]) and appearance (‘staturae duodecim cubitorum’ [twelve cubits tall]), but who nonetheless only inflicts minor injuries on the knight.\(^{518}\) Moreover, the single-combat takes place in front of the monarchical court and is staged not for punishment or trial, but strictly for entertainment: ‘Hunc Brutus uium reseruari praeceperat, uolens uidere luctationem ipsius et Corinei, qui cum talibus congredi ultra modum aestuabat’ [Brutus had ordered that (Gogmagog’s) life be spared because he wanted to see him wrestle with Corineus, who was always most eager to fight giants].\(^{519}\)

The outcomes of these two stories are, of course, notably different. Whereas Gawain will go on to encounter the monster but leave him unharmed in his far flung geopolitical reaches and return to Camelot (arguably) a changed man, Gogmagog’s lot is much different. Within Geoffrey’s characteristic history and conquest by nomenclature, Gogmagog’s name is inscribed onto the very shore where his material presence—the bloody bits of flesh and bone bashed upon the rocks—will give way to the immaterial memory of the genocidal conquest of the giants and societal progress of the Britons. The shoreline is a fitting locale


\(^{518}\) ibid., I.21.

\(^{519}\) ibid., I.21.
for his demise, for as the bloody tide ebbs from Totnes, taking the disfigured remains of Albion’s Giant race with it, the rising tide of British sovereignty follows close upon—for a time at least.

The Green Knight is, in a way, the ephemeral reanimate of Gogmagog, the monstrous alterity necessary for the court’s maturation, the folkloric demon requiring decollation/castration for heroic achievement, and the ghastly reminder of Fortune’s ever-changing imperial favoritism. The ‘Bigog’ curse connects the Green Knight’s own situation, his own sense of identity and purpose, to that of Gogmagog—if only briefly. The connection is not and cannot be totalizing. The Green Knight has other identities and serves other functions as well. The short aside layers his character’s identity with other identities from Arthurian works, accruing disparate and often contradictory symbolic meanings. ‘Gog’ is one more token of identity, drawn from and read through Arthurian literature, which defines (and complicates while defining) identities in the border text.

Though all major characters in Sir Gawain are subject to complicated identity mediations, the primary emphasis of the theme is on Gawain. His harrowing journey is just one portion of his identity formation and mediation—those trials of character will continue with even more peril and consequence when he arrives at Hautdesert. The problem with Gawain’s formative process is that he cannot escape the presuppositions of his personality—he is always-already ‘Gawain’ when he arrives at Hautdesert, and the ‘Gawain’ they know him as does not always match the ‘Gawain’ he considers himself to be. As soon as he is identified as ‘Wawen’ at the welcoming feast, certain expectations are
made of Gawain: ‘Now schal we semlych se sleȝtez of þeweþ And þe teccheles termes of talkyng noble... I hope þat may hym here Shal lerne of luf-talkyng.’\textsuperscript{520}

Certainly Gawain had demonstrated his courteous manners and noble conversation in the hours since he arrived at Hautdesert before he was recognized, but to expect such superlative courtly demeanor from a guest never before encountered would be a character judgment far beyond the ability of any host. However, Bertilak and his companions have met Gawain before and—though the narrative may lead us to believe that this is Gawain’s premiere sojourn in the chambers and halls of Hautdesert—he has in fact visited the castle many times before in the pages of Arthurian literature read by Hautdesert’s inhabitants.

It is in fact through Arthurian literature that Gawain’s identity is not only interpolated but also purposefully altered. The Lady begins to break down Gawain’s resistance to her wooing (and his own sense of self) through presenting expectations that would be made of him in French Romance. When Gawain fails to kiss her before parting, she chastises him:

‘Bot þat þe be Gawan hit gotz in mynde!’

‘Querfore?’ quoþ þe freke, and freschly he askez, Ferde lest he hade fayled in fourme of his castes....

‘So god as Gawayn gaynly is halden And cortaysye is closed so clene in hymseluen, Couth not lyȝtly haf lenged so long wyth a lady Bot he had craued a cosse by his cortaysye, Bi sum towch of summe tryfle at sum talez ende.’\textsuperscript{521}

\textsuperscript{520} ibid., ll. 916-927.
The ‘talez ende’ that the lady references is both ‘the close of a speech’ and is also, importantly, ‘the end of a tale’: specifically the end of a sultry tale of Gawain’s womanizing exploits which are so well documented throughout French romance. Ad Putter notes numerous parallels of these scenes of temptation, including Gerbert de Montreuil’s romance which ‘reads almost like a handbook of seduction,’ and the First and Fourth Continuation. Putter’s analysis of the temptation scenes convincingly locates the Lady’s literary inspirations, but more importantly, Putter emphasizes the effects the self-conscious literary precedents take upon Gawain’s individuality: ‘It poses a threat to Gawain.... Misrepresented in the language of the Lady, who speaks with the powerful backing of a long-standing literary tradition, Gawain faces the loss of his identity.’

