

## The “Anarchy” of King Arthur’s Beginnings: The Politics that Created the Arthurian Tradition

Geoffrey of Monmouth’s historically inaccurate account of the first kings of Briton, the *Historia regum Britanniae*, is famous for originating many well-known stories of English literature, such as Shakespeare’s *King Lear*. The most enduring episode of Geoffrey’s pseudo-history is his story of King Arthur, which provides the first literary description of the legendary king and his rule. Geoffrey took a folkloric Welsh king and transformed him into an imperial figure, establishing the literate, Latin version of the Arthurian legend. Geoffrey’s *Historia* was the first step in the Arthurian literary tradition, yet it was a tradition that Geoffrey may not have intended to begin. Considering Geoffrey’s contemporary Britain and the content of the *Historia*, especially attending to events that have no historical basis and that may have been invented by Geoffrey himself, other, more political, motivations begin to emerge. The way Geoffrey utilized these invented historical episodes, such as when the Briton kings conquer the Roman Empire, reveals political machinations hidden underneath Geoffrey’s expressed desire to write down the history of Britain’s first Celtic kings. The *Historia* is rightly famous for its documentation of the legendary Arthur, but the politics that underlie Geoffrey’s creation deserve exploration as well. It is remarkable that one of English literature’s most prominent characters arose from 12<sup>th</sup>-century political observations that were imbued into the *Historia*’s pseudo-historical account of a period set centuries before Geoffrey’s own contemporary time.

In this essay, I describe a connection between the political ideologies of Geoffrey’s *Historia* and the literary tradition it began. Geoffrey’s *Historia*, when viewed in the historical context of the 12<sup>th</sup> century, has subtle objectives beyond Geoffrey’s stated purpose: to record the ancient Briton kings whose “deeds are worthy of everlasting fame.”<sup>1</sup> Viewing Geoffrey’s writing within its larger

---

Andrew Pringle is a Kansas native who graduated from Kansas State University in 2018 with a B.A. in English-Literature with a Pre-Law emphasis. The research for this essay began in Medieval Literature, a course taught by Professor Wendy Matlock of the Kansas State English Department. The essay was refined after months of working with Prof. Matlock as part of an independent research project. Andrew will begin law school in the fall of 2019, with the goal of concentrating in family law. He hopes to combine a law education with his experience in the humanities to build a career that is centered around assisting the underrepresented.

<sup>1</sup> Geoffrey of Monmouth, *History of the Kings of Britain*, ed. & trans. Michael A. Faletra (Ontario: Broadview Editions, 2008), 41.

political and social climate makes it hard to imagine that Geoffrey sought only to be the progenitor of the medieval Arthurian tradition, yet it is this contribution for which Geoffrey is most remembered. I intend to show how Arthur transcended his creator and what politics from his *Historia* may still influence Arthur's tradition. I will do this in three stages: first, a summarized look at Geoffrey's historical period, the Anarchy, to understand the contemporary events that influenced Geoffrey's writing, second, how the politics of this period manifest themselves within the *Historia* through the norms of 12<sup>th</sup>-century Anglo-Norman society that Geoffrey wove into his ancient setting, and finally, discuss how the legend moved beyond Geoffrey and demonstrate that the tradition retains some politics of his time, focusing on the one prominent example of Mordred's character. These three sections will show that the Arthurian tradition has outgrown both the Anarchy and Geoffrey, such that it is difficult to find substantial connections between the Anarchy and later medieval Arthurian texts, let alone the modern adaptations of Arthur. Still, certain foundations, such as Mordred, remain centuries later as reminders of Arthur's political roots in Geoffrey's *Historia*.

## The Anarchy

Geoffrey wrote the *Historia* during the events that would act as the prologue of the Anarchy, a series of civil conflicts that began with Stephen of Blois' usurpation of his uncle Henry I's throne, a throne declared to Henry's daughter Matilda. After Henry I's death in 1135, Stephen consolidated power quickly, securing support from the church, nobility, and citizenry. The people of London, specifically, overwhelmingly supported Stephen and his rise to power, and his rule would prove to be an economic boon for the city.<sup>2</sup> Stephen rallied his support and was crowned king in the same month that Henry I died, while Matilda had only been able to make it from Anjou to Normandy, not even into Great Britain itself, before her birthright was taken from her.<sup>3</sup> On the grounds of legitimacy, Stephen did have a right to the throne. He was a close relative of Henry I, the most fit out of his brothers to be crowned king, and a favored individual in Henry's court.<sup>4</sup> What made Stephen's power grab problematic is that he had sworn an oath of fealty, along with other nobles, to Matilda after she was named Henry's heir.<sup>5</sup> He had supporters who claimed he was released from his vows by

---

<sup>2</sup> Oliver H. Creighton and Duncan W. Wright, *The Anarchy: War and Status in the 12<sup>th</sup>-Century Landscapes of Conflict* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2016), 220.

<sup>3</sup> Creighton and Wright, *The Anarchy*, 21.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

Henry I before the former king's death, but most knew that this was untrue.<sup>6</sup> Matilda had her own supporters, but they usually came in the form of foreign powers, such as her husband Geoffrey of Anjou and her uncle David, king of the Scots. Welsh raiders and noble uprisings against Stephen, though unconnected to Matilda, probably served her cause as well.<sup>7</sup> However, the support of London and other powerful nobles gave Stephen the domestic foothold he needed to retain his power for nearly two decades.

