To the University of Wyoming:

The members of the Committee approve the thesis of Janna Nickerson Kestner presented on April 9th, 2014.

Dr. Barbara Ellen Logan, Committee Chair

Dr. Isadora Helfgott, Committee Member

Dr. Susan Aronstein, External Department Member

APPROVED:

Dr. Brose, Department Chair, History

Dr. Paula M. Lutz, Dean, College of Arts and Sciences
The Performance of Chivalric Masculinity: the Plantagenet Kings and Maintaining Political Power examines how the Plantagenet kings of England between 1225-1399 maintained masculine and political power through their ability to properly emulate chivalrous characters like King Arthur. Based upon an examination of specific Arthurian texts, including *The Knight of the Cart* and *Gawain and the Green Knight*, I argue that kings who could properly emulate King Arthur, who acted as the keystone to the ideology of chivalry within the literature, and use the propaganda of chivalry, received and maintained access to power regardless of their other failures as a leader. Kings who could not emulate Arthur or use the propaganda of chivalry properly were either frequently challenged by other elite men and struggled to maintain political and masculine power or were subsequently deposed. Specifically through the close examination of Edward III and Richard II, I concluded that chivalry played a key role in a king’s ability to maintain power over other elite men and thus retain his position as king.
THE PERFORMANCE OF CHIVALRIC MASCULINITY: THE PLANTAGENET KINGS
AND MAINTAINING POLITICAL POWER

By

Janna Nickerson Kestner

A thesis submitted to the University of Wyoming in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTERS OF ARTS
in
HISTORY

Laramie, Wyoming
May 2014
Acknowledgements

I would like to thank, first and foremost, my husband Eric who has always supported my dreams, never asked questions, and been my partner in crime since the day we meet. I would also like to thank my advisor and committee chair, Dr. Logan, for her support, encouragement, and high standards. Without her, this project could not have been completed. Lastly, I would like to thank my cohort who sloshed through the pain and heartache with me until we all found success and accomplishment at the end of the long tunnel that is a Masters in History.
Table of Contents

Introduction ........................................................................................................................................... 1

Chapter 1 The Development of Chivalry: the Saxons, the Normans and the Anvegins .............. 24

Chapter 2 King Arthur: the Chivalric Performance of Elite Masculinity ........................................ 45

Chapter 3 The Plantagenets: Henry III through Edward II ........................................................... 67

Chapter 4 Edward III and Richard II: How the Performance of Chivalric Masculinity Defines a King ........................................................................................................................................ 86

Conclusion ........................................................................................................................................... 120

Bibliography ....................................................................................................................................... 127
List of Tables

Diagram 1.0 - Hierarchy of Medieval Society and Masculinity ........................................ 123
Table 1.2 - Chronology of the Norman and Angevin Kings ............................................. 124
Table 2.1 - Chronology of Arthurian Works 1138-1399 ................................................. 125
Table 3.1 - Chronology of the Plantagenet Kings to the Tudors .................................... 126
Introduction

In medieval England, the ideology of chivalry dominated the mind-set and cultural expectations of elite men. Previous scholarship, such as the work of Nigel Saul’s *Chivalry in Medieval England*, Robert Bartlett’s *The Making of Europe*, and Michael Prestwich’s *Plantagenet England* recognized the importance chivalry played between 1154 and 1399, and extensively critiqued the discourse of chivalry in comparison to the reality of knights’ violence. What the scholarship fails to examine is how kings used chivalry as a form of propaganda as a means to power which proved successful for some kings yet failed for others. Kings and other members of the elite, namely barons, dukes, earls, bishops, merchants, and wealthy landowners used chivalric masculinity as a form of propaganda to define and justify their right to power. If kings could successfully demonstrate their chivalric masculinity via the mystified violence of knighthood, and fulfill the characteristics their peers expected, then they were worthy of power.

Chivalry began as a discourse for armed cavalry within medieval Europe but eventually grew into a hegemonic ideology. The evolution of discourses into hegemonic ideologies begins with a discourse, a set of linked ideas or a way of thinking in a culture, which forms force relations of power as well as producing, transmitting, and reinforcing them. As per Michel Foucault, power is defined as:

The multiplicity of force relations immanent in the sphere in which they operate and which constitute their own organization; as the process which, through ceaseless struggles and confrontations, transforms, strengths, or reverses them; as the support which these force relations find in one another, thus forming a chain or a system, or on the contrary, the disjunctions and contradictions which isolate them from one another; and lastly, as the strategies in which they take effect, whose general design or institutional crystallization is embodied in the state apparatus, in the formulation of the law, in the various social hegemonies.¹

Power, then, is exercised through a social body or a set of social relations, and shapes cultural perceptions or ideas. A discourse is understood as a disciplining discourse when it has the power to reward or punish specific acts and behaviors. According to Judith Butler, a society inscribes disciplining discourses on bodies, as they either reward or punish the performance of discursively interpreted acts by said bodies. For example, Butler argues that masculine performances by female bodies are punished by others in the society for being acted out by female, not male, bodies. Thus, masculinity and femininity are tied to sexed bodies and, in fact, sex them. Once a disciplining discourse gains sufficient power to reinforce behaviors and joins with other disciplining discourses, a disciplining discourse can then be described as an ideology or a regime of cultural beliefs or perceptions. The moment an ideology becomes so embedded within a culture that it is no longer recognized as an ideology, the ideology becomes hegemonic according to Antonio Gramsci. A hegemonic ideology is a set of concepts that is naturalized, reified, and mystified within a culture. These discourses are no longer apparent as a cultural trait to members of the culture, but appear a natural thoughts or ideas to those they discipline.

Using the theoretical frameworks of Foucault, Butler, and Gramsci, this thesis argues that chivalry became a hegemonic ideology for the ruling elite during the Middle Ages; the study of chivalry, however, cannot be complete without a brief overview of the study of the discourses of normative masculinity in which chivalry was firmly grounded. The study of masculinity developed as scholars moved from a focus on women and minority groups (as a part of New Social History in the late twentieth century) to the study of gender discourse and gender’s impact upon history, both politically and socially. Masculinity evolved as a historical focus after Second Wave feminism, and although the study of masculinity created controversy and led some scholars to claim the study of masculinity returned the focus to the “study of men,” masculinity
as an ideology remains an important analytical tool in which to study society. The study of the discourse of masculinity allows scholars to understand both past and present societies through the examination of systems of power based upon gender divisions which are present within a society.

Joan Scott helped found gender theory for historians in 1986. Scott’s intervention allows historians to use gender as a category for analysis because gender has specific meanings, maintains social order, promotes change, and creates hierarchies despite being mystified for its practitioners. She argued that gender, present within all social relationships, “is a constitutive element of social relationships based on perceived differences between the sexes, and gender is the primary way of signifying relationships of power.” The study of gender gives greater understanding to historical knowledge through the investigation of discourse, ideology, and hegemonic ideology. The examination of how individuals define and practice gender in society, and how those gender discourses affect an individual’s material reality, allows historians to study identity formation within specific groups as well as gendered perceptions. The study of discourse reveals the ideologies and hegemonic beliefs within a given society. Because gender provides the foundation from which identity forms, gender structures behavior; because gender structures, and therefore dictates behavior, as Scott claimed, gender provides a means to power which allows individuals, based upon their performance of gender in a socially accepted form, to gain or lose power.

Scott’s definition of gender consists of two parts. Individuals negotiate, no matter how unconsciously, how to display their gender, thus gender is a subjective identity as well as a social

---

3 Gendered perceptions are the ways individuals of one gender are expected to act. Gender can be defined on the performance of behaviors that are ideologically linked to the sex of bodies.
identity. Scott maintains that one’s subjective identity of gender maintains one’s role in politics and social institutions, and shapes symbolic representations of power. As Scott asserted, gender is a primary category used by society to establish differences between individuals. Gender differences between individuals constitute the first split in access to power by signifying who has access and who does not based upon gender as “sex” or as a binary relationship between male and female. By examining the discourses associated with gender, scholars can better understand systems of power. As a system of power, gender “becomes implicated in the conception and construction of power itself” through discourse and ideologies. If gender plays a role in the creation of power, then gender can be used by scholars as an analytical category to understand a society’s power structure, and who has access to power, through the gendered discourses and ideologies present within.

Academics across many fields praised and criticized Joan Scott’s work for using gender as a category of analysis which provided new avenues to study societies but, to some, ignored the study of minority groups. Joanne Meyerowitz, examining the impact of Scott’s article in 2008, stated that “the growing number of studies of gender discourse pushed historians to recognize its pervasiveness, the diverse domains in which perceived sex differences appeared as model, analogy, and metaphor for hierarchical relationships, and the wide-ranging and changing meanings of masculinity and femininity in the modern era.” Meyerowitz suggested, however, that gender as a theory removed the focus from women and minorities, and returned the focus to dominant groups which in turn limited the potential to fully understand a society.

Meyerowitz’s critique of gender as an analytical tool did not halt the use of gender as a category of analysis by modern day historians. The use of gender as an analytical tool expanded

---

into a focus on masculinity which a scholar could use to examine relationships of power. Not all scholars favored the study of masculinity, and some argued that it shifted the focus from women, reinstated the importance of men, and returned scholars to the “norm”. John Tosh argued that gender, not just masculinity or femininity, but gender as a whole, is “inherent in all aspects of social life,” and men and women should be studied together, not in isolation. Even though the controversy surrounding Scott’s work continues today, Joan Scott provided a foundational theory of gender as a category that defines an individual’s access or relation to power.

Adding to the discussion on how masculinity should be studied and used as an analytical tool, Stephen Whitehead argued that masculinity, both malleable and changing, should be studied and analyzed because the study of men helps historians to not only understand relationships of power between men, but also between women. To Whitehead, the “myths of masculinity and accompanying ‘truths’ remain firmly implicated in the politics of gender.”

With the understanding that masculinity and all of masculinity’s “truths” are connected to gender politics, Whitehead believes masculinity and gender should then be viewed as a process which creates identity that includes political consequences and political expressions of power. The exercise of power, aided by the dominant discourses regarding masculinity, suggests to Whitehead that men who do not correctly use the discourse of masculinity fall from power. The individual is “both subject to masculinity and endorsed as an individual by masculinity.” The discourse of masculinity provides bodies “sexed” as male with a list of specific, culturally acceptable, expectations of behavior to which all males are expected to conform in order to be

---

9 Ibid, 111.
viewed as men. Such a combination of expected acts and traits can also be labelled a gender performance.

Gender performance as an ideology is explained by Judith Butler as an enacted discourse; accordingly specific ideologies of masculinity require men to perform their male identities. Butler’s 1990 work on critiquing the discursive body demonstrates how gender and identity are formed through the constant performance of gender.\(^{10}\) Critiquing the ideology of sexed bodies allows scholars to see “the discursive subject as embodied within distinct gender categories of female and male,” and formed not only through the body but “as an embodied presence and signification that speaks to a particular form of knowing.”\(^{11}\) Discourses form into “a politicized physical presence”\(^{12}\) which has negative or positive reinforcement (disciplining discourse) attached to it. Judith Butler argues that gender is a performative act that constantly needs to be reenacted through the body. For Butler, the body is the canvas for the basic performance of gender.\(^{13}\) Gender “created through sustained social performances…[and] that the very notions of an essential sex and true or abiding masculinity or femininity are also constituted as part of the strategy that conceals gender’s performative character.”\(^{14}\)

To link Scott and Butler, gender is a hegemonic ideology or tool, which is an invisible but important avenue through which men (and women) gain power. The proper performance of masculinity defines or marks a man’s ability to achieve power over others. A man’s failure to perform masculinity, as defined by his culture, results in the loss of power in the Middle Ages. As a primary relation of power, gender – masculinity or femininity – is freighted with upholding

---

\(^{10}\) To Butler, gender constitutes sex; expectations of gender sex a body, which is then “called” to the proper performance of gender attached to sex.


\(^{12}\) Ibid, 193.


\(^{14}\) Ibid, 141.
other ideologies and discourses within culture. To fail at masculinity therefore is to fail at multiple social relations, and that failure will be punished accordingly by other members of society whose own power is threatened with another’s failure.

Each society has its own expectations as to what constitutes correct masculinity or femininity. Likewise, neither gender is completely singular nor stable but supports and depends upon the other performances of naturalized, or hegemonic, ideas. For example, femininity is not performed the same way by young and old female bodies, or rich and poor female bodies. Members of a culture must constantly negotiate their performances in relation to multiple discourses and social relations or risk being “punished” for their failure of such a primary identity marker. Conversely, individuals who correctly perform their gender are allowed access the political power that stems from that successful performance.

The ideology of gender in the High Middle Ages came in part from classical writings on physiology and physiognomy by authors such as Aristotle, for whom the male body was inherently different from, and superior to, the female body. That superior nature had to be maintained through various medical practices defined by treatise such as those attributed to Hippocrates. These texts made clear that one had to ensure one’s maleness through continued behaviors reflected in food, medicine, and exercise. Those most disciplined in their health regimes would be the most masculine, but there was a spectrum of “maleness” across the culture.

Historians argue that in the Middle Ages, a society which followed a highly structured hierarchy, still maintained alternative forms of masculinity, which did not follow the ideal form expressed in chivalrous knighthood. The existence of the other masculinities formed a hierarchy which was arranged similarly to the hierarchy of society.\textsuperscript{15} The ranks which formed the

\textsuperscript{15} Class did not exist in the High Middle Ages as it does today. The High Middle Ages was structured hierarchically with a king on top, followed by members of the aristocracy, the working class, made up of merchants and
hierarchy of masculinity consisted of numerous factors including the circumstance of a man’s birth, the position he achieved in his profession, and his age. The successful performance of masculinity led to the establishment of power for the individual within his social groups. The proper performance of masculinity most clearly established him among a hierarchy which consisted of his peers. (See diagram 1.0)

One of the factors influencing medieval ideas of masculinity was how men increasingly viewed women as dangerous. Jo Ann McNamara argues that gender could be thrown into a crisis when alternative forms of gender reacted to specific cultural circumstances. She theorized that between 1050 and 1150, the established system of gender, and access to power for many medieval men, underwent a change in Europe. The Church wanted to establish greater conformity within and to redefine the internal structure of the Church. One such issue the Church decided to regularize was its ban on clerical marriage, and so introduced a new doctrine which prohibited the clergy from engaging in sex. One of the possible performances of masculinity included marriage, so its removal as an option endangered the “masculinity” of clergy. As members of the clergy were forced to remain celibate, a growing literature developed which attempted to reinforce the superiority of men, whether celibate or not, over women. Men did not need women to prove their worth and so clerical misogyny propagated in order to maintain masculine power.

The Church thus destabilized the gender system, and the clergy reacted by monopolizing more positions within the Church and increasingly removing women from important religious

---

16 The decision by the Church actually caused what is known as the East-West Schism in 1054 where the Western Church in Rome split with the Eastern Church in Constantinople. The two sides disagreed on clerical marriage and concubinge, using leavened or unleavened bread for the Eucharist, and the nature of the Trinity as expressed in the filioque clause.
duties as a marker to signify what was not masculine. McNamara argues that the change “deprived masculine individuals of objects for the sexual demonstrations that proved their right to call themselves men,” and clergy struggled to adopt new ways in which to prove themselves men.

The polemics of clerical misogyny collided with the church’s strengthened demand for lay monogamy and its accompanying sexual responsibilities. Secular men living ordinary procreative lives as prescribed by their religion heard women denounced as virulent agents of moral pollution, so contagious that prudent men must flee at their approach and shun all contact with them.18

As women were viewed as an inadequate and dangerous means through which to prove masculinity, men had to develop a new strategy to demonstrate masculinity and power.19

Stylized competition between men increasingly became the accepted way to demonstrate masculinity. “Medieval society formed men in a variety of ways, and formed a variety of men, always in competition with each other. For a boy to become a man meant testing and proving himself, not only as he came of age, but throughout his lifetime.” Before boys entered into marriage, they competed against one another as a way to achieve recognition among their peers and to forge a more masculine persona. Other boys were one’s main companions, and this forced boys and men into almost entirely homosocial relationships. Knights competed in tournaments for renown, university students competed academically, and apprentices competed against other apprentices to enter into the rare and coveted category of master. Competition, and rising above

---

18 Ibid, 6.  
19 Masculinity remained the dominant gender throughout the Middle Ages because of patriarchy and hegemony. Patriarchy is the overt male practices which reassert the power of men over women, and hegemonic masculinity is where masculine power is won and maintained until it becomes an invisible norm within society. Stephen M. Whitehead, *Men and Masculinities*, (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2002), 90-91, “While the fundamental premise remains that male power is a ‘hegemonic project’, embedded in ideological and material structures, there is space for ambiguity – and change,” and while “‘not many men meet the normative standards of hegemonic masculinity’ and even then ‘many men live in some tension with, or distance from, hegemonic masculinity,’ hegemonic masculinity remains the ‘guarantor’ of men’s dominant position and the ‘currently accepted strategy for ‘defending patriarchy.”  
one’s challenger, became the key element to masculine success throughout many masculine hierarchies. To achieve and maintain his masculinity in the Middle Ages, a man had to continually prove himself to other men by triumphing over his peers in direct competition with them. The constant competition forced men to perform specific acts to achieve or maintain access to power; a man thus performed for other men because other men determined one’s manhood.

Masculine superiority and the right to power through competition developed early in a boy’s life. In From Boys to Men Ruth Mazo Karras examines how boys learned to become men, and what it meant to be a man in order to understand the relationship between masculinity and power. She studied three types of boys on the verge of manhood: the knight, the apprentice, and the university student. Each type of man demonstrated that while masculinity had many forms, it was a long term and life-long goal, which could only be attained when specific social signifiers were achieved.