The notion that Gawain’s literary identity presupposes his individual identity continues in the evolving relationship between Gawain and the Lady. She later encourages Gawain to talk of love, as he is ‘knowen oute’, to be the ‘tytelet token and tyxt of her werkkez’—to be the ‘title, gloss and the very text of the works’ in which he is written. In an oblique anticipation of Jacques Derrida, the Lady sees ‘nothing outside the text’ in her interrogation of Gawain; her Gawain must be the literal/literary signifier of French Romance, and must woo and kiss and hold the love of multiple ladies. This is despite the fact that the Gawain standing in front of her is apparently a virgin, and when she accuses him of having another lover, he swears by the patron saint of celibacy: ‘Þe knyȝt sayde: “Be

521 ibid., ll. 1294-1301.
523 ibid., p. 114.
Sayn Jon,” (and smepely con he smyle), “In fayth I welde [lemmans] riʒt non, ne non wil welde þe quile.”

Interestingly, despite his attestations of being a ‘different’ Gawain, his ultimate response to the Lady is to acquiesce to her literary interpolations: ‘I schal kysse at your comaundement, as a knyʒt fallez, and fire lest he displese yow; so plede hit no more.’ As Putter points out, it is no coincidence that at the moment Gawain begins to imitate the French literary Gawain who figuratively preceded him to Hautdesert, Gawain’s pronouns switch to the third person—‘lest he displese yow.’ Gawain seems to recognize the segmentation of his own identity into that which was formed by French Arthurian Romance and that which is presently being formed within the poem—and his choice is to then emulate the preconceived literary identity.

Another important moment in the poem which highlights the poem’s mediation of fractured, mixed literary identities comes near the close of Gawain’s tale. As we know, Gawain is ultimately able to resist the seductions of the Lady but accepts a magic green girdle which could supposedly protect him from the deadly return blow he is to receive on New Year’s Day. When the Green Knight lifts the freshly sharpened blade over the hero’s fair neck, Gawain ‘Shranke a lytel with þe shulderes for þe scharp yrne.’ The flinch would be an understandable reaction for any normal person, but this Gawain is not allowed to be normal. The Green Knight then proceeds to reprimand Gawain for shunning his literary precedents: ‘Þou art not Gawayn’ quoþ þe gome, ‘þat is so goud halden, þat neuer arȝed for

524 SGGK, ll. 1788-91
525 ibid., ll. 1303-4. My emphasis.
526 ibid., 2267.
no here by hylle ne by vale, Such cowardise of þat knyȝt cowþe I neuer here! ¹⁵²⁷ Yet again, Gawain is told that he is not being himself—or, at least, he is not performing the identity which readers have come to expect of him in literary works. The literary Gawain invoked by the Green Knight, however, is not the same seductive playboy of French Romance that Lady Bertilak prefers, but seems more akin to the famously fearless Gawain of English battle poetry.

The Green Knight’s Gawain is Laȝamon’s Walwain who, when in Emperor Lucius’s tent and surrounded by the entire Roman host, draws his sword to split the skull of a back-talking Roman knight; then, while fighting off the entire army with only two other knights, Walwain taunts his enemies while lopping off Roman heads like thistle tops: ‘betere inc weoren inne Rome, for þus we eou scullen techen ure Bruttisce speche!’¹⁵²⁸ Or, perhaps the Green Knight has the Gawain of the Alliterative Morte in mind who, when mortally wounded and surrounded by Mordred’s men, ‘Letand as a lion he launches them through,’ slashing his sword Galuth through the wall of Saracen bodies so he can grapple with Mordred himself in hand to hand combat.¹⁵²⁹ Certainly, that Gawain ‘neuer arȝed for no here.’