The *Historia*'s first appearance is dated to be around 1138, the same year Robert of Gloucester, Geoffrey's patron and illegitimate son of Henry I, defected to his half-sister Matilda's cause. Thus, it was completed before the battles that would mark the most turbulent years of the Anarchy, but civil unrest was already in full effect. King David was the first to attack Stephen's kingdom after his coronation in 1135 and David would continue to be a thorn in the king's side for years to come.<sup>8</sup> David's invasion of northern England marked the beginning of a long list of foreign aggressions and insurrections that defined Stephen's reign, one of the main causes for why this English historical period was branded "the Anarchy." The latter part of 1138 saw Stephen suppressing rebellions that supported Matilda and the Angevin cause as well as more localized uprisings. These smaller uprisings normally involved nobles who wished to settle disputes left over from Henry I's reign.<sup>9</sup> Stephen spent the majority of his rule trying to maintain his power through constant campaigning, yet he never quite established a nation-wide peace. Because of these never-ending conflicts, historians have characterized Stephen's rule as weak and disorganized.

To designate the term "Anarchy" to the conflict between Stephen and Matilda is somewhat misleading, however, as it is difficult to define this period as a civil war or even an "Anarchy."<sup>10</sup> The term "anarchy" was not even associated with the period until William Stubbs applied it in the 1870s, more than seven hundred years after the conflict was resolved.<sup>11</sup> Stephen's rule was not lawless, as the title would imply. Although there were many insurrections during Stephen's reign, none of these became full-fledged civil wars. The period would even be more accurately described as a foreign invasion. Her half-brother, Robert, backed Matilda but her main supporter was her husband, Geoffrey of Anjou. The Normans and Angevins already had a deep disdain for one another and this succession issue served as the perfect opportunity for Angevin intervention in

---

<sup>6</sup> J.S.P Tatlock, *The Legendary History of Britain: Geoffrey of Monmouth's Historia Regum Britanniae and its Early Vernacular Versions*, (New York: Gordian Press, 1974), 426-427.

<sup>7</sup> Creighton and Wright, *The Anarchy*, 38-39.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>10</sup> Creighton and Wright, *The Anarchy*, 30.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

Normandy and Britain.<sup>12</sup> The Anarchy's conflict was eventually resolved with a truce between Stephen and Matilda stating that Matilda's son, Henry of Anjou, would inherit the throne after Stephen. Henry did take the crown as Henry II upon Stephen's death, beginning the Angevin line of kings. Therefore, the "civil war" technically ended with a foreign power wresting control of Britain away from the Norman kings. The Angevins did not even consider Stephen a proper ruler, being written off as an illegitimate ruler in their histories.<sup>13</sup> The Treaty of Winchester, the document that ended the Anarchy, acted to erase the Anarchy and, by extension, Stephen's rule. It required that all castles built during the conflict be destroyed and all land confiscated by Stephen be restored to those who held the land during Henry I's reign, almost as if the treaty was meant to portray a history where the crown was handed directly from Henry I to Henry II without any interruption.<sup>14</sup> The history of Stephen's reign shows that it is hard to define the Anarchy as any one conflict, much as it is difficult to define the exact purpose of Geoffrey's *Historia*. Despite the period's ambiguous nature, it is clear that there was civil conflict both before Geoffrey wrote his chronicle and after it began to circulate, as is seen in Stephen's disregard for Henry I's command to put Matilda on the throne and countless noble uprisings. This period of history may not have been a true anarchy, or even a true civil war, but it did see a time of massive civil unrest.

### **Reflecting Contemporary 12<sup>th</sup> Century Politics and Society in the *Historia***

A careful reader of the *Historia* will find that Geoffrey integrated 12<sup>th</sup>-century politics, culture, and society into his chronicle. The beginning turbulence of the Anarchy and civil war, especially, have parallels within his chronicle, as do certain traits of the Norman court that appear in the courts of Arthur and other kings, and questions about legitimate queenship. Thanks to the vast amount of invented historical material found in the *Historia*, there are plenty of opportunities for Geoffrey to incorporate contemporary 12<sup>th</sup>-century themes. This is most likely one reason why Geoffrey wrote in the chronicle style. A medieval chronicle focused on "a year-by-year account of the actions of king and princes as well as the events...that take place as those years unfolded."<sup>15</sup> Histories, on the other hand, were more like biographies, focusing on a single figure and the events of

---

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 30-31.

<sup>13</sup> Robert Bartlett, *England Under the Norman and Angevin Kings: 1075-1225* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000), 11.

<sup>14</sup> Creighton and Wright, *The Anarchy*, 29.

<sup>15</sup> Andrew Galloway, "Writing History in England," in *The Cambridge History of Medieval English Literature*, ed. David Wallace (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 268.

their life. Histories also were composed of “elegant language”<sup>16</sup> while chroniclers were meant to be much simpler in their writing. However, Geoffrey’s use of language changes depending on the state of Britain in the *Historia*, as seen in his descriptions of civil upheaval. Geoffrey’s chronicle eventually led to a renewed interest in not only Arthur, but also in the history of the ancient Celtic kings. As Andrew Galloway notes, “Geoffrey’s work managed to provoke earnest historical writing, involving intensive comparison, enquiry, and intercalation with other works.”<sup>17</sup> Geoffrey’s *Historia* became a major influence for the many vernacular translations from his chronicle’s original Latin as well as future writers of ancient Briton history, and the political themes he included played a major role in this influence.