Karras argues that medieval society did not view the differing types of masculinity equally. Hierarchies within masculinity grew from social divisions between the rich and poor, Christian and non-Christian, noble and peasant, and contributed to the formation of masculine subcultures that define power within one’s subgroup. For example, one common form of alternative masculinity within medieval England can be found between a younger and an older man. All older men dominated all younger men within the same class. In his case study of the hierarchies of age, Author W.M Aird examines the relationship between William the Conqueror and his eldest son Robert Curthose. He argued that the father and son represent two “distinct masculine identities.”

---

father, could never have become a full adult male within Anglo-Norman society because his father continued to view him as a youth by keeping him from his inheritance. Robert rebelled against his father to prove he was a man who deserved his inheritance. His rebellion forced his father to continue to withhold Robert’s inheritance, as adult sons were expected to continue to obey their fathers. Robert’s rebellion suggested to William that his son was not yet a man as he could not obey his father.

The relationship between masters and apprentices appeared as another form of alternative masculinity as the prominence of guilds increased. This form of masculinity mirrored the relationship between a father and a son; apprentices were unmarried, were servants to the master, and lived under the master’s roof. However, unlike sons, apprentices were not guaranteed to inherit anything from their master. The master expected complete control of, and obedience from, his apprentice. Apprentices were not allowed to marry or have any type of sexual relationship, could not own property, and were to obey their master in all regards. Again, a hierarchy of masculinity appears within the social network, and apprentices looked for ways to reach a higher tier of masculinity by engaging in competitive sports, and visiting forbidden prostitutes. Apprentices who disobeyed faced punishment similar to the punishment of disobedient sons: exclusion from the ranks of men.

Scholars view the clergy as an additional form of masculinity that existed alongside the dominant structure. As the priesthood only accepted men, and only priests were allowed to hear confession, the spiritual power given to clergy provided them with a masculinity that elevated them above the status of women and many men. For example, the bishop wielded power

\[22\] Those who were considered clergy ranged from individuals who took minor orders, friars and priests to priors, abbots, and bishops. The clergy formed their own hierarchy which existed alongside the hierarchy of men within lay society and frequently carried power similar to that of their lay counterpart.
very similar to that of a duke.\textsuperscript{23} Like other forms of masculinity, the clergy had members who failed to embody the required masculine traits of a clergyman.

The plurality of masculinities in the High Middle Ages demonstrate that while a hegemonic masculinity existed in support of patriarchy, many men were barred from obtaining even an alternative form of masculinity. Men who failed to achieve masculinity were viewed harshly by their peers. Sons who did not obey their fathers, apprentices who failed to obey their masters, and clergy who did not abstain from sex, all threatened not only the different types of masculinity through their “rebellion,” but masculinity as a whole by not following the expected norm within their societal position; masculine failures thus challenged normative masculinity and the hierarchy of masculinity itself. Medieval scholars theorize that masculinity shifted over time and place, consisted of alternative structures, and had specific expectations of how an individual achieved power within his social group. Elite masculinity followed a similar pattern, and had a strict, well-developed sense of what was required to perform proper masculinity through the code of knighthood. The masculine ideal for upper-class, elite males, or knights, was defined by the ideology of chivalry.

Chivalry is defined by the online Oxford Dictionary as either “the combination of qualities expected of an ideal knight, especially courage, honor, courtesy, justice, and a readiness to help the weak” or “courteous behavior, especially that of a man toward women.”\textsuperscript{24} The Encyclopedia of the Medieval World defined chivalry as “a moral, religious, and social code of knightly conduct upholding the virtues of courage, respect of women, honor, and service to

\textsuperscript{23} Many bishops held power similar to that of a duke or king where they controlled armies and oversaw a vast amount of territory.

lords.” Nigel Saul, within *Chivalry in Medieval England*, defined chivalry as “more of an outlook than a doctrine, more a lifestyle than an explicit ethical code. It embraced both ideology and social practice. Among the qualities center to it were loyalty, generosity, dedication, courage and courtesy, qualities which were esteemed by the military class…[which] an ideal knight should possess.” The definition used within this work will be as follows: chivalry is the expected behavior among an elite warrior class of men, specifically knights, lords, and kings, who are encouraged, if they wish to access the political power of the elite, to act courteously towards each other and to women of their own class, to act honorably, generously, bravely, piously, and to enforce justice. Chivalrous men entered into tournaments, duels, and went to war to prove their worth, uphold their honor, and to mete out justice. They accepted other knights as equals, stayed loyal to their liege lord, and shunned cowardice, coveting, and discourteous behavior.

Chivalry defined a specific set of characteristics and expectations for the elite male. More importantly, chivalry provided the crux of the view aristocratic men held of each other and the world. Chivalry became the fantasy, or the ideology, of the aristocracy. They believed they were men of honor “fighting on horseback, [and] jousting in tournament lists, and…[achieving] manliness through prowess.” Simply put, chivalry formed the masculine ideal for the elite, and elite society encouraged the enactment of chivalry through literature and pseudo-histories.

The actual literature and eyewitness accounts of supposedly “chivalrous” knights reveal the very violent and brutal tendencies of elite medieval men. Not only did they embrace the

---

27 Ibid.  
28 Pseudo-histories can also be called Vernacular histories (or histories in the new vernaculars), and were most often in verse or rhyming form, as were some Latin texts.
chivalric ideals but they equally embraced the violence found within reality, and reified both ideologies through action and literature. Such ideas changed the views of warfare and society:

Part of the change was towards a new cruelty, brutality and bloodthirstiness, for savagery was as important a part of the image as vigour and valour. The ‘ferocious Normans’, as William of Apulia called them, had a reputation. To the local Lombard princes they seemed ‘savage, barbarous and horrible race of inhuman disposition.’ It was an image that was carefully cultivated. An incident which demonstrates the calculated brutality of the Norman leaders occurred during a dispute between Normans and Greeks over booty. A Greek envoy came to the camp. One of the Normans standing nearby fondled his horse’s head. Then, suddenly, ‘so that the envoy should have something terrifying to report back to the Greeks about the Normans, he struck the horse in the neck with his naked fist, knocking it half-lifeless to the ground with one blow."

As Robert Bartlett, a leading medieval historian, noted “the purpose of this suddenly unleashed savagery, a controlled use of the uncontrollable, was to win submission. It is not depicted as simple anarchy or brutal self-expression. The violence was intended to alert the local population to the presence of...players who were determined to be winners.” To retain power, the elite aristocracy, also members of an elite military force, created two opposing perceptions. The first perception was one of violence, wherein the knight had to be feared by enemies for his prowess in war. “Knights worshipped at the shrine of the demi-god prowess and practiced violence as an esteemed and defining entitlement. The primary constituent in chivalry was prowess which wins honour, weapons in hand.” The second perception of chivalry was of an “honorable violence,” wherein knights were expected to fight but also demonstrate key characteristics such as loyalty to one’s land and king, courage in the face of danger, and courtesy to women. For instance, a properly chivalric knight would refuse to rape or otherwise injure a woman. The second perception became the fantasy knights held of themselves, and was held by other members of their society. Knights were violent but they justified their violence. Through

---

30 Idid, 87.
that justification, chivalric masculinity became an elite ideology of the High Middle Ages via the combination of the fantasy of chivalry and the reality of violence which formed the overall lived experience of elite medieval men.

The evidence of the ideology of chivalry among the elite can be found in the literature of the era as well as within the pseudo-histories. Pseudo-histories, the understanding that a particular chronicle or set of works are viewed as historically accurate by the society which produced the work but are, in actuality, not historical, should be viewed as historical documents. The medieval world, unlike today, did not differentiate between literature and history. In the Middle Ages, medieval histories were very different from the modern concept of history, and frequently included both historical and fantastical elements. Pseudo-histories were socially accepted and provided entertainment, history, and social commentary within one body of work.

For example, the Venerable Bede wrote in the seventh century:

Ireland, in breadth, and for wholesomeness and serenity of climate, far surpasses Britain…No reptiles are found there, and no snake can live there…as soon as the ship comes near the shore, and the scent of the air reaches them, they die…almost all things in the island are good against poison. In short, we have known that when some persons have been bitten by serpents, the scrapings of leaves of books that were brought out of Ireland, being put into water, and given them to drink, have immediately expelled the spreading poison, and assuaged the swelling. 32

Such works, including the work of Geoffrey of Monmouth, give modern scholars the opportunity to “explore the social and political agendas of the cultures that produced them.” 33 Alongside chivalric literature, pseudo-histories were also produced by contemporary writers, which, like the literature, imparted the importance of chivalry among elite men.

The Anglo-Norman pseudo-histories were written in alliterative-verse form, and while we may view these as pseudo-histories today, they were the history of the people who developed

the work, and reveal a wealth of cultural ideologies. Medieval histories were thus very different from our modern concept of “history.” By using pseudo-histories in this way, the Middle Ages authorized Arthurian pseudo-histories to advance specific ideologies which were culturally useful, and created a form of symbolic power. These verse histories, or pseudo-histories, held a wealth of cultural ideologies. Chivalric works can then be equated to the vernacular propaganda of elite men, such as kings, which encouraged men to strive for the achievement of chivalric ideals in order to attain political and masculine power.

With chivalric literature, the pseudo-histories of the High Middle Ages authorized and legitimized chivalric discourse and ideology in works like the King Arthur legends. King Arthur and his knights became figures who embodied the ideal of chivalry as both literary and quasi-historical individuals, and their popularity demonstrated “a fascination with England’s history, arising from the new aristocracy’s appetite to learn more about its adoptive country.” The rise of chivalry is one such ideology that developed within the pseudo-histories.

Coming from a French background, chivalric pseudo-histories, along with chivalric literature, grew in popularity after the Norman Conquest of England in 1066. During the Angevin (1154-1216), but in particular the Plantagenet era (1154-1399), when an Anglo-Norman aristocracy ruled over an Anglo-Saxon peasantry, a particular ideology first appeared within medieval literature: the chivalrous knight. The chivalrous knight represented the ideal of aristocratic masculinity. As argued by Nigel Saul, a leading researcher at the University of London on medieval chivalry and the Plantagenets, chivalry became the cultural expectation of upper class men:

35 Ibid. 220.
In medieval aristocratic society, chivalric activity and cultural expectation went hand in hand. The chivalric lifestyle of the aristocracy found its mirror in literature, just as literature found much of its inspiration in chivalry. In the romance writing lapped up by the aristocracy, the themes most commonly dealt with were the performing of brave deeds, the knightly quest for honor and the love of the knight for his lady. These were themes with an immediate appeal to an aristocracy which defined itself as a military elite, but because that aristocracy was also a social elite, they found a wider audience among those influenced by elite tastes – the humbler knights, esquires and lesser gentry, even in some cases townsmen. Chivalric culture played a key role in shaping the culture of medieval society.37

Chivalric literature and ideas spread in popularity as aristocratic patrons, such as Eleanor of Aquitaine and King Henry II of England, first of the Angevins, encouraged the writing of such works. Elite society attempted to represent and replicate chivalry in real-world settings through the production of artwork, the development and popularity of tournaments, the increased use of chivalry in political commentaries wherein kings or lords where considered chivalric, and in the production of literature which was frequently read out loud in private and public settings. In time, chivalry grew into the expectation of knightly behavior.38 The same knights and kings of the elite invested in the fantasy of chivalry by demanding the production of more chivalric works such as the Arthurian legends. Those who read and wrote chivalric literature were members of the upper classes themselves, and through reading and writing such chivalric stories, chivalry and its importance were continually reified by members of the aristocracy and their associates. In time, members of the aristocracy viewed men who embraced chivalry as individuals who deserved their power and place within society.

38 Ian Mortimer, The Time Traveler’s Guide to Medieval England: A Handbook for Visitors to the Fourteenth Century, (New York, London, Toronto and Sydney: Touchstone, 2010), 68, literacy during this time was on the rise. By the 1300s in England the male literacy rate was at 5% in rural areas and over 20% in urban areas (some scholars estimate 40%). The aristocracy was literate. Chiara Frugoni, A Day in a Medieval City, (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2005), 147, reading privately or out loud was a common pastime within the Middle Ages. Men, women, and children were frequently read to or read out loud to a group. Even if an individual, especially within the upper classes, could not read, he or she still had access to the literature of the time.
Eventually, chivalry filtered down through the ranks of the aristocracy, and became a symbol of power and prestige that members of the middle class embraced as a way to achieve respectability. The adoption of aristocratic culture or ideas by groups such as apprentices and university students was done in an attempt to cement their place in society by copying elite members to reestablish their own power. Society reified chivalry as crucial to masculine success. “It was at this point that chivalry assumed the character of the outward and visible form of social respectability defined in terms of polite knighthood.”39 The self-perpetuating nature of literature, chivalry and the demands of patrons led to the development of a chivalric masculine ideology which grew among the aristocracy in the reign of Henry II (r.1154-1189). When the medieval ruling class endorsed chivalry, through the continued patronage of chivalric writers, to excuse the violence of the ruling elite through its glorification of chivalry as a code of war, they created a form of “propaganda” for themselves and others.

An example of the normative power of chivalric masculinity and medieval violence can be found within *Gawain and the Green Knight*, an Arthurian work produced in the fourteenth century.40 Gawain, a knight of King Arthur’s court, accepted the challenge of the Green Knight to protect his king, agreeing to behead the stranger in front of a gathering of lords and ladies:

> The grene knyght upon grounde graythely hym dresses, a little lut with the hede, the lere he discoveres; his longe lovelych lokkes he layd over his croun, let the neked nec to the note schewe. Gawan gripped to his ax, and gederes hit on hyght, the kay fot on the folde he before sette, let hit doun lyghtly lyght on the naked, that the scharp of the schalk schyndered the bones, and schrank thurgh the schyire grece, and the scade hit in twynne, that the bit of the broun stel bot on the grounde. The fayre hede fro the halce hit to the erthe that fele hit foyned wyth her fete there hit forth roled; the blod brayd fro the body, that blykked on the grene…41

40 Unlike other Arthurian stories, the violence within Gawain is minimal. However, even within a story which does not focus upon chivalry and the inherent violence of the ideology, both are still present and provide the foundation from which the story evolves. Violence acts as the vehicle which moves the story forward, provides incentive for the characters and, in the end, resolves the story.
[The Green Knight got ready right away on the ground,  
Bending his neck a bit forward to lay bare the flesh,  
Stringing his long, lovely strands up over his scalp,  
Exposing his naked nape to the need at hand.  
Gawain gathers up the ax, gripping it tightly,  
And placing his left foot before him on the floor, he brings it down brusquely upon the  
bare-skinned neck,  
So that the sharpened blade shatters through the bones.  
It shears the shaft of the neck, splitting it in two,  
With the edge of bright iron biting into the earth.  
The fair head flips from its foundation to the floor, and the crowd begins to kick it as it  
caroms their way.  
Blood spurts from the base, shining bright upon the green…]42

Gawain accepted the challenge to protect his king and to appear brave and decisive. He acted  
both violently and, within medieval eyes, honorably. In an earlier work produced in the twelfth  
century, Lancelot, in The Knight of the Cart, joined a vicious fight on his quest to save King  
Arthur’s wife:

He leapt among the knights, jabbing one man down with his elbows and another after  
him. He struck the two nearest him with his elbows and forearms and beat them both to  
the ground. The third swung at him and missed, but the fourth struck him a blow that  
ripped his mantel and chemise and tore open the white flesh of his shoulder. Though  
blood was pouring from his wound, our knight took no respite, and without complaint of  
his wound he redoubled his effort until he managed to grab the head of the knight who  
was trying to rape his hostess. He forced him up, in spite of the other’s resistance; but  
meanwhile the knight who had missed his blow rushed upon our knight as fast as he  
could with his ax raised to strike – he meant to hack the knight’s skull through to the  
teeth. But our knight skillfully maneuvered the rapist between himself and the other, and  
the axman’s blow struck him where the shoulder joins the neck, splitting the two  
asunder.43

The aristocracy accepted violence if it was done for an “honorable” cause, as they believed it  
was justified. Honorable violence could range from the violence inherent in tournaments to the  
violence of war as kings and lords claimed what they rightfully believed to be their own and so

42 “Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,” lines 414-429, The Romance of Arthur: An Anthology of Medieval Texts in  
43 Chretien de Troyes, "The Knight of the Cart," The Romance of Arthur: An Anthology of Medieval Texts in  
fought for an “honorable” cause. As stated by Richard Kaeuper, “belief in the right kind of violence carried out vigorously by the right people is a cornerstone to this [chivalrous] literature,” and in this way literature allowed elite men to justify their right to violence and power. In many of the chivalrous works, the violence of the knight is both frequent and brutal, but always justified.

The representation of a knight within the literature was a man of violence and chivalry. He mirrored the violence of reality, and encouraged the act of chivalry in reality. However, violence appeared more prevalently within reality than acts of chivalry. Kaeuper argues “legal records show us that the knightly violence so prevalent in chivalric literature was...practiced in everyday life, with serious consequences for public order.” Such a situation is demonstrated in the twelfth century political commentary on the Anarchy of England between 1235–1154:

Me henged up bi the fet and smoked heom mid ful smoke. Me henged bi the þumbe other bi the hefed and hengen bryniges on her fet. Me dide cnotted strenges abuton here hæved and wrythen it ðat it gæde to þe hærnes. Hi diden heom in quarterne þar nadres and snakes and pades væron inne, and drapen heom swa. Sume hi diden in crucet-hur, þat is in an cæste þat was scort and nareu and undep and dide scærpe stanes þærinne & þrengde þe man þærinne ðat him bræcon alle þe limes.