It needs hardly to be pointed out that the Walwain of English battle poetry is as different from the courtly, courteous Gauvain of the French tradition as he is from the snippets of the tradition of Gwalchmei ap Gwyar we have from the Welsh literature; and all of these Gawains are positively distinct from the scared and confused knight baring his

¹⁵²⁷ ibid., ll. 2270-72.
neck to the shining green axe blade in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. As a major character in a medieval Arthurian romance, Gawain is undeniably constituted by the previous iterations of his literary identity—especially within the geopolitical context of the March of Wales where so many “Gawains” are available within the literary and folkloric repertoire. Yet, at the same time that these literary identities *create* Gawain, they *divide* and fracture his core conception of himself. He is left to vacillate between those literary identities as he vacillates between his various ideological allegiances in the poem—to emulate each literary identity as a transcendent signifier, only to have the signifier deconstructed in favor of another literary identity in the next scene: ‘Þaȝ I be not now he þat ȝe of speken—To reche to such reuerence as ȝe reherce here I am wyȝe unworȝy, I wot wel myseluen—Bi God, I were glad and yow god þoȝt At saȝe oþer at seruyce þat I sette myȝt To the plesaunce of your prys; hit were a pure joye.’ Gawain is simultaneously mixed (*i*-medled) and divided between competing hegemonies and competing cultures, torn asunder by the Arthurian tradition which constitutes his imaginary existence in the first place.

This, then, is the formative connection I see of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight’s* to the March of Wales—not through pagan traditions of green men or ‘Celtic’ head cults or sovereignty goddesses of a largely mythologized past; nor, I must stress, through contact with the ‘exotic’ Welshman (who was never particularly exotic to the Englishman until Matthew Arnold made him so). The characters who surround Gawain and demand that he conform to their preconceived notions of a solidified literary identity create and divide Gawain in the same way that England and Wales and Normandy created and divided

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530 ibid., ll. 1242-1243.
cultural identity in the March of Wales throughout the Middle Ages. Those cultural and ethnic identities, like the diversified literary identities of Arthurian literature, were exacerbated in the decades following the 1283 Conquest, becoming more and more distinct and loaded in each iteration of their development. But as those external identity markers became more and more distinct and intensified, the sense of division it must have created for the culturally, politically and ethnically mixed population in the March of Wales was simultaneously exacerbated.

This ‘new’ Arthurian legend in the March has changed somewhat from previous formulations of the legend in the same geographic and political arena. It is not that Iolo and the Gawain Poet are originative in recognizing the multicultural origins of the Arthurian legend—Laȝamon described an Arthur who brandished a Welsh spear, ‘Ron,’ while wearing an English helm, ‘Goswhit.’\textsuperscript{531} Nor are these poets particularly innovative in appealing to a diverse audience—Geoffrey of Monmouth’s Arthurian court is as Cambrian as it is Angevin. But their unique depiction of the implicit and explicit effects of that cultural multiplicity and competing hegemonies on the individual is a distinct development from previous iterations of Arthurian border literature. The newfound senses of regional and national identity were—as they had been for centuries—interrogated in the Arthurian legend of the March of Wales; however, as these poets remind us, those interrogations did not happen in a human-less vacuum.

\textsuperscript{531} Laȝamon, Brut, 10544-10554.
Epilogue: Of Borders and Nations

“A nation without a border is not a nation. There must be a wall across the southern border [of the United States of America].” – Donald J. Trump, US Presidential Candidate.532

“We want to govern our own country. We want to make our own laws . . . and we want to control our borders, and that now is what must happen.” – Nigel Farage, UK Independence Party Leader.533

To put it mildly, it is an interesting time to be working on the concept of borders in Western society. “The border” has, of course, always been an important talking point in political discourse on the nation in Western society; but it has taken an unprecedented center stage in the two most important political events of 2016: Britain’s vote to leave the European Union (Brexit) and the United States Presidential Election. On the eastern side of the Atlantic, the perceived need to “control our borders” and “take our country back” dominated the rhetoric of the “Leave” campaign. Similarly, the Republican candidate for the US Presidency, Donald Trump, has made “a wall across the southern border” with Mexico a central issue of his campaign. Although I do not want to overly conflate these two political issues, it occurs to me (and many others) that they are both derivative of similar economic and social developments, and that both appeal to similar nationalistic impulses. That “the

“border” should form a central conceit in this rhetoric of imagined communities and, at times, imagined problems is hardly surprising from the perspective of this dissertation.