Geoffrey went to great lengths to make his *Historia* appear to be a true history. While there were contemporary scholars of the time who denounced Geoffrey’s chronicle, the most well-known example being William of Newburg, Geoffrey constructed the *Historia* to appear as a legitimate chronicle. The clearest and first sign of historical legitimization is Geoffrey’s use of Latin. As Geoffrey was a cleric, it is no surprise that he wrote the *Historia* in Latin, the universal language of the church in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, but also the language used in official documents, as well as some written story-telling.<sup>18</sup> Geoffrey also legitimizes his work by citing his own multilingualism and an obscure written source, claiming that the Oxford Archdeacon Walter, which he went about translating into Latin for the sake of his *Historia*, gave him “a certain very ancient book in the British language”.<sup>19</sup> The mention of such a source and an Oxford authority condoning it would have been meaningful for Geoffrey’s noble audience. Not only does he cite a legitimate, although unverifiable, source for his chronicle, he shows that he is a learned man who can comprehend multiple, ancient languages and can move in-between them.

Geoffrey also frequently refers to Gildas and Bede, historians who covered similar periods of history to the one that the *Historia* recounts. Geoffrey makes sure to mention that he is the first to focus on the ancient Briton kings, though, establishing himself as the gatekeeper of their specific history. At the end of the *Historia*, he cements his status as their sole historian by asking that “all be silent in regard to the kings of the Britons, since they do not have that book in the British tongue which Walter the Archdeacon of Oxford obtained from Wales.”<sup>20</sup> Geoffrey’s request is an unexpected one, going so far as to address directly other chroniclers who would have likely had no desire to write on the ancient kings of

---

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 256

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Bartlett, *England Under the Norman and Angevin Kings*, 500.

<sup>19</sup> Geoffrey of Monmouth, *History*, 41.

<sup>20</sup> Geoffrey of Monmouth, *History*, 217.

Britain.<sup>21</sup> Indeed, the subject matter of the *Historia* was one that was largely unexplored by historians and chroniclers.<sup>22</sup> The history of the ancient Britons, called the Welsh by Geoffrey's period, did not have their own history, while the French, Normans, and Saxons had all been significantly documented. The Welsh were certainly not seen as heirs to the Great Isle, as they were considered a barbarous people in 12<sup>th</sup>-century Britain. Geoffrey himself states that the Welsh name could be derived from "their own barbarity,"<sup>23</sup> and the term "Welsh" is a descendant of the Anglo-Saxon word for "slave."<sup>24</sup> Geoffrey's medieval intellectual claim is made stranger by the fact that similar remarks were "almost unparalleled in medieval historians."<sup>25</sup> This unusual request can also be interpreted as politically motivated. Geoffrey expertly secures himself a platform from which to espouse his own political rhetoric, a platform which no other historian or chronicler can use to interject his own views. Geoffrey wanted the narrative of his *Historia* and the politics involved in it to have only one representative voice: his own.

Despite the ancient setting of Geoffrey's history, much of what he depicts resembles the Norman courts of the 12<sup>th</sup> century, the court culture with which Geoffrey would have been familiar. Imperialism and semblances to the Norman court are seen throughout his history, even though his account ends a few centuries before William the Conqueror came to Britain. Conquest, presented both positively and negatively by Geoffrey, is one of the major actions of the *Historia*. The greatest kings, particularly Arthur, expand Britain through conquest, which acted as a standard to show how well a king rules his kingdom. Conquest also serves as a marker of Britain's unity; if the king has time to conquer foreign powers, as Arthur nearly does to Rome, then the Briton state is experiencing a period of civil tranquility. This positive connection to conquest would have resonated with the Norman audiences. The Norman Conquest was what established Norman culture in Britain, and imperial expansion would have been an important facet of the Anglo-Norman identity.

Geoffrey utilized aspects of Norman court culture to portray advanced Briton civilization in the *Historia*, establishing a link between contemporary Norman power and the heroes of his chronicle. This understanding helps justify why the courts of the ancient Britons in Geoffrey's *Historia*, especially Arthur's, resemble the Norman courts. Specifically, in the way that the Briton kings

---

<sup>21</sup> J.S.P Tatlock, "Geoffrey of Monmouth's Motives for Writing his 'Historia,'" *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 79, no. 4 (1938): 701, accessed June 8, 2018, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/984946>.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 699

<sup>23</sup> Geoffrey, *History*, 217.

<sup>24</sup> Michael A. Faletra, ed. and trans. *The History of the Kings of Britain*, 217 n1.

<sup>25</sup> Tatlock, "Geoffrey of Monmouth's Motives," 701

conducted their courts. For example, J.S.P. Tatlock noticed how “the court is constantly on the move, both in the *Historia* and in history...[it is] desirable to live first on one estate then on another.”<sup>26</sup> Considering the state of his kingdom, it is no surprise that Stephen’s court moved frequently. In the *Historia*, such a practice is seen when Arthur, after much deliberation, decides to host the feast of Pentecost in the city of Caerleon,<sup>27</sup> a proto-Camelot. King Arthur’s court was also an international marvel, with emphasis on feasting, tournaments, and chivalry. Geoffrey claimed that under Arthur’s rule Britain “surpassed all other kingdoms in its courtliness,”<sup>28</sup> where knights bettered themselves for the affections of women and women were purer in their love for men. The knights’ betterment usually takes place in mock battles during tournaments, a practice that thrived under Stephen’s reign and saw its development from military training to entertainment in the 12<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>29</sup> A knight proving his worth through tournaments is a trademark of courtly romance and an important part of the Arthurian tradition. While these elements are not a central focus of Geoffrey’s *Historia*, its themes of knightly strength and dignified courtly behavior proved wildly popular with the Norman nobles.<sup>30</sup> The aristocratic culture arising in the 12<sup>th</sup> century was based on displays of wealth and finery,<sup>31</sup> and Arthur’s court displays luxury regularly, such as feasts served “by one thousand young men...clad in ermine.”<sup>32</sup> Arthur’s court was not only a reflection of this rising court culture but depicted an ideal court of extravagance, a court so far ahead of its time that its members lived in a chivalric utopia. Geoffrey’s Arthur began the tradition of seeing the medieval court as a romantic culture in both literature and reality, even though the modes of noble power, in particular possessing land, wealth, and military prowess, did not change. In addition, thanks to works such as Geoffrey’s, a perception of history began to emerge in the 1140s that the Normans and Anglo-Saxons shared common ancestors.<sup>33</sup> In the same way that Geoffrey’s ancient Briton people had a natural born right to Britain in the *Historia*, the Normans were beginning to associate themselves with an Anglo-Saxon past and a right to the great isle as well.