[They strung them up each by their feet and filled them full of smoke. They hung each by their thumbs over their heads and hung coats of mail on their feet. They tied knotted ropes about their heads and twisted it to the point it went into their brains. They put them in quarters with vipers and snakes and toads and killed them so. Some of them where put in torture cages, that were short and narrow and not deep, and put sharp stones therein and pressed with stones the man inside so that all his bones broke.] (Translation Kestner)

---

44 Within the literature, chivalrous knights were expected to protect women from rape. Knights who defended women from other men acted in a chivalric manner and believed their violence in protecting a woman from rape was to be excused. In contrast, rape (violence against women) continued to be a problem in reality. The courtesy granted by a knight to a woman constantly appeared within the literature. This continued repetition suggests that in reality knights were continuing to rape women regardless of their status.
46 Ibid, 110.
The reality of violence and the ideal of chivalry created set expectations for elite men. The expectations of chivalry made masculinity a performance, which, according to Judith Butler, had to be constantly reenacted to express specific discourses and cultural traits. Elite men created their masculinity “through sustained social performances” where men were required to fulfill specific gendered obligations to be considered a successful performer of chivalric masculinity. As a reified performance, cultural values were thus inscribed upon the male body. Those cultural values were constantly threatened through the proper or improper performance of an individual’s gender. To be accepted by his peers, an elite man had to perform chivalric masculinity as found within the literature and pseudo-histories of knights, and use that performance to convince others to accept his right to power. As chivalry became a hegemonic ideology within elite society, it reified elite male rule by mystifying the violence inherent in chivalry by pretending to correct the violent access to power through figures like King Arthur. Chivalry, in essence, masked and excused the power and violence of knights or the “armed horsemen,” who relied on their violence to maintain power.

Within medieval England, the pinnacle of chivalric masculinity, and the keystone of power, was the figure of King Arthur. Whoever succeeded at attaining the symbolic power held by King Arthur, who was the crux of knightly success, by properly performing chivalric masculinity, succeeded in establishing real power. With King Arthur as the keystone to chivalry, and a source of symbolic power, the flourishing of chivalric literature can be tied to the idea that Arthur and his knights were used as examples of how chivalry should be used by elite men, most importantly, kings. As Arthur and his knights became the court ideal all elite men should imitate, the symbolic power obtained from the imitation gave kings real political power for symbolic

---

49 Ibid, 130.
power manifests into political power. The kings of the Plantagenet dynasty of England are a clear example of the power of the proper performance of chivalric masculinity, and the use of chivalric masculinity to maintain political power through the implementation of chivalric masculinity as a form of propaganda.\(^5^0\)

The Plantagenet dynasty of England offers a unique opportunity to study such performative aspects of chivalric masculinity because some of the Plantagenet kings embodied the cultural expectations of chivalry successfully, as well as its inherent violence, and some failed. The dynasty spanned three centuries of rule in England from 1154 to 1399. Historians note the dynasty’s relative stability in the transition between rulers, and the development of an elaborate bureaucracy which saw the establishment of Parliament.\(^5^1\) How members of the Plantagenet dynasty implemented chivalric masculinity affected their political power. Some Plantagenet kings were able to consolidate power, bring internal peace and prosperity, and triumph over both England’s enemies and internal enemies. The kings who were successful at promulgating a myth of their chivalric mastery received the support of their earls, counts, etc., such as Edward III (r. 1327-1377), who, despite financial concerns, disputes with the church and extensive absences from England, became lauded as a great chivalric king. In contrast to Edward III, a failure of chivalric masculinity can be seen in the reign of Richard II (r. 1387-1399).

This investigation is intended as an intervention into the field of medieval knights in England. I will show how different members of the Plantagenet dynasty either failed to properly use the ideology of chivalry or successfully implemented the ideas held therein. I argue that the

\(^{50}\) While kingship can be considered a myth of the Middle Ages, as kings could be easily deposed or challenged by rival kings who held lands within another kingdom as dukes, kings who failed to act chivalrous threatened not only their own dynastic claims but the claims of their lords and knights. Knights, lords and kings all relied upon the same system of power which rewarded the violent, chivalrous warrior and placed him at the top of the social and political hierarchy. A man who could not fulfill his role, and did not act as an elite, warrior knight should but maintained a position of power threatened the power of all other elite men. A king’s lack of power, therefore, endangered the whole system which gave power to the elite warrior class.

proper performance of chivalry by a king led to the support by the nobility for the king’s reign. When a king failed to perform properly, regardless of his other successes, he was viewed as a failure of not only chivalric masculinity but of kingliness. Elite men rebelled against the king and, in some cases, deposed him. To elite men, the deposed king did not deserve to maintain power if he did not fulfill the expectations of chivalric masculinity that the members of the aristocracy demanded he emulate. By the Plantagenet era, chivalry had become a hegemonic ideology within elite Anglo-Norman society, and a king’s ability to emulate characters such as King Arthur contributed to how long he sat upon the throne.
Chapter One
The Development of Chivalry: the Saxons, the Normans and the Anvegins

The legend of King Arthur’s likely historical story began with the Roman Empire. Britain, originally inhabited by Celtic speaking tribes known as the Britons, whose descendants are the Welsh, became a Roman territory in A.D. 43. The Romans began to withdraw from the island by the fifth century as the German migrations, or Volkswanderung, began, and various groups moved into the retracting Roman Empire. By 450, a group of people known as the Saxons encroached upon the Britons. During this power struggle between the Britons and the Saxons, the myth of King Arthur arose. The legends say that King Arthur was born around the year 475, with his death occurring after the battle of Camlann in approximately 537. Arthur was likely the warlord of a Dumnonian province, and held the position of the dux bellorum, or battle leader, who other kings rallied behind in times of need. He rose to fame at the battle of Badon where he successfully held off Saxon advances as they attempted to move into British lands. Celtic British identity began to take shape under Arthur’s reign. By the time Arthur “died”, he had succeeded in keeping the Saxons at bay for nearly two decades. The unity of Briton, however, dissolved after Arthur’s death. Here the myth fades and is replaced by actual, verifiable history. In the mid sixth century, the Saxons were able to advance deeper into Britain, mixing British and Angles, another invading force, with Saxons to form the Anglo-Saxons. Many Britons were pushed west into Wales.

---

53 Ibid, 117-140.
54 While some scholars argue that Arthur existed, his historical likelihood is highly doubtful. A very limited set of “historical” works discuss Arthur’s success and fame. For example, in the eighth century Nennius wrote Historia Brittonum where he placed King Arthur as the leader of twelve battles against the Saxons. Arthur did sporadically appear over the centuries in works written by historians but each work is based on highly unreliable sources. As is, by the time the Normans invaded in A.D. 1066, Arthurian myth and legend had long been established on the island.
The Angles and Saxons ruled Britain for over five-hundred years through separate, independent kingdoms frequently referred to as the Heptarchy. In this era, kings came to the throne through election. The *witan*, or king’s council, made up by a body of wealthy landowners, including earls, elected the next king. The inhabitants of England viewed themselves as English, a term designated by Pope Gregory the Great in the sixth century and given greater prominence by the Venerable Bede, an Anglo-Saxon monk and chronicler in the eighth century. In the ninth and tenth centuries, the Saxon and Angle rule broke down as the Scandinavian invasions began. At this time, royal succession did not follow primogeniture, and the eldest son did not always inherit, even if he were powerful in his own right. “Sons, brothers, uncles, cousins and even more distant relations might all be contenders for royal power,” and this included powerful kings and lords from neighboring lands. Kingship itself was loosely defined at this time. In general, a king or powerful landowner ruled one territory supported by an armed retinue which is very similar to the *dux bellorum* found in Arthur’s days.

The historical background of the Plantagenet dynasty and the eventual supremacy of Arthurian stories within the medieval literature began with a Saxon King. The Saxon king, Aethelred II, murdered Danish settlers at the turn of the eleventh century. The Danish settlers were under the protection of the king of Norway, Svein, who sought vengeance for the murdered men and women. Fearful, Aethelred fled, and Svein took control of England. Aethelred sought refuge beneath the banner of Duke Richard II of Normandy in northern France. While in

---

55 A *witan* can be translated as a king’s council which gathers together to elect the next king. During the Early Middle ages and well into the High Middle Ages, kings were frequently elected by a body of councilmen, called the *witan*, and this practice continued in a variety of forms into the Plantagenet dynasty. Thus, the king’s first son was not guaranteed the position of king once his father died. During the Plantagenet dynasty, primogeniture became increasingly common but did not become the standard until after the War of the Roses in the fifteenth century.


57 Ibid, 76.
Normandy, Aethelred married the Duke of Normandy’s sister, Emma, in 1002. When Svein died, Aethelred II returned to England to claim the throne. Aethelred ruled for another fourteen years. His predecessor, his son Edmund, died shortly after his father. Following Edmund’s death in 1016, the Danish king, Cnut the Great, the son of Svein of Norway, ascended to the English throne and, to secure his own claim, married Aethelred’s widow, Emma. From this marriage came a son, Harthacnut. Cnut’s first son, Harold Harefoot, ruled after his father from 1035-1040, and then Harthacnut, the son of Emma and Cnut, ruled England from 1040 to 1042. Emma’s son by Aethelred II, Edward the Confessor, like his father, sought refuge in Normandy during the reign of the Danish kings. Once Harthacnut died, Edward the Confessor ascended to the throne, and when he failed to leave an heir in 1066, Harold Godwinson, a powerful earl and the brother-in-law of Edward, went to the witan to be elected king of England.

The duke of Normandy, William, viewed Harold as a usurper. Duke William, Emma’s great nephew, claimed that Edward the Confessor had proclaimed him heir and had, in 1051, made his nobility swear fealty to William. Duke William also argued that Edward the Confessor had not only chosen William as his heir but that Harold, after being shipwrecked in Normandy in 1064, swore fealty to Count Guy of Ponthieu, who was the vassal of William of Normandy. Any vassal of Count Guy automatically became William’s vassal. William maintained that Harold could not claim the throne in place of a superior’s claim, and challenged Harold for the throne.

---

59 Ibid, xx.
60 Ibid, 101.
61 Ibid, 26-27
Harold insisted that while Edward the Confessor lay on his death bed, the king had named Harold heir. In Anglo-Saxon eyes a *verba novisma*\(^{63}\) out-weighed any previous proclamations. In Normandy, such *verba novisma* did not overpower previous promises, including a *post obitum*,\(^{64}\) which William claimed Edward the Confessor had bestowed upon him in front of high ranking witnesses who, at the time of the *post obitum*, proclaimed their allegiance to William. “Both Harold and William were able to base their claims to the throne on the testamentary customs of England and Normandy respectively.”\(^{65}\) Their dispute could only be settled on the battlefield, and would need to include the defeat of the Norwegian king Harald Hardrada, who had allied himself with Harold’s brother, Tostig Godwinson, in a bid for the throne of England.

Once crowned in January of 1066, Harold had little time to relax. He had to defend his throne. By the fall he had engaged, and defeated, Harald Hardrada and Tostig Godwinson in the north as they tried to conquer York. While Harold put down Hardrada and Godwinson, Duke William of Normandy gathered his forces across the channel. William sailed on England in the fall of 1066, and defeated Harold’s forces. The king himself died at the Battle of Hastings. Duke William ascended the throne, and was crowned king in London at Westminster Abbey on Christmas day.\(^{66}\)

The Norman Conquest of England marked a change in Anglo-Saxon and Norman society as the two cultures merged both socially and politically under the powerful rule of William the Conqueror and his successors. From the beginning of his conquest of England, William the

---

\(^{63}\) *Verba novisma* translates from Latin to “last words”.
\(^{64}\) *Post obitum* translates from Latin to “after death,” and in this case refers to property granted to an individual while the donor still lived.
\(^{66}\) Ibid, 133.
Conqueror, concerned with the legitimacy of his claim to the throne, strove to prove that he, not Harold I, had been designated the heir of Edward the Confessor. Yet throughout the reign of William the Conqueror, rebellions rose across England, and other powerful individuals laid claim to the throne or threatened to depose the foreign king. This is testified to by the increasing numbers of castles, in particular mote-and-bailey castles which began to fill the English countryside. The laws following the conquest also demonstrate the continued tension between the Anglo-Saxons and the Normans. Laws such as the murdrum fine, which punished nearby villages if a Frenchman was found dead in the vicinity, protected Normans from the locals while revealing a very real fear of the conquered peoples. Tensions were high in the newly conquered land but despite the strain and occasional upheaval, the Norman aristocracy remained in control of the Anglo-Saxon peasantry.

William the Conqueror died in 1087 by which time Anglo-Saxons, from all social ranks, were already assimilating their culture with the imported Norman culture. William II succeeded his father in 1087, and only a year into his reign he had to put down a rebellion that his elder brother Rufus began. The English, however, “were fighting for their Norman king, [and] William II [fought] against his own barons.” One of the major causes “which contributed to this change was the intermarriage between Norman men and English women. Continuing intermarriage turned the Norman ruling elite into the Anglo-Normans who were viewed as the native ruling class.” When William II died in 1100, his brother, Henry I, ascended to the throne. Henry provided greater organization for the government while investing the crown with more power. He organized the Anglo-Norman government, developed royal patronage, reformed the treasury

---

68 Ruth Mazo Karras, *From Boys to Men: Formations of Masculinity in Late Medieval Europe*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), 156, as noted earlier, patriarchy is the domination of men over women. However, patriarchy can also be the dominance of a limited number of men over most other men as well as over women.
and the exchequer, and “reconstituted and tamed the itinerant royal court along ration lines.” Henry restored many of the laws of Edward the Confessor, with Norman amendments, and “committed the new regime to safeguarding the rights of inheritance of loyal tenants-in-chief.” In all, Henry helped establish the Norman aristocracy as capable rulers to the Anglo-Saxons. (See diagram 1.2)

There remained concern, however, about the family’s legitimacy, and William II and Henry I, like their father, created propaganda which traced their line to the literary figure of King Arthur in a metaphorical lineage. The legends of Arthur, as a pre-Saxon Briton, who had connections to France where other Britons (Bretons) had lived, made Arthur a convenient hero for the Norman kings, regardless of the fact that he was a literary, not historical figure. The Normans’ connection to the Britons through intermarriage, beginning with the Viking raids and colonization in the ninth century, “linked” the Norman line to Arthur’s via a metaphorical lineage. By forging this metaphorical link, the Normans attempted to naturalize themselves as legitimate rulers. To them, Arthur existed as both a “historical” and literary king, and “by identifying themselves with Britons rather than Norman or Saxon kings, the first Norman rulers of England were able to counter the fragmentation and decentralization that marked feudalism in France and that remained an obstacle to the establishment of a centralized administrative bureaucracy.”

Henry I died in 1135, leaving his three-year-old grandson as heir. He had hoped that his daughter, Matilda, would rule in his place upon his death, and until his grandson Henry came of age. Henry I had his barons swear their loyalty to Matilda, but upon his death the oaths of loyalty

71 Ibid, 112.
were broken in favor of a different king. Stephen of Blois took the throne with the support of the barons, but Matilda would not give up. “The ensuing civil warfare led to a fragmentation of society that ended…in suffering, disorder and economic ruin.” Three years following Stephen’s usurpation, Geoffrey of Monmouth published his famous work on King Arthur in a period of time which became known as the Anarchy, where the extreme violence and lack of law within in England led to a desire for order and peace.

In 1138, Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *Historia Regum Britanniae* (History of the Kings of Britain) appeared as one of the first post-conquest works that traced the history of the British kings. Arthur played a key role in Geoffrey’s history, whose life and death he chronicles, and he turned Arthur from a “Cornish or Breton legend to a hero of the aristocracy of the Anglo-French world.” According to Laurie Fink and Martin Shichtman, Arthur acted “as a social signifier, whose function was to smooth over the ideological conflicts created by the Norman colonization of England and the uneasy and unequal cohabitation of three distinct cultures – Norman, Saxon, and Celt.” Geoffrey used Arthur much like the Norman kings wished him to be used: as a link between cultures who legitimized the Norman warrior elites’ right to rule. The work created the illusion of an unbroken line of succession that “culminates in the emergence of Arthur out of the social chaos of the Saxon invasions,” and created a “past that would ease the anxieties of a powerful ruling class concerned with discovering origins so that claims of lineage might be upheld.”

---

76 Ibid, 38-69.
During the twelfth century, such genealogical history, whether historical or imagined, provided a way to bind people together as members of an “imagined community” which linked everyone through a lineal descent, and provided members of the society with a sense of group cohesion. The concept of the imagined community, introduced by Benedict Anderson in *Imagined Communities*, views a nation as a cultural artifact that carries with it a peoples’ deep attachments to what they consider a nation, or “an imagined political community—and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign…where most members…will never know most of their fellow-members.” Within this concept of “nation,” a nation is limited by its boundaries, and viewed as a community because it is recognized as a continual society with connections between all individuals. A nation must be understood in relation to the cultural systems which preceded it, specifically the dynastic realm. In the dynastic realm of the Middle Ages, a society was organized around a king who ruled over a heterogeneous population with fluctuating boundaries, and who relied on political marriages and warfare to maintain authority. From such a cultural system, the idea of the “nation” arises, enabling people to view themselves as part of a greater whole with a particular sense of consciousness, in which new ways appear that connect individuals, power, and time together in a system that is meaningful to the land’s inhabitants. For Benedict Anderson language and literature acted as one of these unifiers, and Arthurian legends were used as a way to create ties among the warrior elite by supporting their right to rule based on the performance of a new ideal in warrior behavior.