Yet it is not really the US-Mexican border or the English Channel that figures in these discussions of borders, it is instead two separate and much more abstract borders. The first border is the one we now, supposedly, currently have: they are porous, leaky creatures straining under the weight of the masses of septic freeloaders and thugs clamoring to infiltrate and undermine our national sovereignty. Trump has consistently labeled Mexican immigrants as “criminals” and “rapists,” and, as proof, his campaign website describes a grisly gang rape and murder of a white woman by two illegal Mexican immigrants in gruesome detail. The Leave Campaign’s *Breaking Point* poster, which showed masses of Syrian refugees walking into Europe is admittedly more subtle, but approximates a similar political sentiment: they are coming, they are going to take your jobs, and they are going to destroy your country.

The second border cited in these discussions is their ideal border, the border that voting for “Leave” or for Donald Trump would supposedly enable: for Trump, this border looks like a “great, great wall” which is linear and impenetrable—a clear and unmistakable division of “us” and “them.” Brexit campaigners have been less prone to visualizations, but a point-based system—whereby potential immigrants would be ranked according to British preference—has been offered by Farage and others as a means of keeping out those who are unwanted. The free movement of workers under the European Union privileges the “brickie from Budapest over a surgeon from Sydney”, as Farage describes it.534

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534 Nigel Farage, “THIS is how we should control our borders, says Ukip leader Nigel Farage”, thesun.co.uk, published March 6, 2016, https://www.thesun.co.uk/archives/
Regardless of how these imaginary, ideal borders would look and operate, their cumulative effect would be the same on both sides of the Atlantic: they would enable the UK and the US to root out the invading Other and become great, sovereign nations once again.

Farage and Trump’s point that the nation state and traditional culture is under a heinous assault due to porous borders has obviously been compelling for many people; as has been their subsequent point that a clearly-defined and tightly-managed border could breath new life into the traditional culture of the nation state. Saving “the border,” for these politicians, is more than about saving jobs or money or homogeneous communities—to save the border is to save the foundations of the nation state itself.

Now, before the counterarguments of progressivism and tolerance pass our lips; before we essay to enlighten these bewitched congregations with the profits of pluralism, or the perils of xenophobia or racism or fear mongering; before we illuminate the flaws in their arguments—the outright lies they’ve been told and the pitfalls in their retrogressive path to past nationalisms; before we sigh, shake our heads and write off their rhetoric as the death throes of a shrinking demographic, do we dare to pause and concede that Donald Trump and Nigel Farage might actually be right? That prolonged contact with a myriad of cultures and a porous, leaky border might actually enable a society to redefine the foundations on which nationalism, ethnocentrism and the sanctified Nation State are built? That the development of hybrid cultures in borderlands can help to dismantle the parochial conceits which consistently drive oppression and intolerance? That certain kinds of borders—like the medieval March of Wales—can, in fact, tear apart “their” countries at the seams?

politics/1074805/this-is-how-we-should-control-our-borders-says-ukip-leader-nigel-farage/.
The changes in cartography, in technology, but most importantly in politics have apparently obviated the need for officially designated “border zones” in Western civilization. Borders are either open, as in continental Europe, or they are monitored by advanced physical and technological infrastructure. We have also been encouraged to think that individuated, intermediary contact zones like the March are no longer necessary from a cultural perspective either; travel is considerably easier now than in the medieval period, and (despite the best efforts of these and other politicians) the trend of globalization through information technology is hardly subsiding.

However, border zones like the March of Wales offered something considerably more than a *Lonely Planet*, two-week tour of another country or a Facetime chat with business partners abroad. It offered a perpetual space of inquisition, experimentation, and scrutiny for neighboring sovereignties over scores of successive generations. To be clear, cultural contact zones certainly exist now, and in a much more dispersed form than in the Middle Ages (inner-city ethnic neighborhoods, universities, the internet); and those zones are playing an important role in the long-term breakdown of the nation state as a force of regressive politics—even as they occasionally inspire short-term surges of those same politics.

Nonetheless, all contact zones are not created equal: the gerrymandered East Indian neighborhood might boast a great selection of curry shops and a cultural center, but it has little political clout as a community within a sovereignty; university studies are temporary and only available to a certain section of the population; and the cultural diversity of the internet is no substitute for physical presence. The March provided a contact zone that provoked a range of responses—from the reactionary, separatist rhetoric of Nennius to the
political canniness of Geoffrey of Monmouth to the dispersed, muddled identities of Iolo Goch and the Gawain Poet—and the physical space was both durable and powerful not only for the individuated community in the March, but for the sovereign communities politically invested in that border. The March of Wales and other borders like it are likely to remain a vestige of the past, but the lessons they offer to the present will be viable for the foreseeable future.
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