---

<sup>26</sup> Tatlock, *Legendary History of Britain*, 293.

<sup>27</sup> Geoffrey of Monmouth, *History*, 174.

<sup>28</sup> Geoffrey of Monmouth, *History*, 176.

<sup>29</sup> Creighton and Wright, *The Anarchy*, 180.

<sup>30</sup> Bartlett, *England Under the Norman and Angevin Kings*, 250.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 235.

<sup>32</sup> Geoffrey of Monmouth, *History*, 176.

<sup>33</sup> Paul Dalton, “The Topical Concerns of Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *Historia Regum Britannie* History, Prophecy, Peacemaking, and English Identity in the Twelfth Century,” *Journal of British Studies* 44, no. 4 (2005): 709, accessed June 13, 2018, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/431937>.

It is also worth mentioning that the courts of the Briton kings bear no resemblance to the courts of 12<sup>th</sup>-century Wales, the descendants of the historical ancient Briton kings.<sup>34</sup> It would have made more historical sense to incorporate the traditions of the Welsh into the court of Arthur and the other kings, yet Geoffrey obviously wanted there to be a Norman connection between his constructed history and his contemporary time. The Norman influence certainly would have helped ground Norman readers within the narrative of the *Historia's* fictional events, as well as draw the political parallels between the ancient Britons and current Anglo-Norman rulers. No matter his reasons, using the Normans as a model undoubtedly contributed to the *Historia's* popularity.

Another contemporary political issue that arises within the *Historia* is the legitimacy of queenship, specifically if not explicitly Matilda's. According to Geoffrey, natural law is one of the most important factors in choosing a ruler and is a necessity if Britain will remain unified under a given king's rule. With Geoffrey's constant reminders that disregarding the natural laws of succession will only bring discord to Britain, the *Historia* can be seen not only as a warning against civil war, but also as a call of support for Matilda. Matilda was the legal heir of Henry I, a ruling that King Stephen openly disobeyed when he took the throne. One of the reasons that Stephen was able to take power was because the idea of a female ruler was difficult to accept for many of the nobility. Geoffrey never directly addresses Matilda in his *Historia*, despite both her connection to his patron Robert of Gloucester and her political presence at the time of the *Historia's* completion, probably because Stephen was king during the composition and publication of the *Historia*. In fact, Geoffrey praised Stephen and his rule in the *Historia's* dedication, although this message to Stephen survives in only one manuscript, the Bern MS. The only other individual addressed in the dedication is Robert of Gloucester. Robert was Geoffrey's patron, so dedicating the work to him over Matilda was expected. Further, appealing to Robert over Matilda was not a specific case, since Matilda was rarely considered an influential political figure in the conflict over her own throne, and other chroniclers tended to write more about her brother Robert than her.<sup>35</sup> This tendency arises despite the fact that Matilda had a head for military tactics and leadership, as displayed by her capture of Lincoln Castle in 1141.<sup>36</sup> Even if Geoffrey desired to write to Matilda, Robert was the safer and more sanctioned choice at the time. While he did not explicitly name her, Geoffrey did support Matilda's rule through his chronicle.

Despite what Geoffrey's contemporaries may have thought about a woman as ruler, Geoffrey made sure to include several ruling queens in his

---

<sup>34</sup> Tatlock, *Legendary History of Britain*, 293

<sup>35</sup> Creighton and Wright, *The Anarchy*, 157.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

*Historia*. While one can hardly consider the *Historia* a feminist text, the inclusion of legitimate female rulers signal that Geoffrey is compiling a case for Matilda with his history. Geoffrey went out of his way to set an example for powerful queenship, recounting many queens in his *Historia* who rule well and alone. Women rulers were unusual and rarely seen in the recorded early history of the British, French, or Welsh.<sup>37</sup> Indeed, as J.S.P Tatlock notes, there was little true historical precedent for Geoffrey's many ancient Briton queens.<sup>38</sup> A well-known example would be that of Cordelia, King Leir's third and most loved daughter. Geoffrey's story differs from its Shakespearean counterpart, the major deviation being that Leir reclaims his power after being outed by his two oldest daughters and Cordelia rules Britain well for fifteen years after him. Cordelia still meets a tragic end when her nephews overthrow her peaceful rule through civil war. Heartbroken after losing her kingdom, the queen commits suicide. As Fiona Tolhurst notes, there is an interesting parallel between the stories of Cordelia and Matilda.<sup>39</sup> Both have their thrones taken from them by male relatives, and their thrones usurped because key political players were "outraged that Britain was now subject to a woman."<sup>40</sup> While Stephen and his cohorts probably were not as explicit about this belief as Cordelia's nephews, resistance to the idea of a woman ruler enabled Stephen's ascent to power. While there are other queens of Geoffrey's *Historia*, some who rule well and others who even raise armies to take the throne by force, Cordelia's unfortunate circumstances are the most like the resistance Matilda faced in Geoffrey's contemporary Britain.