---

79 Ibid, 12.
81 Ibid, 37.
The literature of King Arthur, which appeared after the Norman Conquest, reveals an imagined community, and the attempt by Norman rulers to force cohesion between themselves and the Anglo-Saxons they conquered through a code of war described as chivalry. Under the Normans, England began to forge a new sense of identity as the culture of the aristocracy of the Normans and culture of the Anglo-Saxon peasantry clashed. *The History of the Kings of Britain* set the foundation for later histories and romances while connecting the two cultures through the figure of King Arthur. King Arthur became a cultural and “semi-historical” figure, used as a tool to legitimize rulers and their political agendas. The history of Britain after the Norman Conquest was, in reality, an “agitated environment…an environment of uneven, unsettled, and conflicted cultural, political, ideological, linguistic, and economic agendas.” Pseudo-histories thus developed as a way for the ruling elite to maintain power by citing their right to power through a “history” of an imagined community of England and its king. In particular, the development of chivalric masculinity became an important ideology among the elite and eventually writers reproduced the ideology in the form of literature.

The Normans and their descendants used the image of Arthur, and eventually chivalric masculinity, to maintain identity, which in turn allowed the Normans to claim an Arthurian lineage to demonstrate legitimacy and power over a “newly” conquered and rebellious people. Histories and legends began to appear, many created in an attempt to bolster claims of rule by the Normans. In time, great lords and kings patronized Arthurian works that might not even include Arthur as a character. From this demand the ideology of chivalric masculinity, which legitimized the warrior elites’ right to power, became the centerpiece for elite men. Chivalry helped authenticate the value attributed to violent masculinity, and provided a set of standards all elite men

---

83 Ibid, 31.
men were to aspire towards in order to be accepted members of the elite. Literary works such as *Lancelot, Gawain and the Green Knight,* and Layamon’s the *Brut* soon provided an example of how elite men were to perform masculinity. The performance of chivalric masculinity, especially kingly chivalry, can be found most powerfully in the character of King Arthur; beginning with the Angevin kings in 1154, the ideology of chivalry began to flourish.

The last of the Norman kings, Stephen, died in 1154.\textsuperscript{84} Henry II, Matilda’s son and the grandson of Henry I, took the throne as Stephen’s heir.\textsuperscript{85} The first of the Angevin kings came to the throne after England endured nineteen years of civil war between King Stephen, the usurper, and Empress Matilda.\textsuperscript{86} Henry II became Stephen’s heir because of Stephen’s mishandling of powerful men,\textsuperscript{87} the stresses of twenty years of civil war on the kingdom, and the increasing strength of Henry II (r.1154-1189), which Stephen could no longer ignore. He accepted Henry as his heir in 1153.\textsuperscript{88} When King Stephen died a year later, Henry II assumed the throne with his wife, Eleanor of Aquitaine.\textsuperscript{89} The Angevin dynasty had begun.\textsuperscript{90}

With no opposition, Henry II immediately set to work forming his administration, appointing his own loyal knights and barons to positions of importance and, with a kingdom weary of warfare, implemented both swift and bold decisions to restore royal authority and end

\footnotesize{
\textsuperscript{84} In actuality, Stephen was a member of a different line, the Blois of France. However, he married one the Henry I’s daughters and thus maintained Norman ties.


\textsuperscript{86} King Stephen’s reign is known as the Anarchy, where lawlessness and violence covered much of England and horrific acts were carried out as described in the quote from the Peterborough Chronicle (page 20). Beginning with Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *History of the Kings of Britain,* there is a clear connection between the violence of reality and violence in the literature. Reality and fantasy during this period of time were highly volatile, violent places.


\textsuperscript{88} Ibid, 52.


\textsuperscript{90} While he is known as an Angevin ruler for his territories in France, as are the two sons who succeeded him, Henry II’s direct descendants formed the Plantagenet dynasty. The name change stems from loss of lands in France. Henry’s son John lost most of the French lands claimed by the English. Henry II’s grandson, Henry III, thus becomes the “first” Plantagenet king, with little claim to France, and began a dynasty which lasted until 1399.
}
the disorder;  

91 it is Henry who greatly helped develop the English Common Law, and codified and instituted official law.  

92 Henry believed that he had to return the kingdom to its formal glory under Henry I. After two decades of warfare, violent crimes had risen to unprecedented levels, and rivalry among the nobility could burst into personal warfare at any moment. “Henry’s immediate purpose was…‘to root out all causes for renewal of warfare and to clear away all inducements of distrust.’”  

93 First, Henry restored impartial law and order, ordered lands taken during the civil war to be returned to their original owners, dismissed Stephen’s mercenaries, and demanded that the barons return castles that belonged to the Crown and tear down illegal castles.  

94 From their own desire to stay in the good graces of the new king, the barons acquiesced to Henry’s demands.  

Henry’s control over his lands in France, Anjou and Aquitaine were less secure than his hold over England, but Henry was “determined to obtain his whole inheritance as he saw it.”  

95 From 1158-1160 he tried to reclaim additional lands he believed were owed to him as inheritance. Once he accomplished his goals on the continent, “Henry II had authority over half the kingdom of France and quite eclipsed his nominal suzerain, the king of France [King Louis], in wealth, territory and power.”  

96 Henry’s vassals in Brittany began to resist the encroaching power of their duke.  

97 During 1165, he set off for the Continent. He would remain there for the next four years as he quelled discontent, and reasserted his power over Brittany, Normandy, and Aquitaine, as the king of France, threatened by Henry’s growing power, nudged Henry closer to war. He eventually

---

96 Ibid, 22.  
succeeded, but Louis, whose lands and vassals were the victims of the war, had to sue for peace in 1169.\textsuperscript{98}

Henry announced that he would divide his lands among his three sons, and as a long peace seemed to be at hand, Henry held the coronation for Henry the Younger (1155-1183), who would co-rule with Henry II. However, a dispute rose between Henry and Henry the Younger which would become one of the most serious events of Henry’s reign. When Henry sought to promise lands which had been informally given to Henry the Younger to his son John, Henry the Younger protested because he needed the land to “maintain himself and his queen in proper estate.”\textsuperscript{99} Henry the Younger also “kept a large and glamorous retinue but felt constrained by lack of resources: ‘he had many knights but he had no means to give rewards and gifts to the knights.’”\textsuperscript{100} Henry, in an act of rebellion, withdrew from his father’s court, and convinced the king of France to support him. Together they formed an alliance against Henry II.\textsuperscript{101} Henry the Younger’s brothers and mother followed him (she was later caught by Henry II), and joined the king of France in a declaration of war against Henry in 1173. The king of Scotland and a number of nobles in England rallied to the Young King’s cause. The nobles rebelled against Henry II “‘not because they regarded his [Henry the Younger’s] as the juster cause, but because the father, with a view to increasing the royal dignity, was trampling upon the necks of the proud and haughty, was overthrowing the suspected castles of the country, or bringing them more under his control.’”\textsuperscript{102}

The war, called the “Great War,” did not endure long. Henry II won the war in the spring of 1174. When Henry defeated his son, he punished the barons who had sided with the Young

\textsuperscript{99} Ibid, 117.
\textsuperscript{101} Ibid, 55.
King by taking land and titles. The balance of power between the king and barons was now lost and the barons no longer had access to positions of power within the government.\textsuperscript{103} The king of Scotland suffered the greatest defeat. Henry forced him to accept Henry’s over-lordship and perform a public ceremony of submission.\textsuperscript{104}

The remaining years of Henry’s reign saw his sons rebel once more. Despite such distractions, Henry achieved much in his reign. He reiterated the rights that he claimed due to birth and marriage. He forced the king of France to recognize Henry’s claim to certain French territories. And, most importantly, he created:

A self-regulating administrative machine, with methods of accounting and control which meant that no official, however exalted, could entirely escape the surveillance of his colleagues and the king…[and perfected] administrative and judicial procedures which had the effect of reducing to routine much that had previously required the king’s personal attention…[to make] possible a great increase in the scope of administrative activity.\textsuperscript{105}

To England, Henry II gave not a vast dominion, according to W.L Warren, but gave the art of government to his kingdom and heirs, where the art of war eventually became the art of government.

Henry II’s son, Henry the Younger, died before Henry II. Consequently, Henry II’s next eldest son, Richard (r. 1189-1199), ascended the throne after his father’s death in 1189, after having rebelled against his father — once in 1173 and then later in 1184 in protest of his lands being passed onto his younger brother John.\textsuperscript{106} From a long history of rebellion and warfare, Richard developed a keen sense of battle. The ten years of Richard I’s kingship, he managed to

\textsuperscript{104} Ibid, 138.
\textsuperscript{105} Ibid, 149.
\textsuperscript{106} Nigel Saul, \textit{The Three Richards}, (Hambledon Continuum: London and New York, 2005), 36.
become “one of the most charismatic leaders of his day,”107 and set the bar for a king’s military success and renown. “He was a spectacular leader and a clever general.”108

Richard sat on the throne of England for one year before he set sail on the Third Crusade, after investing large amounts of the Crown’s wealth into preparations.109 The Crusade would cement Richard I’s name among the most noble and admired of kings during the medieval period. “He was not only the “single most influential commander on crusade”110 but, by the end of the crusade in 1192, secured a three years’ truce and the right “for pilgrims to journey to the Holy Places,”111 after coming to a military standstill against his main adversary, Saladin.

Richard’s military feats while in the Holy Land, particularly the quick surrender of the city of Acre after his arrival and his successful battles against the formidable Saladin, earned him the jealousy and ire of other powerful commanders including Leopold, the duke of Austria, and the king of France, Phillip II. On his return to England from the crusades, Leopold captured Richard while he rode through Austria. Richard was given to the Holy Roman Emperor, Henry VI, and for a year kings and princes haggled over him.112 Eventually, Richard and Henry VI came to an agreement where Richard would pay “Henry 100,000 marks and supply him with fifty galleys and two hundred knights for a year.”113 King Phillip II and Richard’s brother John attempted to stop the deal, and when that failed, stalled to raise the money needed for Richard’s release, which was eventually capped at a higher sum than the original agreement. In 1194, Richard I gained his freedom.

110 Ibid, 42.
111 Ibid, 44.
112 Ibid.
113 Ibid, 45.
Upon his release, Richard returned briefly to England, where he again crowned himself king, “to wipe away ‘the disgrace of captivity’”¹¹⁴ and he “took punitive action against John and his fellow conspirators,”¹¹⁵ for delaying Richard’s release. Following his second coronation, Richard set sail for Normandy and the Angevin dominions where Phillip II had seized land during Richard’s imprisonment. “For the next five years…Richard was continuously in France and almost as continuously at war.”¹¹⁶ Richard broke Phillip’s hold, at a great expense, and “virtually all that Philip, with the connivance of Richard’s brother, John, had gained during the English king’s absence was lost.”¹¹⁷ Despite such a defeat for France, conflict began again a year later when Phillip launched a surprise attack against Richard’s French lands. During this new campaign, Richard died in 1199 from a lucky shot as he patrolled the area “near his tent.”¹¹⁸

Richard I reigned for a decade, but spent little time in England, and used the country as a source of revenue to pursue war.

The financial burden of the Crusade had been quickly followed by civil disturbances during Richard’s absence, and then by the unprecedented sacrifices demanded of everyone for his ransom. With his release there began a heavy expenditure on war with Philip or preparations for it. Every year for five years the bills mounted for the building or remodeling of castles, the laying in or equipment, the purchase of…alliances, and the hire of mercenaries.¹¹⁹

Richard would be remembered, however, as a great warrior king who brought victory to his people, and demonstrated the values of chivalry highly praised by the elite. Chivalry had become an important ideology for the warrior elites of England. For example, Richard I himself frequently emulated the character of King Arthur. He not only supposedly carried Excalibur, but

fought under a dragon banner similar to Arthur’s emblem. Richard imitated Arthur through acts of war, and was frequently compared to the legendary king because he led a Crusade, fighting in the Holy Lands for a Christian cause. Richard displayed characteristics important within the character of King Arthur and kings themselves. He displayed “prowess, valour, and the sense of honour which…were qualities that made him a legend.” As John Gillingham explicitly stated “they [the qualities] endangered his life, but while he lived they contributed greatly to his successes. After his death they ensured that his reputation lived on.” As Richard I emulated the qualities of chivalric masculinity found within King Arthur and expected within a king, he managed to establish a reputation as a great and powerful king.

Richard himself had no legitimate children, and it was his brother John who succeeded him to the throne. John was the fourth son of Henry II and Eleanor of Aquitaine, and came to power at the age of thirty-three. Richard died in the middle of reconquering lands in France, and once John took the throne his first order of business was to take up the war and secure his claim to the throne.

Besides the burdens left by his brother, John’s claim to the throne was not without issues. His older brother Geoffrey had a son, Arthur of Brittany, who held a claim to the throne, regardless of Richard’s wishes or will. When news came of Richard’s death, John, in Angevin lands, rode for Chinon where the treasury was kept. The treasury had long been the best ploy to secure the throne, and John, fearful of Arthur becoming king, claimed the treasury to give himself an additional bargaining chip. His mother, Eleanor of Aquitaine, gave her support to her

---

122 Ibid, 348.
123 Ibid, 348.
son and further elevated his claim,\textsuperscript{125} as did William Marshal and the archbishop of Canterbury. The debate in England on who had the superior right to the throne spurred John’s actions as well. Some thought “‘the younger son is the nearer heir to the inheritance of his father than the child of the elder brother who died before his father,’”\textsuperscript{126} while others argued for the child of the elder brother as having a greater claim to the inheritance. However, to many of the barons, John appeared the better choice.

John offered homage to king Philip of France to end the war, but the king of France “pitched the price of peace impossibly high. He demanded Anjou, Main, and Touraine for Arthur and a critical slice of the Norman March for himself.”\textsuperscript{127} John refused, but after allying himself with several powerful lords, the king of France was forced to seek peace.\textsuperscript{128} In the formal treaty, the Treaty of Le Goulet, Philip acknowledged John as the heir to all the lands Henry II and Richard I had ruled, including the lands in France, with the one exception that he held these lands “from the king of France as his overlord.”\textsuperscript{129} King Philip agreed to acknowledge Arthur of Brittany as one of John’s vassals. War broke out soon, however, as John, unlike his father and brother, “could never quite bring himself to be generous in victory.”\textsuperscript{130} His inability to provide Poitou with compensation after the war led to a rebellion among John’s French subjects. Philip intervened as John’s feudal lord but John ignored Philip’s requests. Philip declared John had completely disregarded his overlord and so “forfeited his fiefs of Aquitaine, Poitou, and

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item[\textsuperscript{127}] Ibid, 53.
\item[\textsuperscript{128}] Ibid, 54.
\item[\textsuperscript{129}] Ibid, 54.
\item[\textsuperscript{130}] Ibid, 71.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
Anjou...[king Philip] formally declared the feudal ties linking him with John to be severed and threw his forces against the Norman border.”

The war went poorly for John. He gave his mercenaries too much power, insulted his barons, and through the uneven distribution of power caused the breakdown of government in Normandy. A year later “Normandy was virtually lost,” after the fall of key defensive positions and seats of power. Philip progressed further into John’s lands without any legal obstacles slowing his conquest and “the whole of John’s reign after the fall of Normandy was dominated by attempts to recover the territories in France.”

Around this time John began to distrust his own nobility. He feared his barons wanted the throne. What John believed to be treachery was actually growing dissatisfaction as John failed to address issues within the kingdom, including the barons’ exclusion from “all positions of power and influence in the administration of the realm.” John appeared to lack the ability to work with men who viewed themselves as his peers, and the barons showed their growing unhappiness by limiting their support as King Philip focused on invading England. With the threat of France looming, John hurried to gather enough support from the barons to ward off attack. Unwilling to meet head on, Philip and John reached a truce by the middle of fall.

In order to support the war, brief as it was, John levied a series of taxes against his subjects. “The heavy war taxation and disputes over military service all contributed to the crisis of his reign, culminating in [the] Magna Carta and civil war in 1215.” As more taxes fell upon the people, concern began to grow. John developed a reputation as a tyrant who pillaged his

132 Ibid, 97.
133 Ibid, 101.
subjects as the government demanded money from both the poor and the wealthy alike. Tensions built between the king and his administration, and the barons and peasants. As W.L Warrant stated:

There could be no harmony in England in the matter of the Crown’s finances until the barons, on the one hand, recognized the need for a system of taxation appropriate to the new economic conditions, and the king, on the other hand, limited his extraordinary expenditure to venture for which he could get approval. As it was, John had to squeeze and wring out the sources that antiquated feudal custom allowed him….The extortion of money for an unpopular war by an unpopular king is undoubtedly the factor in his malodorous reputation; but the root cause of it lies in the unpopularity of the war and the unpopularity of the king.\textsuperscript{138}

The growing tyranny of John pushed the powerful lords too far,\textsuperscript{139} and by 1215, with John unwilling to compromise or cede any power, “baronial dissidents were loudly demanding a royal charter of liberties.”\textsuperscript{140} A group of barons rose in rebellion. A large number remained neutral, neither declaring for the king nor their peers. The barons who did openly rebel demanded a charter to establish their rights and the power of the king. By the middle of the year, John met with the leaders of the rebels and began to work on a draft for a charter which would firmly establish the rights of nobles and king alike.

The charter, known as the Magna Carta, spelled out the rights and power of the king and his vassals. The charter lay “down that no free man is to be imprisoned, dispossessed, outlawed, exiled or damaged without lawful judgment of his peers or by the law of the land.”\textsuperscript{141} The charter further defined “the king’s rights” and established “protection for the vassal.”\textsuperscript{142} Shortened in a

slightly later law book, the principles within the Magna Carta can be summed up to: 
“‘the king
must not be under man, but under God and under the law, because law makes the king.’”143

The signing of the Magna Carta did not halt the war for long. When Pope Innocent III
“annulled the Magna Carta,”144 civil war erupted once again, and the rebelling barons called on
France for help.145 John grew sick during the campaign as he struggled to reclaim rebel territory
and hold off the French, and he died in mid-October of 1217. “John’s death itself helped the
cause of his house, for many who had opted for Louis in his stead bore no animosity against his
infant son.”146

John left behind a legacy of distrust between king and baron. He could not wage war as
effectively as his brother Richard, nor could he summon the skills needed to maintain peace
within his own kingdom. John’s lasting legacy, the Magna Carta, demonstrates the failures of his
kingship, and his inability to act a proper king. In fact, the Magna Carta could be seen as an
attempt by the barons to insist on the institution of justice and the codes of chivalry that even a
king must follow if he wishes to remain in power.147 Such an insistence by the elite warrior
classes demonstrates that by this time elite, fighting men believed in the fantasy of chivalry, and
subsequently demanded their king act in the manner of King Arthur. In comparison to his brother
Richard, John is not remembered well because he could not imitate the code of chivalry or the
keystone of chivalry that is King Arthur. He lost both masculine and political power due to his
inability to fulfill the characteristics of chivalrous masculinity and subsequently had to fight to
maintain his throne.

235.
William Marshal, a powerful lord and distinguished knight, assumed control as regent after John’s death. He surprised the rebels and the French when he issued a “revised version of [the] Magna Carta” in Henry’s name. William Marshal then routed the French army and the barons who had refused to support Henry. After France’s defeat, the neutral barons joined William Marshal and “on 12 September 1217 peace was restored to England.” The way was set for Henry, the nine-year-old son of John, to take the throne, and begin the long and lustrous history of the Plantagenet dynasty which used their ability to properly imitate King Arthur and the code of chivalry to maintain power.

Chapter Two
King Arthur: the Chivalric Performance of Elite Masculinity

Throughout the reign of the Angevins (1154-1216), in particular beginning with King Henry II (r. 1216-1272), kings of England actively encouraged and promoted the production of Arthurian literature more than any kings before. The demand for Arthurian works continued throughout the Plantagenet dynasty (see chapter three). Nigel Saul has argued that “by the fourteenth century the flow of Arthurian literature was rapidly turning into a flood.”¹⁵⁰ Many of the works focused on the deeds of knights, their chivalric acts and the controlled violence inherent in chivalry. The stories were very masculine, with their focus on knights, tournaments, and duels, revealing through example the type of behaviors an elite man should strive to emulate. The understanding that elite men should emulate these behaviors is suggested by the recurrence of the same traits through three centuries of literature from Henry II to Richard II. With the repetition of traits and the fact that only men are demonstrating these behaviors in the literature shows that the traits of chivalry are normative gender standards in reality. Chivalry could only be demonstrated through male bodies. Bodies sexed as female could not perform chivalry.

The performance of chivalry an elite man should emulate, if he wished to be viewed as masculine, appears in nearly all of the Arthurian literature, but in particular can be found in Geoffrey of Monmouth’s The History of the Kings of Britain, Wace’s Roman de Brut, Layamon’s the Brut, Gereint and Enid, Owein, The Rise of Gawain: Nephew of Arthur, Gawain and the Green Knight, and The Knight of the Cart where Arthur is either the main or secondary character. Regardless of his role in the literature, Arthur stands above the rest for he, as a great and chivalrous king, has drawn great knights to his cause. Between the actions of Arthur and

characters like Gawain, Lancelot, Gereint and Owein, the required acts to properly perform chivalric masculinity become apparent, and by the Plantagenet dynasty, chivalry had become a hegemonic ideology of the elite warrior class.\textsuperscript{151} (See diagram 2.1)

Authors produced dozens of works between the reigns of the Angevin king Henry II to the last Plantagenet ruler, Richard II, in 1399. The continuing publication and creation of Arthurian works reified the importance of chivalry and continued to mystify the violence inherent in both reality and chivalry. The first work which specifically used Arthur as a main literary character came from Geoffrey of Monmouth in 1138 when he wrote \textit{The History of the Kings of Britain}. Within the work, Geoffrey of Monmouth traces the history of the island, and that history culminates with Arthur’s reign and the aftermath of his death. While Geoffrey of Monmouth’s work is one of the earliest pieces of Arthurian literature, the developing essence of chivalric knighthood, with key components like bravery, honor and loyalty, is still evident within the book. Geoffrey described Arthur as a fifteen year-old youth when he comes to the throne. “Although Arthur was only fifteen years old at the time, he was a youth of outstanding virtue and largess. His innate goodness made him exhibit such grace that he was beloved by almost all the people.”\textsuperscript{152} As king, Arthur consults with his advisors for help and agrees, on occasion, to their requests or words of advice. He does not act alone or without counsel. He fights alongside his men. “Seeing their commander in the midst of the enemy lines, the rest of the Britons followed suit, dealing out great slaughter left and right.”\textsuperscript{153} When his men lose their courage or cannot

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{151} Even today literature is used to demonstrate how individuals, depending upon their social backgrounds, are to act within society. The Middle Ages were no different.
\textsuperscript{152} Michael Faletra, \textit{The History of the Kings of Britain [by] Geoffrey of Monmouth}, (Toronto: Broadview Editions, 2008), 163.
\textsuperscript{153} Ibid, 167.
\end{flushright}
withstand the enemy, Arthur is quick to rally their hopes and wade into battle. Not only does Arthur fight alongside his men, but he invites great warriors to his court in order to increase the prestige of his kingdom. Great warriors also desire to serve in Arthur’s court for it is an honor to serve such a great king. “King Arthur then invited all the bravest men from the far-flung reaches of his domains to join his household. In this, he was able to cultivate such refinement in his court that people far and wide sought to emulate it.” Primarily, Geoffrey designed Arthur as a man who embodied values which were “martial ones: pious patriotism, bravery, generosity.”

Geoffrey of Monmouth also describes Arthur and his knights in more peaceful times. The author’s “evocations of Arthur’s court at peacetime provide glimpses of the chivalric pageantry associated with courtly romance: knights wear their own heraldic colors and flock to Arthur’s court, which has become a beacon of courtesy.” Knights who have already proven themselves or wish to demonstrate their prowess travel to Arthur’s court. For Geoffrey of Monmouth, only a great, respected king could draw such warriors to his cause. With other knights agreeing to fight for Arthur, and in fact trying to emulate Arthur, Geoffrey demonstrates the requirements to be a great king. He shows how men, specifically kings, can properly perform chivalric masculinity. If a king can embody the traits of the mythical King Arthur, who is the keystone of chivalry and draws chivalrous men to him, then that king is worthy of political and masculine power, and his rule over other elite men is justified.

Following Geoffrey of Monmouth, Wace, an Anglo-Norman, displayed in his work an example of the structures of power within his Arthurian stories in the early years of the reign of

---

155 Ibid, 171.
157 Ibid, 42.
Henry II. He continued Geoffrey of Monmouth’s example by using history and literature to legitimize the role of the warrior elite in Roman de Brut. According to Laurie Finke and Martin Shichtman, Wace “balanced the benefits of imperial conquest with pleasures of interspersed stretches of peace,”158 and a stretch of peace occurred during the reign of a strong monarch who could stop uprisings. Wace stressed the advantages of peace because it pleased his patrons, and emphasized the “position of dominance…they [the aristocrats] had worked so hard to achieve.”159 Wace’s Roman de Brut, written in 1155, charts the history of the Britons alongside Arthur’s kingship, and one of his heroic characters, instrumental in Britain’s rise, is King Arthur.

Wace’s Arthur is a great king fighting against the Saxons to protect his homeland. In Wace’s introduction to Arthur, Arthur is also a tall and strong fifteen year-old. He is brave and invincible but still gives to others generously and helps those who are in need. “He was a most mighty knight, admirable and renowned, proud to the haughty and gentle and compassionate to the humble…He greatly loved renown and glory, he greatly wished his deeds to be remembered. For as long as he lived and reigned, he surpassed all other monarchs in courtesy and nobility, generosity and power.”160 Arthur’s actions throughout Wace’s narrative depict such a king. He fights with valor and power. He is not afraid to charge into the heat of battle nor does he fear peace.

For twelve years…Arthur reigned in peace. No one dared to make war on him, nor did he go to war himself. On his own, with no other instruction, he acquired such knightly skill and behaved so nobly, so finely and courteously, that there was no court so talked about, not even that of the Roman emperor. He never heard of a knight who was in any way considered to be praiseworthy who would not belong to his household, provided that he

---

159 Ibid, 94.
could get him, and if such a one wanted his service, he would never leave deprived of it.\textsuperscript{161}

As Arthur grew to be great, other knights sought him out because they wanted to fight, as was noble, for the greatest king. Wace made sure to note that “Arthur honoured all of his men, especially cherishing and rewarding the best ones,”\textsuperscript{162} and that he took counsel from his barons. Wace was not discreet in what he argued to be a proper king. He explains the exact characteristics a great king should hold, and the greatest example of chivalric masculinity to Wace was King Arthur. Wace argued indirectly, much like Geoffrey of Monmouth, that if a king can emulate the traits of Arthur he is worthy of political and masculine power. By using Arthur as an example, both Wace and Geoffrey of Monmouth are showing their readers what is needed to become a king who maintains both his masculine and political power; becoming a successful king is accomplished through mimicking Arthur and the traits of chivalric masculinity.

Contemporary writers transferred \textit{The Mabinogion}, a collection of Welsh stories, from an oral tradition into a written form in the thirteenth century.\textsuperscript{163} Within several of the stories, King Arthur’s court acts as the background for the heroic knights.\textsuperscript{164} Both \textit{Owein} and \textit{Gereint and Enid} demonstrate knightly expectations through their character traits. Owein, a knight within Arthur’s court, seeks adventures as a way to prove his worth. Like other stories, Owein encounters impossible odds and faces foes with great combat skills. He overcomes each obstacle in the pursuit of his quest, demonstrating great prowess in combat. First, he fought the Black Knight, and then he fought the knights in Arthur’s routine, defeating each in turn. “And

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{161} Judith Weiss, \textit{Wace’s Roman de Brut/A History of the British}, (Exeter, UK: University of Exeter Press, 2010), 245.
\item \textsuperscript{162} Ibid, 257
\item \textsuperscript{163} Though not read by the Norman court, the \textit{Mabinogion} would have been a source for the writers producing chivalry literature.
\item \textsuperscript{164} While there is a chance that these stories were not widely available even to the elite, Chretien de Troyes had material that was very similar to, or copied the stories found in, the Mabinogion.
\end{itemize}
thereafter each man in Arthur’s retinue went to joust with the knight, and all were thrown.”165 He defeated a man who captured the sons of an earl and then, to free his friend Luned, he fought two youths who imprisoned her. Owein did not take a reward for his effort, and when he married the Lady of the Well to protect her lands, he asked for nothing in return. He entered into each duel to protect another, to uphold honor or prove his worth. Over all, he set out on his quest to maintain his reputation as a knight.

Between duels, however, the ideology of chivalry is apparent within the story. When Owein fails to fulfill a promise, a promise he made to a woman he rescued and later married, the Lady of the Well, he punishes himself by wandering into the wilderness until his “clothes fall off and his body all but gave out and long hair grew all over him.”166 He refused to return to his wife until he did penance for his lack of honor and his failure to uphold a promise.167 His actions suggest that a knight who cannot keep his word is unworthy of being a knight for he cannot control his basest of natures or his violent instinct. Owein demonstrates compassion when he rescues a lion from a serpent. Instead of killing the lion, he allows the beast to travel with him. “He saw the lion following and sporting about like a greyhound he had reared himself.”168

From Owein, chivalry is represented as a knightly ideal with encompasses skills in battle, dedication to proving one’s worth, keeping one’s word and showing compassion towards those unable to defend themselves. “The importance of kindness and courtesy is also stressed [in the story]. Owein’s generosity in saving the lion…earns him the aide of a powerful friend.”169 In contrast, Kei’s rude boasting of his achievements as well as the rudeness he displays to Owein, in

---

166 Ibid, 209.
167 A major aspect of chivalry was a knight’s piety. However, piety itself is not always as explicit as a chivalric requirement within the literature. Piety was frequently hegemonic, a naturalized expectation.
169 Ibid, 193.
what sends Owein off to prove his worth, demonstrates that knights who act unchivalrously by 
boasting and demeaning their peers do not deserve to be considered knights. Group loyalty and 
cohesion is a chivalric necessity. Kei’s punishment stems from Owein himself when he, acting as 
the black knight, “struck him [Kei] in the forehead with his spear butt,”\textsuperscript{170} and summarily 
defeated Kei, proving Owein the greater knight.

Another story in the Mabinogion, \textit{Gereint and Enid} follows a knight who tries to show 
his worth to not only King Arthur, but to his wife, Enid. Geraint’s quests began to redeem his 
honor and the honor of Gwenhwyfar’s maiden. He defeated the reigning champion of a great 
tournament who had impinged upon his honor and won the maiden Enid. He continued to enter 
tournaments after returning to his homeland to prove his skills and attain glory. “As had been his 
custom in Arthur’s court he went to tournaments and encountered the boldest and strongest men, 
until he was famous in that region as he had been before with Arthur, and had enriches his court 
and companions and noblemen with the best horse and arms and the best and rarest jewels. He 
did not leave off until his reputation had spread over the face of the land.”\textsuperscript{171} He demonstrated 
chivalry by protecting the honor of Guinevere’s maiden, and through his participation in 
tournaments, where war is stylized and bound by rules, to demonstrate his skills. When he 
dragged Enid into the wilderness, he did so to prove his worth much as he did when he 
participated in tournaments.

The story suggests that the performance of chivalry is a continuous way of life. Knights 
are no longer knights worthy of positions of honor if they do not continue to appear in 
tournaments, fight in war, or enter into fair duels. Gereint’s entire quest hinged upon his growing 
laziness and the loss of respect from Enid and Geraint’s fellow knights. The moment Gereint

\textsuperscript{171} Ibid, 277.
stopped dueling, “he began to lose the hearts of his noblemen, and his hunting and sport, and the hearts of all the people at court until there was a murmuring against him and reviling of him in secret by these people, because he had forsaken their company for the company of a woman.” 172

Here, the author suggests that if a man wishes to remain great, he must constantly prove his worth. Once Geraint realized this, “from that time forth he ruled prosperously, with prowess and splendor, and won praise and fame for himself and for Enid ever after.” 173

While Arthur is not a main character within either Owein or Gereint and Enid, the authors do show the basic traits needed to gain knightly political and masculine power through the proper performance of chivalry. These traits, such as prowess, honor, and compassion define key components in chivalric masculinity, components both knights and kings must maintain if they are to become leaders either over an entire kingdom or a small retinue. Both Owein and Gereint attain masculine and political power by properly performing chivalric masculinity (while attending the court of Arthur who is the keystone of chivalry). Both are admired by other knights and lauded by their liege lord Arthur because they are viewed as elite warriors who are skillful in battle, compassionate, and honorable. Due to such traits, both men gain lands, beautiful wives, and great renown. If knights within reality wish to gain masculine and political power such as Owein and Gereint, these men are shown through the literature how such power is gained.

Layamon’s Brut, written between the reign of Richard I and the death of Richard’s mother, Eleanor of Aquitaine, in 1204, 174 is the story of Arthur’s death and betrayal by his son/brother/nephew Mordred. Layamon revealed how kings should act through Arthur in the Brut. The character Arthur honored all of his men through praise or physical rewards, and

173 Ibid, 297.
showed that good kings and knights reward their followers generously. Layamon also wanted to demonstrate that honor and equality should exist between elite men. As elite men were expected to respect each other for their individual feats, Layamon created a symbol of such equality by adding the Round Table to the Arthurian legends. Layamon points out himself that before the Round Table, “Arthur must rule by fear, threatening anyone who thinks of breaking the peace with awful consequences,” but once the Round Table is created, Arthur and his knights no longer hold enmity toward each other. Instead, Arthur and his knights recognize the prowess of the others with respect instead of jealousy. To Layamon, a crux of chivalry was respect and the ability to reward others for their diplomacy.

While Arthur himself is recognized as a great knight, Layamon used the actions of Mordred to provide an example on how knights should not act. Mordred, left by Arthur to defend the kingdom, takes control as king, and betrays his liege lord. The betrayal signifies a deep act of shame to which a knight should never stoop. Arthur, upon hearing the news, says, “Never in my entire life did I even envision that Mordred, my nephew, the man whom I most love, would betray me so totally for the treasure I own.” Mordred’s action on the battlefield and in the face of certain death, show even more forcefully how knights should not act. Mordred is concerned only about his own welfare, betrays citizens who supported him and does nothing which does not benefit him. “He was utterly wicked, as he was always so. He betrayed all the burghers…he left people who were loyal there to perish.”

Layamon’s idea of chivalry includes generosity, loyalty, bravery, and the ability to accept other knights as equals. Like other authors before him, Layamon reveals ways in which a king

---

177 Ibid, 117.
can gain masculine and political power and establish himself as a respected leader. If a king can follow the example set by Arthur while avoiding the example demonstrated by Mordred, a king within reality will achieve success and renown during his reign.

The date of *The Rise of Gawain: Nephew of Arthur* is unknown. Scholars believe the story was produced after *the History of the Kings of Britain* but by the end of the fourteenth century. Most likely the author wrote the story during the reign of Henry II between 1154-1189. The story follows the rise of Gawain, his acceptance into Arthur’s court and how he became a great knight. Gawain is raised away from Arthur’s court, his existence unknown to Arthur, and grows to adulthood in Gaul. He is raised by a noble but poor man and Gawain, once his foster father dies, is given to the emperor of Rome who knows that Gawain’s true parentage ties him to “the man whose fame for great prowess flies everywhere.” Gawain enters adulthood under the tutelage of the emperor and joins with the Order of Equestrians, a renowned warrior group.