The main political theme of the *Historia* is civil war, and Geoffrey frequently uses episodes of his history to criticize civil division and those that cause it. Considering that the *Historia* was written before the main activity of the Anarchy, which started in 1139, Geoffrey was more than likely imagining scenarios of violence that could arise if a war over the crown became a reality. Conquest especially is written about often, and it is described either "positively" or "negatively" depending on the historical moment. "Positive conquest" is when Britain is united, prospering, and militarily superior. Belinus and Brennius are such an example. When Brennius' submits to his brother, the rightful king, it creates a British kingdom powerful enough to subjugate the Roman Empire. "Positive" conquest typically appears in the standard chronicle style, with an impersonal report, as we see in the account of Belinus and Brennius conquering Rome, which they recount without embellishment up until the siege of Rome itself.

---

<sup>37</sup> Tatlock, *Legendary History of Britain*, 286.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 287.

<sup>39</sup> Fiona Tolhurst, "The Britons as Hebrews, Romans, and Normans: Geoffrey of Monmouth's British Epic and Reflections of Empress Matilda," *Arthuriana* 8, no. 4 (1998): 81, accessed June 13, 2018, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27869400>.

<sup>40</sup> Geoffrey of Monmouth, *History*, 67.

One excerpt from the brothers' story tells, "The Romans therefore resolved to come out of the city and meet the enemies on the field of battle. Just then, even as they were arranging their battalions more effectively, the consuls arrived ahead of schedule."<sup>41</sup> The important thing to remember is that this is a siege of the city of Rome, which would have been a momentous historical victory for the Britons if this event had actually occurred. Geoffrey describes this siege with the aplomb of an objective transcriber, detailing the events of the battle in a meticulous style that makes the siege more like a business meeting than a conquest. This is the way a chronicler should write, and the reader sees this style in the "positive" moments of the *Historia*. It is when there is civil discord that the reader sees Geoffrey's diction and style take a more artful and darker turn.

There are other episodes within the *Historia* that describe violence and battle to nightmarish extremes. These are the examples of "negative" conquest. One passage details the reign of Kareticus, who was a "lover of civil wars."<sup>42</sup> His rule's imbalance brings foreign invasion from a king of Africa, Gormund, who eventually laid waste to the entire island of Britain: "his fury did not cease until he had ravaged almost the entire surface of the island from sea to sea."<sup>43</sup> Geoffrey uses apocalyptic language to depict the violence that results from civil war, creating an intensity that is absent from episodes displaying British military supremacy and British unity. Another aspect of civil war within the *Historia* is that it often goes hand in hand with the betrayal of relatives: their kin, causing chaos, betray both Leir and Arthur. Other kings, such as Locrinus, betray their wives through adultery and, as a result, cause crises in succession. Civil war almost always occurs as a consequence of familial betrayal, drawing a distinct parallel between the events of the *Historia* and current events in Geoffrey's own Anglo-Norman Britain.

One of the starkest examples of betrayal in the *Historia*, combining both the political and the familial, that has remained constant throughout the entirety of the Arthurian tradition after Geoffrey is Mordred betraying his uncle King Arthur. In the *Historia*, Arthur entrusts Mordred with his kingdom while Arthur goes to confront the Roman force that attempts to subjugate Britain. Arthur defeats the Roman army and moves on to conquer other nations, setting his sights on Rome. This campaign signifies Arthur's unified rule that allows for positive conquest. His campaign is interrupted before he takes Rome by news of Mordred acting as "a tyrant and a traitor."<sup>44</sup> Arthur returns to his kingdom to fight Mordred, with both falling in their final battle along with their supporters, a battle that Geoffrey

---

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 77.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 201.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 202.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 196.

describes as a “great carnage.”<sup>45</sup> Knowing the origins of the Anarchy, it is hard not to see a comparison between Mordred and Stephen of Blois. Both are related to the king as a nephew, both are entrusted with a command, and both betray this command when the king “leaves.” Further cementing that Mordred is an interpretation of Stephen is a message written by Geoffrey to Robert, Earl of Gloucester. After introducing Mordred’s betrayal of Arthur in the *Historia*, Geoffrey directly addresses Robert, reminding the earl that he is only relating what he found in “the abovementioned source in the British tongue.”<sup>46</sup> This is the only time that Geoffrey addresses Robert, other than in the *Historia*’s dedication and ending. Geoffrey makes an appeal to Robert here because he realizes the parallel that is about to be drawn as Arthur and his nephew go to war. Geoffrey wants to alert his patron that what Robert is about to read has contemporary significance. J.S.P Tatlock remarks on Geoffrey’s message to Robert in his writing, stating, “Therefore, to Matilda’s chief supporter [Robert], Geoffrey would seem with equal emphasis and caution to hint an analogy, and his own sympathies.”<sup>47</sup> This small message to Robert can be read as Geoffrey’s secret confession of allegiance to Matilda. Geoffrey’s original depiction of Arthur’s final days and Mordred would be changed in later adaptations of the Arthurian legend, with Guinevere and Lancelot’s affair playing a much larger role in Mordred’s schemes. However, Mordred’s betrayal remains a fixed point in the Arthurian mythos as the character responsible for ending Arthur’s reign.

Geoffrey’s interest in Norman customs, his efforts to legitimize queenship, and his condemnations of civil strife show the political motivations he had for writing his chronicle. There is evidence to suggest other motives as well, of course. Geoffrey’s insistence that no other histories of the ancient Briton kings existed was a true one; the *Historia* was produced in a time of rapid historical documentation, which became dominant after the Norman Conquest.<sup>48</sup> Geoffrey may have been motivated by a desire for personal glory as the first chronicler of a previously unexplored historical period. If this were his ambition, it might help explain Geoffrey’s request at the end of the *Historia* that other chroniclers leave the history of the Briton kings only to him. There is also the matter of Geoffrey’s Welsh heritage. He may have felt a personal connection to this historical subject, despite his negative descriptions of the Welsh as a barbarous people. While these motivations are all valid, there are too many reminders of 12<sup>th</sup>-century politics to disbelieve that Geoffrey had a political agenda for his *Historia*. Yet Geoffrey’s *Historia* is not known for its status as a political text, but as the origin point of significant British literary works, especially the extensive literary tradition of

---

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 199.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 197.

<sup>47</sup> Tatlock, *Legendary History of Britain*, 427.

<sup>48</sup> Tatlock, *The Legendary History of Britain*, 428.

King Arthur. As there is a clear link between the *Historia* and Arthur, then one can assume that the politics of Geoffrey's chronicle had a part to play in beginning the legendary king's literary tradition.

### **The Arthurian Tradition Arising from Pseudo-History**

The specific politics of the Anarchy found in Geoffrey's chronicle, while functioning as important foundations for Geoffrey's Arthur and direct retellings of the *Historia*, have become less apparent in the Arthurian tradition as the struggle between Stephen and Matilda passed from both the Arthurian and cultural narrative. It is the Arthurian romances, not Geoffrey's Arthur, that contain the Arthurian elements most recognizable in literary culture. Yet, it is important to note the politics that survive beyond Geoffrey, aspects of the Anarchy that are so entrenched in the King Arthur narrative that they remain staples of the tradition. Since there are copious amounts of Arthurian literature to sort through, it is best to focus on three main areas of Arthurian texts in regard to Geoffrey: early vernacular translations of the *Historia*, the 12<sup>th</sup>-century Arthurian romances, and Thomas Malory's epic *Le Morte D'Arthur*, a text that behaves similarly to Geoffrey's *Historia* while also serving to establish the elements seen in the Arthurian narrative of today. An examination of these texts will show that despite Arthur's growth beyond the Anarchy, certain motifs from that political moment still exist within the tradition, particularly Arthur's traitorous nephew Mordred.

Geoffrey's influence grew to extend beyond its intended learned Norman audience through its vernacular retellings. The Latin *Historia* itself survives in 215 manuscripts,<sup>49</sup> showing how extensively it was read in its contemporary period and afterward. To illustrate further the *Historia*'s influence, that number does not indicate the works that were translated, influenced by, or adapted from Geoffrey's original work. The most well-known of these translations was the anonymous *Brut*, which saw a widespread vernacular dissemination of Geoffrey's work in English and French.<sup>50</sup> However, politics of Geoffrey's contemporary time were modified slightly in these retellings, as pointed out by Jane Zatta in "Translating the 'Historia.'" Zatta surmises that these early vernacular translations "inscribe a relationship between monarch and subjects different than that seen in their source [the *Historia*]," and stress "the harm that comes from kings who tend towards tyranny and the contribution of the vassals who restrain the power of the

---

<sup>49</sup> Richard James Moll, *Before Malory: Reading Arthur in Later Medieval England* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003), 12.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid*, 39.

king.”<sup>51</sup> This shift in political focus, caring less about the imperial nature and natural right of the king and more about the nobility that surrounds them, shows that Arthur still functioned as a vehicle for politics as well as a literary figure in the *Historia*'s adaptations. These adaptations all fell under the *Brut* tradition, so named for Geoffrey's Trojan founder of Britain, Brutus. This tradition, which includes the anonymous Prose *Brut*, Wace's *Roman de Brut*, and other chronicles, were all given life by Geoffrey's *Historia*. They also demonstrated that many different types of politics, not just those specific to the Anarchy, could be a part of King Arthur's story. The combination of Arthur's status and the political themes of Geoffrey's historical period created a popular history with mobile politics, where the political themes could be reshaped whenever a translator or adaptor saw fit to do so. It is only when the Arthurian romances, with their fictional distance from history, emerged that the association between Geoffrey, Arthur, and the politics of the Anarchy begins to disintegrate.

Based off the courtly descriptions given by Geoffrey for Arthur's court and its chivalric characters, it is unsurprising that Arthur's tales developed into poetic romances. Yet the romances present an Arthur that is much farther removed from reality than even Geoffrey's pseudo-history. Geoffrey's accounts of royal courts did anticipate some characteristics of the courtly romance, but the *Historia* is an epic history before anything else, so defined because Geoffrey wrote in the chronicle style. The Arthurian romances are set within Arthur's kingdom and rarely include any large-scale events outside of that sphere, such as continental conquest done by Arthur, focusing instead on individual Knights of the Round Table. Arthur himself is absent from a great deal of the action, normally functioning as a far-off royal authority who gives out quests than as a central character. Wace's translation, the *Roman de Brut*, departed from the detached writing of Geoffrey's chronicle style, introducing medieval audiences to the romantic side of Arthur while keeping Geoffrey's name attached to the work. Natalia M. Dolgorukova discusses Wace's translation in her article "First Works of Arthurian Literature in the 12<sup>th</sup> Century" and maintains that Wace fills the gap between the Arthur of the *Historia* and the Arthur of romance. Wace still contained a degree of historicism within his work as he was directly adapting the *Historia*. Yet, Wace's translation goes further into romance than Geoffrey's original, as Wace more heavily emphasized the importance of exhibiting courtly manners. Wace describes Arthur's mother as "Right courteous" and "noble of peerage," wherein Geoffrey typically only described women as beautiful.<sup>52</sup> With

---

<sup>51</sup> Jane Zatta, "Translating the 'Historia': The Ideological Transformation 'Historia regum Britannie' in Twelfth-Century Vernacular Chronicles," *Arthuriana* 8, no. 4 (1998): 150. accessed June 16, 2018, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27869405>.