Gawain displays the characteristics of knighthood early in his life. He “strove always for even higher achievements in valor and prowess. A distinguished reputation and singular daring were attributed to him in every encounter of every tournament.” Gawain’s skills in combat are so valuable that the emperor sends him on a mission to protect, upon Gawain’s request, people of the Christian faith. Gawain succeeds in defending the Christian faith, fighting both honorably and well. “The emperor, restoring him to the company of his closest companions, resolved to raise him to the highest honors and to grant him high rank…[but] the Knight of the Surcoat,

---

179 Ibid, 370.
180 Ibid, 371.
distaining a peaceful life and desiring military action, eagerly inquired what region was torn by the tumults of war.”\textsuperscript{181}

Gawain thus makes his way to Arthur’s court. There, Gawain demonstrates his skills in battle against Arthur who shames himself by not listening to the advice of others. Gawain again proves his battle skills by fighting pagans in the name of Christianity to prove his worth as a knight to Arthur. “The Knight of the Surcoat, having gained victory without injury to himself, cut off the head of the pagan king.”\textsuperscript{182} Gawain demonstrates through his actions the high value placed on combat skills, the importance of listening to the advice of others, protecting those less powerful and less fortunate, and fighting for causes which are just, such as the Christian cause. As with Gereint, Gawain must continually demonstrate his abilities a knight but his abilities as a knight are what catapults him into masculine and political power. With greater effectiveness than the previous works, The Rise of Gawain: Nephew of Arthur directly correlates masculine power with a knight’s prowess in battle. If a knight can find success in tournaments, duels, or war itself, he will be a valued individual within a kingdom. By properly performing chivalric masculinity via violence, the way is open for knights to gain political power for they can accrue great wealth and lands while fighting under a king such as King Arthur.

In The Knight of the Cart, written by Chrétien de Troyes in the late twelfth century, Arthur plays a minor role, but it is under his supervision that the story takes place. The focus is on Lancelot, and his attempt to first rescue queen Guinevere, and then prove himself to her. The duties of a knight are quite clearly demonstrated through the actions of Arthur, Lancelot, Gawain, and Kay. Gawain demonstrates restraint, and avoids “the ignominy of being regarded as

\textsuperscript{182} Ibid, 396.
a criminal,” by refusing to jump into a cart meant for criminals, though it is the fastest way to find the missing Guinevere. Lancelot, on the other hand, jumps into the cart with only a moment’s hesitation. Chrétien’s attempt at showing the conflict between Love and Reason, reveals the two opposing value systems which have arisen in medieval society. Chrétien’s decision suggests that though Lancelot is not an ideal knight, he is the best knight to save Guinevere and Arthur’s kingdom, which is at odds with the common ideologies of the day: chivalry.

Early in the story, the author established that holding true to one’s promise is a crucial knightly trait. “Though it saddened the king, he entrusted her to Kay, for never was he known to break his word.” Lancelot keeps the promises he makes to himself, strangers and Guinevere and, if such promises conflict, he seeks solutions which appeal to both parties. “Now the victorious knight hesitated and reflected upon his decision: should he give the head to this girl who has asked him to cut it off, or should he be touched by pity for the defeated knight? He wishes to content them both: Generosity and Compassion demand that he satisfy them both, for he is equally generous and merciful.”

Throughout the story, Lancelot engages in numerous duels, a tournament, and a battle, from which he comes through victorious. He is lauded as a knight skillful in combat. Wherever Lancelot travels, others are amazed by his feats of combat. Some version of “‘Never have I seen such a good knight…and never was there anyone to equal him,’” follows Lancelot like a bur. The bravery and strength Lancelot displays are highly valued by onlookers. In contrast,

---

184 Ibid, 49.
186 Ibid, 153.
187 Ibid, 147.
cowardice is viewed as shameful. To avoid being labeled a coward, Lancelot acts with bravery and strength, or with “Nobility.” In this way, Lancelot gains honor.

Alongside the ideals of strength and bravery, knights are supposed to respect the wives of other knights. They are not to engage in any sexual contact. Kay, when accused of sleeping with Guinevere, responds “May God never absolve my soul after I leave this world if ever I lay with my lady. Indeed I would much rather be dead than to have committed such a base and blameworthy act against my lord.”188 While the main character Lancelot does have sex with Guinevere, Chrétien used Kay to make it abundantly clear that committing such an act with another man’s wife is not only intolerable but a sin against God. In addition, Lancelot is so devoted to Guinevere that he allows her to rule him. When she demands he “do his worst” in a tournament and then to “do the best’ he can”189, the reader realizes that Lancelot has no power over himself when it comes to Guinevere. She makes him weak, and though he is a great warrior, skills in battle are not everything. He cannot be ruled by a woman and maintain honor. A true knight must also be loyal to his king (another man, not a woman), compassionate, courageous, and shun coveting and cowardice. Through Lancelot’s flawed character, the author clearly depicts how a knight should perform. Lancelot is a character who realizes his faults, and accepts his mistakes. However, Lancelot continues to make the same mistakes because he is blinded by love, suggesting that love is dangerous for a knight’s honor. On the surface Lancelot gains masculine power, for he is admired and respected by other knights, but his political and masculine power is, in reality, weakened by his reliance on, and his great love for, a woman. He is unable to remove himself from her influence. Chrétien de Troyes arguably suggests that women restrict access to a knight’s political and masculine power.

189 Ibid, 186.
Gawain’s character and his exploits provide the contrast to Lancelot’s quest in the name of Love. Gawain goes after Guinevere not because of love but because of loyalty to his king. He is far more reasonable than Lancelot, does not needlessly risk his life, and approaches situations with greater calm. He, unlike Lancelot, is not blinded by love, and he gives praise where praise is due. For example, he easily admits it was not he who brought back the queen. “‘Your praise must stop at once, because none of this is my doing. I am ashamed to be honored so, for I did not get there soon enough and failed because of my delay.’”

Through Gawain and Lancelot, Chrétien’s idea of chivalry emerges. Knights are to be wise, skilled in battle, loyal, dedicated to a cause, and, above all, not ruled by their love for a woman. If they can achieve these traits, they will achieve masculine and political power, and be admired and respected by their peers.

_Gawain and the Green Knight_, written by an anonymous author in the thirteenth century, both begins and ends at Arthur’s court but follows the exploits of Gawain, Arthur’s nephew. While Gawain is the main character in _Gawain and the Green Knight_, the actions of Arthur still create an important impression of how elite men should act. First, Arthur is, without doubt, in command. When the Green Knight bursts upon their banquet, Arthur is set to meet the Green Knight’s challenge but Gawain, wanting to prove himself and protect the king from injury, asks Arthur for permission to take his place and challenge the green knight. Arthur’s permission allows Gawain to prove himself a knight. From Arthur’s ready acceptance to face the Green Knight to his willingness to let Gawain fight in his place demonstrates two things: Arthur is brave and not afraid to rise to a challenge but neither is he insecure about his own skill that he cannot let another fight for him. In addition, Arthur admits affection for Gawain and his other

---


191 Even chaste love and Marian devotion, like all other aspects of a knight’s life, must be controlled if a knight is to remain the hegemonic form of masculinity. He cannot be seen to be controlled by another which holds a lower rank.
knights. “Arthur, the artful king, felt a bit anxious at heart.” He is not “weak-kneed” and he demonstrates a large degree of courtesy to his fellow knights. He sees to their needs, entertains them and “would not sit down until they [the knights and their ladies] were served.” In all, Arthur shows that kings need to be secure in their abilities, willing to let others fight for them, and show compassion and love towards peers. The knight is thus an extension of the king who is the keystone to the ideology of chivalry.

Alongside Arthur’s strength, courtesy and confidence, Gawain’s actions add another element to the ideology of chivalric masculinity. Gawain is eager to prove himself and show his loyalty to his liege lord. “For I find it unthinkable…/that when such a weird request is raised in your halls/ you alone should have the yearning to undertake it yourself/ while so many bold warriors are warming these benches/ who, I know, stand second to none in fighting spirit/…I’m the weakest of them all, I’m aware…/…and since this is a foolish fuss, it shouldn’t fall upon you/ For since I’ve asked for it first, it is fittingly mine.” Gawain is later said to be famous for being a good man, “as pure as gold,” and faithful in all ways.

Unfortunately, Gawain ultimately fails the challenge set out before him by the Green Knight. He is seduced into accepting a kiss by the Green Knight’s wife, and shrinks back when the Green Knight tries to behead him. Gawain realizes he acted dishonorably and fearfully – acts a knight should never commit. Gawain takes those failures to heart. He acknowledges his flaws. “Now I’m false and flawed, I who always was fearful/ of treachery and lack of truth…/I confess

193 Ibid, 403.
194 Ibid, 410.
195 Ibid, 417.
to you, my dear knight/ the wrongs I committed there.” 196 In addition to his acknowledgement, Gawain also decides to mark himself by wearing a garter to symbolize his failure. “And I have to wear it for as long as I may live/ for a man can hide his hurt but never hurl it away/ since once it is attached, it will not disappear.” 197 Gawain is determined to not only show that he failed but remind himself of that failure so he never does it again. While the rest of the court ignores Gawain’s failure, he cannot. “This makes for a most unusual ending. Heroes of romance not uncommonly commit faults, but by the end these will most often be either forgiven or forgotten…” 198 The other knights of Arthur’s court, however, honor Gawain’s ultimate success. The ending suggests that knights have flaws, but even with their faults a knight can still uphold the ideals of chivalry if they continue to prove their worth and strive toward the goal of chivalry. More importantly, if a knight is viewed as chivalrous in the eyes of his peers, his own self view does not matter. The opinion of other’s is what makes a knight chivalrous and nets him political power.

Literature was not the only source which tried to impart the importance of chivalry. The impact of chivalric masculinity, and its continuing importance, can be seen in the need of other writers, including knights themselves, to examine and define the requirements needed to be a true knight. Such an example of chivalry can be found in commentaries like the Livre de chevalerie, which provides a good summary of chivalrous behavior and characteristics. Geoffroi de Chanry, one of “quintessential knights of the age,” 199 wrote the Livre de chevalerie before his death in 1356. While the Livre de chevalerie is not a work of literature, it provides an accurate

and contemporary discussion of chivalry. Geoffroi de Charny was a French knight who was active during the Hundred Years’ War (1337-1453), and died in the battle of Poitiers in 1356, where he fought alongside the French king and held the French banner, the Oriflamme. He was a knight of renown, praised by both the French and the English, and produced a work which revealed the expectations of chivalry. Charny was not original in his work but he explained the core ideals of chivalry from a place of experience, and as one who counted himself among the chivalrous elite. His work was not designed to rival Arthurian romances or other such stories, but to inform and encourage knights who chose to follow a chivalrous path.  

Geoffroi de Charny discussed the proper actions, expectations, and the image of the knight; knighthood and the responsibilities of chivalry were to be viewed as heavy responsibilities only undertaken by men of power or great rank. Geoffroi de Charny clearly believed that knighthood was an occupation only for the elite warriors. Men who were not elite warriors were to honor those who were capable of burdening themselves with the weight of chivalry. “I say therefore that one should honor the great lords…and when the men of such condition are in the company of other people, they are held in higher regard than the rest. Then men prefer to listen to them above all others, for they can talk of great, important and honorable affairs, and it seems to everyone that they should and can speak of such matter…” To Charny, knights who engaged in warfare, other than tournaments and local wars, were to be valued and honored far more highly than other knights. 

…It seems to me that in the practice of arms in war it is possible to perform in one day all the three different kind of military art, that is jousting, tourneying, and waging war, for war requires jousting with the point of the lance and striking with the edge of the swords as in a tournament, and attacking with the swordthurst and other weapons, as war demands. Therefore one should value and honor men-at-arms engaged in war more

---

highly than any other men-at-arms…For this reason you should love, value, praise, and honor all those who God by his graces has granted several good days on the battlefield…for good fighting men prove themselves in good battles, where they show their worth…202

Other writers, historians and members of the upper classes agreed that honor was to be found in the midst of battle, a reminder that chivalry was simply justified violence for elite men.

To achieve the highest standard in deeds of arms, Geoffroi de Charny said that boys should begin to show an interest in warfare at an early age, then learn from and listen to experienced knights and, as time continues, perfect their own skills in the art of arms. And young men will thus “learn the true way to practice the military arts until they, on every occasion, know how to strive toward the most honorable course of action, whether in relation to deeds or arms or in relation to other forms of behavior appropriate to their rank. Then they reflect on, inform themselves, and inquire how to conduct themselves most honorably in all circumstance.”203

Knights, if they were to be true knights and follow the code of chivalry, studied the art of war. They fought in wars, both locally or distant, participated in tournaments and religious pilgrimages, and undertook quests for the love of a lady. True knights did not pamper their bodies, nor fear discomfort in the quest for honor. They avoided greed and quarrels, acted politely, did not boast, and always helped their friends.204 If a knight can follow Geoffroi de Charny’s advice, he would, or so the author seems to assume, rise to great renown and achieve honor among not only his peers but those of lower and higher ranks.

However, while knights were to be honored, great lords who follow the codes of chivalry were honored even more due to their greater valor and worth. These great noblemen, men who hold extensive lands, were to love and value all other men. A great nobleman knows of the great

---

204 Ibid, 129.
valor of other knights, and uses these knights to encourage others to reach a higher level of prowess. “Thus you can see that one hundred men skilled in deeds of arms make themselves a name all the sooner through one great and worthy lord…for the great lord has them in his company and loves, honors, and values them and rewards them, and they respect him, love, honor, and esteem him for the great valor they see in him...”205

The greatest of the great men, of course, were the kings. Kings were expected to be the paramount example of chivalry. They commanded power, respect, love and honor and rewarded their followers who in turn would make a name for themselves because they fought under such a great leader. Geoffroi de Charny argued in his treatise that men:

Should know that they [kings] were chosen [by God] in order to endure and withstand greater physical hardship, painful exertions, and mental anxiety than any of their people because of the heavy responsibility they had taken on in the task of government for which they had been chosen and with which they had been entrusted. They showed then great diligence in giving their people good government...they were, therefore, chosen so that they might place the people’s profit above their own...protect their people without taking anything from them apart from those dues the people owed...to administer justice and to maintain the rights of the humble as well as the mighty...they were, therefore, chosen to be the first to take up arms and to strive with all their might and expose themselves to the physical dangers of battle in defence of their people and their land. They were, therefore, chosen to be bold and of good courage against their enemies and against all those who seek to deprives them of possessions or honor. They were, therefore, chosen to give of their own freely and generously to men of worth who had well deserved it and to those likely to deserve it and to the poor to sustain them.206

Geoffroi de Charny continued to describe why kings were chosen, and what was expected of them as rulers. He compared good rulers with unworthy rulers, and argued that good rulers have more of the characteristics that he listed than those who are poor rulers. He ended by stating that

206 Ibid, 142-143.
knighthood was the most rigorous of all orders, either religious or secular, and that knighthood was the highest of life’s achievements.

Alongside Geoffroi de Charny’s work which could be read as a How-to-Manual for knights, the characters of the Arthurian legends clearly demonstrate, especially in their combined effort, the necessary requirements to become a chivalrous knight. For example, Arthur became recognized as a model warrior-king who never lost appeal as a leader. His character became defined through war, demonstrating patience, intelligence, and mercy. “War must always show Arthur as an almost titanically impressive figure.” Arthur spent peacetime hunting, maintaining justice, giant killing, and questing. Each activity cemented Arthur’s status as a hero, a duty-bound king, and as the defender of the land from “destructive forces.” He became an individual any man could admire. During peacetime, Arthur strove “to reconcile the demands of kingship, of knighthood and of individuality.”

Arthurian literature thus excused the violence which marked the life of a knight; chivalric masculinity became the expectation for elite men through literature. Based upon the collection of literary works, the character of King Arthur and his more well-known knights, Arthurian literature reveals the specific type of performance medieval English society expected from elite men. They showed that elite men were to enter, and win, tournaments, take counsel from other elite men, extend courtesy to women but not allow women to rule or ruin their lives, successfully lead armies into battle, admit their faults, try to overcome such flaws, serve their liege lord loyally, and, most importantly, embark on quests or adventures which would heighten the honor

209 Ibid, 70.
210 Ibid, 93.
and glory of the knight and continuously attempt to do so. Such quests can range from following
the king to war or heading out alone into the wilderness to conquer the hidden dangers of the
wild. The knightly ideal of masculinity carried with it an ideal physical appearance where a
knight was “handsome, tall, strong, and well-proportioned…broad-shouldered, slender at the
waist…has pale skin, and his eyes, nose and mouth are in proper proportion.”

Society believed warriors had voracious appetites, showed wisdom and courage, and, most importantly, developed deep bonds with other warriors, particularly ones close to their own social status. Military friendship was the most important relationship a man could have in his life.

Knighthood was the goal of, and propaganda for, elite men to maintain political power. Chivalry can be considered the ideology of elite masculinity during the High Middle Ages. Society expected a man to live up to the model behavior and representation of the ideal knight found within chivalric literature and pseudo-histories. The manliness associated with knights carried through the upper classes and even reached the king himself. The ideal of the knight, and the proper performance of that ideal, allowed the elite to maintain power amongst themselves and over others.