<sup>52</sup> Natalie M. Dolgorukova, "First Works of Arthurian Literature in the 12<sup>th</sup> Century: At the Boundary between History and Fiction," *Forum for World Literature Studies* 8, no.2 (2016):

Wace, women in literature now had a new trait that made them attractive: courtly conduct. Wace could see the parallels to Norman aristocratic life in the original *Historia* and emphasized them, expanding Geoffrey's work to describe the smaller, romantic details along with the history that Geoffrey recounted.

Wace's translation, and other works like it, gave way to the actual Arthurian romances, such as those by Chretien de Troyes, the French poet from who originated the character Lancelot. Chretien's poetry showcases standard Arthurian romanticism, favoring Arthur's knights and their quests over any other aspect of Arthur's reign and removing Arthur from much of the action within these quests. It is difficult and premature to connect Chretien to Geoffrey: while it is certainly possible that the poet read the *Historia* or Wace's translation, he never points to either as an influence on his own work. Thomas Malory, on the other hand, was certainly influenced by Geoffrey's account of Arthur. Malory's *Le Morte D'Arthur* is the culmination of everything added to the Arthurian tradition after Geoffrey: Camelot, Lancelot and Guinevere, Merlin's larger role, the Lady of the Lake, and other familiar elements that did not appear in Geoffrey's original telling of King Arthur. Malory's version also sees Arthur battling the Romans, but his Arthur succeeds in conquering Rome early in the text. Malory's Arthur is essentially Geoffrey's, except that Malory narrates and expands on the story of the legendary king and his knights instead of including him as a prominent ruler in a large roster of different kings.

Essentially, Malory sits between Geoffrey and the Arthurian literature that is most recognizable today. Malory's work is also a return to Geoffrey, as it too embodies both the political and the epic, with Arthur's story now used to criticize another civil conflict: the Wars of the Roses. In Malory's epic, Arthur's kingdom is undermined by the conflict that arises between the factions of Arthur, Mordred, and Lancelot, much like the civil division caused by the Yorks and Lancasters. As with Geoffrey and the *Historia*'s vernacular retellings, Malory's Arthur serves as a politically charged warning against civil war. Even though Malory's work is culturally detached from Geoffrey's, as *Le Morte D'Arthur* was written for a different Britain that had a more romantic basis for Arthur, Malory is using Arthur for the same purpose that Geoffrey did. Malory employs the Arthurian narrative to critique civil war, while also making Arthur relevant to his contemporary Britain. Geoffrey began a tradition where Arthur acts as a vehicle for contemporary politics, the mythos behaving as a political tool that mirrors the time in which it is told. This can be observed in the way certain translators, such as Wace, approached the politics found in the *Historia*, and Malory is simply following in this tradition, even as his work depicts an Arthur that has further evolved from the *Historia*. Despite this similar purpose between the two authors,

Geoffrey's origination of Arthur has become less apparent, as the politics of the Anarchy became buried under the political and narrative additions of the translations, romances, and Malory's epic.

Even though both Geoffrey and Malory use Arthur to criticize civil war, it is more difficult to find a narrative link between the two works. When examining characteristics of the Arthurian legend in *Le Morte D'Arthur* and Malory's romantic sources, it is challenging to distinguish any of the original politics of Geoffrey's narrative finding their way into Malory's King Arthur story. The support for Matilda's queendom is harder to perceive since the only major queen figure of the story is Guinevere. Guinevere in the *Historia* is a cryptic figure at best; she is described as having "broken her marriage vows" to Arthur with Mordred, even though the same line makes it seem that Mordred had forced himself upon her.<sup>53</sup> Her relationship with Lancelot in Malory's text leaves little room for ambiguity, as it is a sexual affair for which both are punished with some form of religious repentance. The theme that has degraded the most from Geoffrey to Malory is probably Norman imperialism. The King Arthur of the romances and Malory's epic does conquer Rome and unite Britain early in his reign, but the focus remains on the Knights of the Round Table and their quests. Whereas two books are dedicated to Arthur's battles and conquests in the *Historia*, Arthur gets all these things out of the way as a young king, well before the main events of *Le Morte D'Arthur*. Malory cares more for individual knights' adventures, the trademarks of Arthurian romances. The only reason Arthur gets to be imperialistic for the first two books is because such things are no longer an issue; conquering other lands is more of an obstacle that must be taken care of before the main goal of questing. Some politically inspired themes from Geoffrey's time do remain, however. Arthur still functions as a political vehicle, used to comment on civil war, but the political focus shifts from Stephen and Matilda to the Yorks and Lancasters. In addition, the themes of familial betrayal and civil collapse, mirroring Stephen's betrayal at the start of the Anarchy, are still alive and well in the character of Mordred. In Malory, Mordred is a political schemer, using the affair of Lancelot and Guinevere to orchestrate division within the Round Table and, ultimately, Arthur's death. Malory's use of Mordred in *Le Morte D'Arthur* may be different from Geoffrey's, but it reflects the precedent that Geoffrey set for Mordred in the *Historia*: political confusion and strife breaking down a peaceful kingdom.