Knights who fulfilled such requirements rose to prominence among the elite. For example, William Marshall, the fourth son of a baron, rose through the proper performance of chivalry acts and participating in tournaments “from obscurity to the very top of the feudal aristocracy” when he acted as regent for the young Henry III (r. 1216-1272). Those who failed at properly performing the expectation of chivalry were not lauded by their peers and, in some cases, were punished or killed for their failure. The performance of chivalric masculinity was no

---

less important for kings and, in fact, required a higher level of performance in order to maintain power over other elite men. Good kings encouraged chivalry, and were encouraged themselves to imitate Arthur because he was the keystone to chivalry and elite power. As shown through Arthurian literature, chivalry stemmed from the king. Those kings who could emulate Arthur successful deserved to be king. The Plantagenet kings, in particular Edward III and Richard II, are clear examples of how the success or failure to perform chivalric masculinity can lead to a king’s triumph or ultimate usurpation where failure leads to the unleashing of violent, armed men.
Chapter Three  
The Plantagenets: Henry III through Edward II

The Plantagenet dynasty lasted from Henry III’s reign, which began in 1216 after the sudden death of King John I, to the end of Richard II’s reign in 1399. In the reign of every Plantagenet king, the king had to establish his superiority and power. Simon de Montfort, along with other barons, rose in rebellion against Henry III over a difference in politics and ideals. The reign of Edward II was rife with political instability, with those favored by the king gaining greater power over the course of his reign. Richard II’s authoritarian rule and habit of giving wealth and privileges to a select few led to his dynasty’s downfall. However, from lengthy periods of peace to moments of civil war, the Plantagenet kings were able to hold onto power and pass the crown to their intended heir at the time of their death. In this regard, the Plantagenet kings were successful.

The Plantagenets, a dynasty that could trace its line back to William the Conqueror and the dukes of Normandy as well as the counts of Anjou, lasted over one-hundred and eighty years. From Henry III to Richard II, England experienced a growing bureaucracy, the development of parliament, stable transitions between kings, both great success and failure in war, and few threats to the main economic power within England, the great land-owning lords. When conflict erupted, it came from specific disputes between the king, the nobility and, in rare circumstances, the peasantry. Conflicts typically ended with the next king, as many were specifically between a given king, his handling of government and the nobles’ discontent with

213 Primogeniture had not been fully established by the beginning, nor the end, of the Plantagenet Dynasty and while it became increasing common, primogeniture was not an engrained practice. Several of the Plantagenet kings, such as king John, had to rush to claim the treasury upon their predecessor’s death or wrote wills in which they explicitly named their heir, like Edward III. With this instability, the heir had to properly display kingly characteristics if he wanted a smooth transition between kings, and if the supposed heir was found wanting, other powerful lords might try to take the throne for themselves and receive ample support in doing so.

his form of rule. Conflicts with France were one of the few continuing issues throughout the dynasty. Through most of the Plantagenet rule, English kings controlled lands on both sides of the Channel, and, dependent upon the reigning king, swore fealty to the king of France, avoided fealty, or claimed the French throne for himself. War with France occurred within the reign of every Plantagenet king and could make or break the king’s influence and power within England. Some, specifically Edward III, rose above the rest, able to consolidate power, bring internal peace, prosperity and triumph over England’s enemies. Other kings struggled to maintain peace within their kingdom. Increased taxes on the elite were a major motive for rebellion as well as the political dissatisfaction of the king’s most powerful rivals. Additional ingredients for rebellion included the infringement on the nobility’s power and the selective nature of kingly favors. The successful kings demonstrated a knack for political persuasion, achieved great success in warfare, balanced kingly favors, dealt with rivals effectively, and displayed the characteristics of chivalry lauded by medieval people.215 (See diagram 3.1)

The first of the Plantagenets sat on the throne from an early age, and a regent ruled for Henry III between 1216 and 1232 until he came of age. Between his father’s death and the end of his minority, England ended the civil war, rebuilt, began the slow recovery to financial stability, and reissued the Magna Carta in 1225.216 While the country recovered, Henry III lost most of his lands in France but the power of France itself weakened in 1226 when King Louis died. His son, a minor, came to the throne and his mother, Blanchet of Castile, acted as regent. The death of his

---

215 Whether or not a king proved to be successful, all kings during the Plantagenet dynasty were expected to uphold a set of oaths. At his coronation, the king of England would swear a threefold oath (eventually a fourfold oath) in which the king promised to protect the Church, to maintain peace, and to administer proper justice. The fourth clause, added in 1308, swore to uphold any law the realm should choose.215 The king himself was above the law until the signing of Magna Carta by king John in 1215 in which the king now had to follow the laws of the land and could no longer claim to be above earthly rulings.215 Additionally, kingship in medieval England, believed to be ordained by God, viewed all the lands within England as the land of the king in which all landed nobility were the king’s vassals and expected to give homage and fealty him. Nigel Saul, *The Three Richards*, (Hambledon Continuum: London and New York, 2005), 23-25.

rival gave young Henry the chance he needed. He quickly courted the nobles of Normandy, Poitou, and Anjou.\textsuperscript{217} The nobles, many who had fought against England, defected back to Henry.

Despite the death of Louis, France continued to cause problems for the young king. The queen regent made a treaty with the nobles who had returned to Henry’s side to bring them back under French control. To defend his lands and limit any more loss of territory, Henry extended the peace treaty another year. As he tenuously held onto his French territories, the Welsh rose in rebellion against the king.\textsuperscript{218} Unable to defeat the Welsh and financially incapable of paying for the costs of new castles within Wales, Henry and the Welsh leader Llewellyn agreed to peace.\textsuperscript{219}

Henry received invitations to rule by lords in Normandy and Poitou, and refusing to miss the opportunity to extend his power, he assembled a large fleet and sailed for France but he made little progress. Magnates back in England severely criticized the costs of the war.\textsuperscript{220} Financially and militarily, Henry struggled to continue the war in France. As the war in France slowed, Wales once more returned to rebellion. Henry marched to Wales and forced the Welsh to retreat. The moment Henry departed, the Welsh leader Llewellyn invaded the lands of the marcher lords. Henry returned to Wales but the Welsh would not engage head-on. Henry returned to England and throughout 1232, Wales continued to harass the marcher lords.

Henry summoned a council to deal with the continuing conflict in Wales. The barons and magnates refused to attend, denying Henry financial support for the Welsh war. When Henry learned they were frustrated with the large numbers of foreigners he had brought into the government, and their threats to drive Henry from England, he demanded hostages for

\textsuperscript{218} The Welsh caused problems for the Plantagenets throughout the dynasty’s reign.
\textsuperscript{220} Ibid, 80.
protection. Henry’s hostages did not stop the coming conflict. Between the summer and autumn of 1233 England experienced a civil war in the Welsh marches, as certain barons, unhappy with the king and the “influx of inexperienced officials from Poitou,” began to cause problems. War with the rebels continued until 1234 when Henry was advised to end the rebellion by dismissing certain counselors whose merits were not based on war and were thus not chivalrous men. He followed the advice, and not only dismissed leading advisors who were accused of being “responsible for everything that had gone wrong since the loss of Normandy in 1204,” but reconciled with the lords he had alienated and removed the foreigners, the Poitevins, from power. Henry allowed the majority of the rebels to live and restored them to favor.

The opportunity to invite foreigners into the government once again began in 1236 when Henry married Eleanor of Provence, the sister to the queen of France. The queen’s uncle, William of Savoy, “rapidly established himself in power, with astonishing skill. He obtained the ear of the pliable king, and soon drove the household stewards from office…he began a period of financial and administrative reform.” Next, Henry established a secret, twelve-man council to help deal with the growing financial crisis. He promised greater freedoms to his barons by insisting he followed the Magna Carta, but his actions proved otherwise. The financial reforms that did occur resulted in William of Savoy “enriching his favorites” instead of helping restore the crown’s finances. The barons grew increasingly frustrated and critical of Henry’s decisions.

222 Ibid, 93.
224 Ibid, 87.
228 Ibid.
Henry managed to keep the peace but only after he promised to reconfirm the Magna Carta, and agreed to the addition of new men to the “membership of the royal council,” who were not foreigners but well-respected members of the English aristocracy.

By 1240, the magnates became increasingly irate with Henry’s blatant favoritism. As the magnates stewed, discontent rose in France and the peace between England and Wales grew tenuous once more. The tension with Wales continued until Henry forced the submission of Llewellyn’s son, the prince who had inherited his father’s lands after Llewellyn died in 1240. In preparation for possible war with France, “Henry summoned a council on 29 January…[the] ‘first authorized account of a parliamentary debate.’ All of the magnates appeared…[and] Henry asked for aide for war with France.” The magnates refused aid, but Henry managed to convince several to privately help fund the war. He launched his invasion in 1242 and quickly found himself in an unsuccessful war. He lost territory to France, and only maintained the territories he did when King Louis offered a five-year truce. Henry accepted the deal, then returned to England to manage the growing problems at home.

With the lack of success in France, and Henry’s inability to protect Poitou, Poitevins arrived in England, including Henry’s mother- and sister-in-law. Their arrival laid the foundation for a revival of foreign influence. Many of these foreigners received special treatment from Henry, including sizeable land grants and important positions within the government. Their favored position earned them the resentment of the English nobility.

In 1247 Henry reestablished his power over Wales when a succession dispute arose, and pledged to fight in the Holy Land. With near-constant military demands, Henry continually sought financial help. Two years later, he asked Parliament for aid as his financial situation grew worse.

231 Ibid, 133.
critical with his inability to manage his accounts. The request put Henry in conflict once more with the aristocracy over finances and the elections of officials. 232

Henry married his daughter Margaret to the king of Scotland in 1250, extended the truce with France for another five years after king Louis suffered a devastating loss while on crusade, and recalled Simon de Montfort, a powerful magnate, to England after hearing complaints of de Montfort from Gascony. De Montfort “reminded the king his position was permanent,” 233 and returned to Gascony where the province rebelled against him. The resistance to de Montfort failed, and he retained control of the province for another four years despite Henry’s orders.

Henry’s debt continued to increase with expensive trips to France, and the wedding of his son, Prince Edward. Henry’s extensive building projects, in particular the rebuilding of Westminster Abbey, were put on hold. Henry and Louis extended the peace between their two lands for another few years. Henry’s disagreements with Simon de Montfort continued to grow and would eventually culminate in the most disastrous event in Henry’s reign, the Barons’ War.

Henry’s continued disregard for the Charters and his lack of financial planning, as well as the growing trouble with Wales as the two grandsons of Llewellyn fought for control, led the barons to demand reform. The most important point of contention was once again in regard to “the hostility to foreigners.” 234 The barons believed the government (i.e. the foreigners) did not provide Henry with adequate guidance. 235 The attempt at reform, in what was called the Oxford Parliament, demonstrated the stark divide between Henry and his opponents over matters of principle. “In total twenty-nine articles were formally presented, addressing past abuses…During the Oxford Parliament several other reforms were put forward. Under the supervision of the

---

233 Ibid, 169.
235 Ibid, 104.
twenty-four it was announced that a body of fifteen would act as the king’s permanent
council.”236 Lands and castles given to royal favorites were ordered to be brought back into the
king’s hands. Naturally, the Poitevins did not react well to the news, but military action quickly
subdued the Poitevins. “Henry and Edward had little choice but to observe the ‘Provisions of
Oxford’ and seek to work constructively within the new reforms.”237

During this period, Henry’s health had deteriorated to a point that he now demanded his
lords take an oath of allegiance to Edward and acknowledge him as their future king. “The
barons declared that Edward should agree to swear by the Provisions” to which Henry objected
and, upon “hearing this Simon declared war on all who refused the Provisions.”238 Tensions
continued and civil war erupted in 1264. “Though he was heading a large army, Simon’s
numbers were smaller than those of the royals…the large size of the king’s force seems a clear
indication that many of those involved in the proceedings of 1258 no longer favoured Simon’s
cause.”239 Henry destroyed Montfort’s stronghold in the Midlands, and prepared to capture
London,240 but de Montfort’s victory at Lewes quickly turned the tables when both Henry and
Edward were captured. Simon de Montfort forced Henry to accept reform, including the
“establishment of a council of nine counselors to advise the king.”241 Simon maintained popular
support as well. “Popular support, however, was no substitute for the backing of the
magnates.”242 Power lay with the loyalty of the aristocracy, and many members of the
aristocracy either remained neutral or stayed loyal to the royalist cause. Henry and Edward still
had a chance to regain power.

237 Ibid, 199.
238 Ibid, 208.
The chance to regain political power arrived in 1265 when Edward escaped from de Montfort’s control. Edward quickly rejoined the royalist army, assumed command, and overwhelmed Simon de Montfort and his forces at the Battle of Evesham. He “captured” Henry III and de Montfort. Edward had de Montfort beheaded not long after his capture, resumed control of the kingdom, and ruined the rebels financially. Henry’s decision lead to a continuation of the civil war as his actions spurred insurrection. The second barons’ war did not end until 1267 when Prince Edward finally subdued the rebels.

The following five years of Henry’s reign were dominated by his son Edward taking the cross, the Easter Parliament of 1269, which “involved money-lending regulations to resolve issues left over from the Magna Carta,” and the completion of Westminster Abbey, one of Henry’s greatest building projects. In 1270 Edward prepared for crusade as officials loyal to Edward were appointed and put in positions of power in case of Henry’s death. After Edward left on crusade, between 1271 and 1272, Henry grew ill. He died in November of 1272, leaving behind a legacy which had dealt with the impacts of the Magna Carta, the relationship between king and magnate, and the growing politics of what had become a highly bureaucratic kingdom.

While Henry III maintained his place as king, even when captured by Simon de Montfort, his ability to use chivalry as a means to maintain power ultimately failed. Henry allowed other officials to exert control over the kingdom, found limited success in war, and failed to keep the loyalty of his nobles, all of which led to numerous conflicts with other elite military men. The loss of the nobles’ faith in Henry suggests more than anything that Henry failed to impress his elite peers. That failure, in part, rests on Henry’s inability to channel chivalry as a means to both

---

244 Ibid, 231.
245 Ibid, 236.
masculine and political power. He was not viewed as a chivalrous king. Unable to keep the respect and loyalty of his peers, who demanded a chivalrous king, Henry nearly lost his crown.

Henry’s son, Prince Edward, inherited the throne while on crusade. He did not reach England until two years after his father’s death to be properly crowned. Once Edward I was crowned, “the reshaping of the administration was tackled.”  

Concerned the crown had lost specific powers under his father’s reign and during his crusading years, Edward worked hard for reform and “achieved much of what the reformers of 1258 had been looking for.”  

After Edward reformed the government, determined to limit corruption and establish financial stability, his attention turned to Wales. The Welsh Prince, Llywelyn ap Gruffudd, refused to pay Edward homage. With the support of the marcher lords and two Welsh princes, Edward launched his attack in 1277. Edward never engaged Llywelyn in a direct battle, but he devastated the countryside until Llywelyn surrendered. Edward “severely curtailed” Llywelyn’s political power and Edward intended to extend “his rights of jurisdiction [over Wales and the people] at Llywelyn’s expense.”  

The second Welsh rebellion began in 1282, when one of the princes who had supported Edward in 1277, Prince Dafydd, rebelled against Edward because he had never received the rewards promised to him. Llywelyn joined in, but the war of 1282-1283, swiftly won by the English, led to harsher punishments for the rebels than the previous conflict.

During the wars in Wales, Edward encouraged reform back in England. With his officials, he tackled issues such as the grievances of landowners, crime, and disputes with the

---

248 Ibid, 124.
250 Ibid, 13
Church. As Edward dealt with political reform, he also encouraged peace on the continent in order to begin preparation for another crusade. His attempts never came to fruition, as the last crusader stronghold in Acre fell not long after. However, for a span of years in the 1280s, “Edward had been able to play a central role in European politics; he not only intervened with some success in the disputes between the Aragonese and the Angevins, but also sent an embassy to negotiate agreement between the quarrelling rulers of Brabant, Guedlers and Holland. He had become the most respected prince in Europe.”

Like his father, Edward struggled to overcome financial problems. After the Welsh rebellion of 1287, and increasing debts to Italians bankers, Edward requested permission to collect a tax. When war broke out in 1294 with France, and then later with Scotland after a succession dispute, Edward “faced problems of recruiting troops, collecting food supplies and raising funds.” What finally allowed Edward to forge the national unity he needed to obtain proper financial and military support occurred when the English army suffered a devastating defeat from the Scots at Stirling Bridge. Edward subsequently made peace with France in 1297 so he could direct his attention to Scotland as the “Scots rose under the combined leadership of William Wallace and Andrew Moray.”

The Scottish victory at Stirling Bridge in 1297 shocked the English, as they suffered a resounding, unexpected defeat. Edward, having just made peace with France, responded to Stirling Bridge with deadly efficiency. He brought a large force down on the Scots that

---

253 Unlike in the literature of the time, magic could not dismiss the problems with money.
culminated in victory at Falkirk in 1298. After his victory at Falkirk, Edward established limited control of southern Scotland, but from 1298 to 1302 large English offenses in the summer failed to lure the Scots to battle. By 1304, after “the majority of Scottish leaders came to terms with Edward I,” including Robert Bruce, Edward directed his full attention to Scotland as the French threats of joining the Scots were ended with the French defeat by the Flemings at Courtrai.

Edward achieved his success in Scotland not only with the impressive organization of men and resources, but through the skills of the bureaucracy back in England. He established moderation where “the Scots were fully consulted, and although the king’s nephew John of Brittany was appointed as royal lieutenant and warden, and other high positions were given to Englishmen, many local posts went to Scotsmen.” Edward gave Scotland a great deal of freedom in their government but he maintained enough control, Scotland remained part of England. Edward I acted more chivalrously than he did with Wales. He used consent and cooperation to establish control and power.

Edward made the same mistake in Scotland as he had in Wales: he failed to reward high-profile and powerful allies such as Robert Bruce. Robert Bruce rebelled in 1306. The Scots crowned Robert Bruce king of Scotland, and Edward marched north to challenge the claim. At first, Edward and his armies achieved “remarkable success against their new enemy,” but the English reacted “to the rising with a new degree of vindictiveness. Prisoners were sent south to be hanged, drawn and quartered, rather than imprisoned at the government’s expense. Edward I realized too late that such polices were counter-productive. Support for Bruce rose steadily.