Geoffrey's use of Mordred, the fictional parallel of Stephen's usurpation, can be understood clearly when read in the context of the Anarchy. Whereas the episodes with queens may not be directly linked to Matilda and Stephen, Mordred's status as traitorous nephew, combined with Geoffrey's message to

---

<sup>53</sup> Geoffrey of Monmouth, *History*, 196. "Mordred had seized the throne of Britain and now took his wicked pleasure with Guinevere, who had broken her marriage vows."

Robert before relating the Battle of Camlann, points to Geoffrey's ultimate loyalties lying with Matilda. Geoffrey even created Mordred's relation to Arthur. Mordred is not Arthur's nephew in any pre-Galfridian work or recorded folklore, meaning that Geoffrey specifically gave Mordred the relationship that would define the character to this day.<sup>54</sup> Within the Arthurian tradition, Mordred is always a relative to Arthur, whether he be a nephew or incestuous son. For Geoffrey and his contemporaries, Mordred's status would have made it difficult not to think of Stephen, nephew to Henry I who made a vow to uphold his king's ruling only to break said vow as soon as the king is absent. Mordred's betrayal is also a key part of the Arthurian tradition, acting as the end to Arthur's utopian reign as king. Mordred is the fictional insert of the Anarchy's catalyst, Stephen's takeover of Matilda's rightful throne, and a strong example of a political motif that has been retained within the Arthurian tradition, even in the works that have long deviated from Geoffrey's original chronicle. Centuries of retelling Arthur's story have divorced the *Historia's* original politics from the Arthurian tradition, but the betrayal of Arthur's nephew Mordred, the narrative's representation of Stephen's historical betrayal, remains as one of the pillars of Arthurian literature.

## Conclusion

Arthur serves as the principal hero of the *Historia*, with more than two of the text's twelve books dedicated to him. Yet Arthur is still a means to an end for Geoffrey, a recognizable folkloric figure that he injected with the politics of the Anarchy to show the effects of civil discord. Despite Geoffrey's efforts to retain sole custody of his history, and by extension, Arthur, his account of the legendary king proved fated to rise beyond its origin in the *Historia*, with its utopian depiction of court, kingdoms, and knights. The Arthurian narrative took on a life of its own, with countless chroniclers and writers adding to and subtracting from the narrative based on their own political and social preferences after Geoffrey. The origin of Arthur, however, was born of 12<sup>th</sup>-century politics, specifically those of the Anarchy's first years. The remnants of the *Historia's* politics are rarely seen in modern Arthurian literature, but some aspects of these original politics, such as Mordred, remain as key features of the tradition. Arthur, too, remains a political vehicle, proving that a singular narrative can reflect a number of diverse political landscapes, even in societies radically different from the one the narrative was created in.

---

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 426.

## Works Cited

- Bartlett, Robert. *England Under the Norman and Angevin Kings: 1075-1225*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000.
- Creighton, Oliver H., and Duncan W. Wright. *The Anarchy: War and Status in the 12<sup>th</sup>-Century Landscapes of Conflict*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2016.
- Dalton, Paul. "The Topical Concerns of Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britannie* History, Prophecy, Peacemaking, and English Identity in the Twelfth Century." *Journal of British Studies* 44, no. 4 (2005): 688-712. Accessed June 13, 2018. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/431937>.
- Dolgorukova, Natalie M. "First Works of Arthurian Literature in the 12<sup>th</sup> Century: At the Boundary between History and Fiction." *Forum for World Literature Studies* 8, no.2 (2016): 273-290. Accessed July 13, 2018. <http://link.galegroup.com.er.lib.k-state.edu/apps/doc/A461068386/LitRC?u=ksu&sid=LitRC&xid=7cbe8217>.
- Galloway, Andrew. "Writing History in England." In *The Cambridge History of Medieval English Literature*, edited by David Wallace, 255-283. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.
- Geoffrey of Monmouth. *History of the Kings of Britain*. Edited and Translated by Michael A. Faletra. Ontario: Broadview Editions, 2008.
- James, Richard Moll. *Before Malory: Reading Arthur in Later Medieval England*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003.
- Tatlock, J.S.P. "Geoffrey of Monmouth's Motives for Writing his 'Historia'." *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 79, no. 4 (1938): 695-703. Accessed June 8, 2018. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/984946>.
- Tatlock, J.S.P. *The Legendary History of Britain: Geoffrey of Monmouth's Historia Regum Britanniae and its Early Vernacular Versions*. New York: Gordian Press, 1974.
- Tolhurst, Fiona. "The Britons as Hebrews, Romans, and Normans: Geoffrey of Monmouth's British Epic and Reflections of Empress Matilda." *Arthuriana* 8, no. 4 (1998): 69-87. Accessed June 13, 2018. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27869400>.
- William of Newburgh. "From William of Newburgh, *The History of the Deeds of the English (Historia Rerum Anglicarum)*." In *The History of the Kings of*

*Britain*, edited and translated by Michael A. Faletra, 289. Ontario: Broadview Editions, 2008.

Zatta, Jane. "Translating the 'Historia': The Ideological Transformation 'Historia regum Britannie' in Twelfth-Century Vernacular Chronicles." *Arthuriana* 8, no. 4 (1998): 148-161. Accessed June 16, 2018.  
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/27869405>.