---

258 Ibid.
259 Ibid, 51.
while there was little enthusiasm for the war in England.”260 The populous of Scotland, enraged with Edward’s harsh policies, refused to submit.

Edward prepared for another Scottish campaign, but he died in 1307 on his way to Scotland, leaving a legacy which would be remembered as chivalric, for his military feats and activity. Edward I would be remembered as a chivalric warrior and a king who was feared and respected.261 Edward III, decades later, would try to emulate his grandfather, Edward II. Like his predecessors, Edward II encouraged a connection to King Arthur and attempted to emulate the great king. “Largely as a result of his [Edward I’s] efforts…Arthur’s cult was both popularized and accommodated in English court culture. Edward was attracted to Arthur in part by general chivalric sentiment: the cult of the mythical king was a component in the international knightly culture of the day. He was also attracted, however, by considerations of political expediency.”262 Edward connected himself to Arthur by ordering the excavation of the graves of Arthur and Guinevere in 1278 at Glastonbury Abbey, and through his conquest “of Wales and his ambitions in Scotland [which] were viewed by some as Arthurian.”263 He sponsored tournaments and commissioned the creation of a round table. Overall, “Edward’s interest in Arthur and his court had its origin in an aristocratic culture which reveled in myth, legend, history and pageant…Arthurianism, ever open to invention, could easily be manipulated and reinterpreted. It could easily be made to serve English monarchical needs.”264 Edward, like Richard I before him, used chivalry and King Arthur to advance his own political position.

Edward I left his son, Edward II, to continue the war with the Scots. Unwilling to cede Scotland, Edward II refused to acknowledge Robert Bruce as king, however his lack of military initiative led to the abandonment of the war. With the English withdrawal from Scotland and the good will created under the reign of his father, Edward II began his kingship with significant support. The move to withdraw from Scotland alleviated pressure on the treasury. With the relieved treasury and general support for the new king, the councilors were ready to please Edward II, and “it was to be expected that they would be asked to give their support”\(^ {265} \) to the first orders Edward II issued as king. One of Edward II’s first acts revoked the exile of Piers Gaveston, a man dear to the king who had been exiled under the reign of Edward I.\(^ {266} \)

Edward II’s trouble began in the second year of his reign. He filled the pockets of his favorite, Piers Gaveston, whose close relationship with the king led several magnates to point out that “Gaveston, through extravagance, was impoverishing the crown.”\(^ {267} \) Piers Gaveston, who many members of the aristocracy did not believe deserved his growing wealth and power, acted arrogantly and placed himself nearly on level with the king. To the magnates, many of whom based merit on military success per the chivalric model, Piers not only failed to follow the correct path to power but held too much influence over the king, whom no one should be above. Piers’ status as the favorite greatly threatened the established structure of the aristocracy and military elite.

Around the time that Edward married Isabella, the daughter of the king of France, a group of powerful magnates “stressed their loyalty to the crown, but stated the need to reform

---


\(^ {266} \) Piers Gaveston, the son of a knight, had risen to prominence in the prince’s court. When Edward I became aware that Piers’ influence over prince Edward had grown so great, Edward I exiled Piers to remove such dangerous favoritism and influence. Once Edward II ended Piers’ exile, Piers eventually became the Earl of Cornwall. His quick and seemingly reasonless ascent to power angered many of the powerful men in Edward II’s court.

‘things which have been done before this time contrary to his [the king’s] honour and the rights of his crown, and the oppression which have been done and are still being done to his people.’

They referred to the increasing power and favoritism shown Piers Gaveston, and general abuses of administrative power.

As with kings before him, Edward’s limited patronage and his favoritism of specific individuals, made the magnates increasingly hostile to the king and his favorite. The magnates demanded the exile of Gaveston, to which Edward acquiesced. Piers Gaveston’s second exile did not last long. In 1309 Edward secured his return. To negotiate Gaveston’s return, Edward “conceded many of the demands of the opposition… [but] financial weakness compelled the king to agree to the appointment in 1310 of twenty-one Ordainers who were to produce articles of reform.” The Ordainers then demanded the third exile of Gaveston.

Edward was prepared for a civil war to protect Gaveston, but the opposition outnumbered the king’s forces. He tried to protect Gaveston by moving north, but the baronial forces were too strong. The Earl of Warwick captured Gaveston as he fled. Piers Gaveston, removed from Edward’s protection, provoked the Earl of Warwick who, after calling Piers a liar and a traitor, tried and convicted the king’s favorite. The Earl of Warwick handed Gaveston over to the Earl of Lancaster who promptly executed him. Gaveston’s death led to a divide in the opposition. Several earls joined Edward in response to the act; by 1313 fruitful negotiations stopped the
impending war. “Pardons were granted... [and] a grant of taxation considerably eased the king’s difficult financial position.”

Once the civil war ended, Edward could no longer ignore the threat of the Scots nor their increasing ambition and territorial expansion into lands he claimed. Edward launched an attack, and Robert Bruce met Edward II head on. Edward “appears to have played little part in its [the battle’s] direction...” With little organization and less-than-firm command on the English side as, according to Michael Prestwich, “Edward II was no natural leader,” the battle of Bannockburn in 1314 ended in disaster for Edward and the flower of the English army.

Edward had no interest or skill in warfare (he was no King Arthur), but he would not lose Scotland. To maintain his honor, Edward declared Scotland his in 1315 but did nothing militarily except provide defense along England’s northern border. “Bruce’s victory did not win the war or secure the independence of Scotland. Edward II was defeated...but there was no indication that either he or any of his leading subjects believed that the war itself was lost and that Bruce should be formally recognized as king of the Scots.” The loss at Bannockburn weakened Edward’s political sway and ushered in a new regime dominated by the Earl of Lancaster. Lancaster, a leader of the discontent rising from the aristocracy, accused the king of ignoring the Ordinances established in 1310. Lancaster and other members of the aristocracy summoned armed assemblies in a show of strength in 1317 to remind Edward of the Ordinances and their own power. The country only avoided civil war when Lancaster and the king agreed to create a

---

permanent council of seventeen members who would give counsel to the king in matters that did not involve the parliament. One of the members would be chosen by Lancaster. 277

Soon, a new favorite emerged. Hugh le Despenser, eventual Earl of Winchester, and his son, Hugh le Despenser the Younger, found a place at Edward’s side. The younger of the Despensers won a series of grants from the king, which firmly established him as the next favorite. When the younger Despenser gained lands by persuading the king to confiscate lands from other lords, he incurred the anger of the Marcher lords whose lands he specifically sought. 278 Rising opposition toward Edward II grew serious when both the Marcher Lords and the Earl of Lancaster declared war.

The Marcher lords seized Despenser’s lands in Wales in 1321. Edward began a “counter-offensive, which culminated in the complete and utter defeat of Lancaster and his allies.” 279 Edward gathered his forces. He prepared to take the Marches. However, the strong opposition in the Marches quickly dispersed. Several leaders surrendered without a fight, while others abandoned the Marches and joined Lancaster in the north. Unable to mount a serious opposition after losing important allies, Lancaster surrendered and Edward had him executed. Lancaster’s surrender “marked the beginning of an unprecedented bloodbath. One chronicler lists twenty-five executions and a total of a hundred and eighteen either slain, imprisoned or fled into exile…” 280 The fall of Lancaster sufficiently removed any serious threat to Edward’s power and “was a triumph for the Despensers, and it was they who dominated government” 281 until the end of Edward’s reign.

278 Ibid, 89.
279 Ibid, 90.
280 Ibid, 93.
Edward II turned his attention back to Scotland in 1322. Edward marched a large force into Scotland, but the Scots withdrew and decimated the countryside, leaving nothing for the English army to eat. “Edward was forced to withdraw by famine and disease. Insult was added to injury when the Scots retaliated with a massive raid into Yorkshire, and almost succeeded in capturing the English king.”  

From 1322 to Edward’s fall in 1326, the Despensers continued to gain land and power. “Royal funds were used to buy armour for him [Despenser the Younger], to munition and fortify his castles, and to pay for his wife’s expenses. When a new royal ship was built, it was called La Despenser.” The Despensers initiated a series of reforms that were designed to increase royal revenue, targeted widows to acquire more land, and forced men with extensive wealth to owe them debts to secure protection from other lords who could challenge their power.

The power of the Despensers continued until 1326. Queen Isabella had been sent to negotiate peace with her brother, Charles IV of France. When the negotiations asked for Edward II to perform homage for Aquitaine, the Despensers, unwilling to let Edward out of their hands, sent the young prince Edward to perform homage in Edward II’s place. Isabella, who had been unsatisfied with her treatment by the king and his continued suspicions of her loyalty, refused to return to England until the Despensers were exiled. The arrival of her son gave her greater sway, and strengthened her position among the exiles and the nobles back in England.

Isabella then allied with Roger Mortimer, an exiled English lord. As a lord, Roger Mortimer could act as the figurehead of the invasion, as a woman alone would be unlikely to
garner enough support. Isabella then betrothed her son to the count of Hainault’s daughter, in exchange for a small force of mercenaries to launch her invasion of England. Upon Isabella and Roger Mortimer’s landing on English soil, support for the king and the Despenser regime vanished. The bulk of Edward’s administration abandoned him, and London quickly sided with Isabella. Unable to mount an effective defense, the Despensers were captured and executed. Edward went to Kenilworth in captivity. Parliament, under threat of violence from the London mobs who wanted the king deposed, sent a deputation to Kenilworth with the king’s final chance to abdicate. “In a highly confused state Edward displayed the full weakness of his character, fainting with grief and begging for mercy. He appears to have resigned the throne, on condition that his son should succeed him. In the end, therefore, the procedure was a confusing mixture of deposition and abdication.” Edward II died in captivity. Isabella and Roger Mortimer gained complete control of England, and ruled for the young Edward III.

Aside from his lack of success in war and on tournament ground, Edward II’s legacy, most notably, was tainted by his continued preference towards favorites, a preference which not only fueled rumors of inappropriate liaisons but threatened members of the ruling elite as Edward’s unseemly need for attachment suggested weakness. His private attachments threatened the balance of power, and therefore the power structure of the ruling elite, by suggesting that the king could be ruled by another individual. Such a weakness endangered the delicate alliance of competitive, military men by suggesting that the king was not strong enough to rule and anyone could rule in his place. Additionally, if the king, the greatest of the chivalric elite, could be controlled by another, so could other members of the ruling elite. The preference toward a

---

favorite, therefore, threatened the entire system the ruling elite had created to maintain and justify their power.

Overall, the kings of the Plantagenet dynasty provide examples which demonstrate the importance of properly performing chivalric masculinity. The success of Richard I and Edward I in their performance of chivalric masculinity, mostly through success in tournaments and war, encouraged powerful magnates to follow their lead, and made both kings renowned as great warriors and leaders. They were remembered and cited by their successors as good examples of kingship such as Edward III’s admiration of his grandfather, Edward I. They successfully used the propaganda of chivalry to cement their place as king. Other rulers, such as John I and Edward II, failed to maintain the support of the elite, and their continual struggle to find success in battle hints at their failure to properly perform chivalric masculinity. The reign of Edward III and his successor, Richard II, the last of the Plantagenet kings, provide the clearest examples of how the success and failure to properly perform chivalric masculinity, where the crux of a king’s success rests on his military achievements and chivalric imitation of King Arthur, leads to a king’s ultimate success or failure as a ruler.
Chapter Four
Edward III and Richard II: How the Performance of Chivalric Masculinity Defines a King

Arguably one of the most successful Plantagenet kings, Edward III (r. 1327-1387) ruled England for fifty years. He began the Hundred Years’ War, established the Order of the Garter, and drew knights to his cause from all across Europe. He was lauded as great leader, on and off the field of battle, and known for his chivalric nature. He frequently hosted tournaments to encourage chivalry in his own knights. In particular, Edward’s renown as a great, chivalrous leader came after the battle of Crecy in 1346. His victory at Crecy, one of the first significant battles in the Hundred Years’ War, established his claim to the French throne and in the eyes of his followers verified divine support for his rule. Nigel Saul noted of Edward III that “in the eyes of later generations Edward III was the perfect king whose example his successors would do well to follow. Like Richard the Lionheart before him, Edward was to place all who ruled after him under a heavy burden of emulation.”

Edward III, unlike many kings before him, used the performance of chivalric masculinity to gain political power.

Edward III did not formally come to power until 1330 when he overthrew the regency of his mother and Roger Mortimer. During Mortimer’s regency, Edward played a limited role in politics but he did begin his military career. His first military defeat came in 1327 when he embarked north to campaign in Scotland. The Scots refused to engage in battle, but raided and pillaged the countryside beneath the nose of the prince. Following the humiliating outcome, Isabella and Mortimer sought peace with the Scots. The final treaty between the English regime and the Scots acknowledged the renouncement “of all English claims to feudal overlordship in

---

Scotland and recognized the legitimacy of the Scottish king.” Edward itched to claim victory in Scotland, however, and English ambitions for the north were not stifled with Isabella and Mortimer’s peace agreement.

The king of France died in 1328 with no son to inherit his throne. Edward, as the grandson of Philip IV, “had little opportunity to prosecute his own claim to the French throne, concerned as his government was with problems closer to home,” and was forced to do nothing more than register a claim to the throne without any military force to secure his inheritance. The new king of France, Philip VI, demanded Edward pay homage for his French territories. After delaying for a year, Edward finally acquiesced. His ambitions for the throne of France, however, were only temporarily tempered. His act of homage was seen by his lords as an act of courtesy bestowed from one king to another, and not a form of weakness. Consequently, they continued to support Edward III.

Following Edward’s marriage to Philippa of Hainault in 1328 and the inability to claim the French throne, opposition to the Mortimer regime began to appear among the ranks of the nobility. Because of the rising tensions and Edward’s own concern with the regime, he soon feared losing power indefinitely. To maintain power, Edward launched a coup. In a quick and seamless takeover with a close group of loyal men, Edward over-powered Mortimer and imprisoned him. Edward formally claimed the throne in 1330.

Following the advice of powerful lords, Edward restrained from the immediate execution of Mortimer. He instead called parliament to formally try Mortimer in front of his peers. A list of Mortimer’s crimes was given to members of parliament. Edward asked parliament “to consider them [the crimes] and deliver judgment as peers of the realms. The crown asserted that

---

289 Ibid.
290 Ibid, 142.
Mortimer’s offences were ‘notorious’: that is, that he was self-evidently guilty and did not need the opportunity to defend himself.”\textsuperscript{291} Parliament found Mortimer guilty. Edward executed him as a traitor, removed his mother Isabella from court, and pardoned those who had risen against Edward II with Isabella and Mortimer.\textsuperscript{292}

Once Edward removed Roger Mortimer, the new king faced extensive challenges. Though he had already “been hard at work to win the hearts of the aristocracy in the spring and summer of 1330, when he participated in tournaments,”\textsuperscript{293} demonstrating his chivalric mastery in stylized competition, he faced challenges: in France with Philip VI consolidating his claim to the throne, and in Scotland now that Robert Bruce had died and left the Scottish throne to his eight-year-old son. Edward first launched an attack on Scotland, and decisively captured the Scottish city of Perth with minimal English casualties. Edward publically backed Robert Balliol for the Scottish throne, and the two launched an attack which culminated in the Scottish defeat at Halidon Hill in 1333. Victorious, Edward returned to England where “he was hailed as a second Arthur.”\textsuperscript{294} Edward proclaimed Balliol king of the Scots. Balliol performed homage to Edward, but the Scottish war did not end with Halidon Hill. The war continued until 1335 when the king gathered a massive army and forced the remaining Scottish resistance to surrender.

The now twelve-year-old heir to the Scottish throne, David II, rejected the terms of surrender. He appealed to his ally, Philip VI of France. War resumed in 1336 once David II received the support of France. Edward managed to head off a French invasion where he then projected “English power into the far north even if he failed to bring any significant Scottish

\textsuperscript{293} Ibid, 144.  
\textsuperscript{294} Ibid, 147.
force to battle.” Edward burned the Scottish city of Aberdeen as well as much of the land along the east coast; by doing so, he limited the possibility of a French invasion through Scotland and the ability for the Scots to raise another army. “The king then initiated a building programme, hoping to emulate his grandfather’s success in securing Wales by fortifying his own position in Scotland.”

The French support of the Scots led to floundering negotiations between Edward and Philip and in 1337 Edward prepared for war. He wanted to claim the French throne. Edward “was very careful to ensure that he had full support, obtained in parliament, for the war with the French,” and he formally received support from parliament to implement taxes which would support the war effort for three years. Edward then sent diplomats to France to renounce his homage to Philip. The withdrawal of homage formally declared war.

Besides the support of parliament, Edward built a coalition with the Low Countries to provide additional military and monetary backing through his wife’s connections. Despite Edward’s preparedness, “the early phase of the war did not go well, as the king himself seems to have been inconsistent and indecisive in articulating and pursuing his war aims.” Edward landed in France in the middle of 1338, but little fighting followed as the English struggled to organize their forces and France refrained from engaging. A year later, the French invaded Gascony, burned the city of Hastings and provided assistance to the Scots who had broken the truce and besieged Perth.

---

296 Ibid.
299 Ibid, 150.
Edward marched into France after convincing most of his allies to follow his lead. He recaptured Hastings, and attempted to force Philip into battle, but Philip evaded his army. In response, Edward’s army ravaged the countryside. With few confrontations, Edward’s debt and lack of success led to decreasing support for the war back in England. He needed a victory to recover support for the war and continue the war effort.

The first major English victory in the Hundred Years’ War arrived three years after Edward renounced his homage. The French and English fleets met during one of Edward’s crossing between England and France. The French were defeated at Sluys. The sea battle effectively crippled France’s abilities to launch naval attacks on the English.300

The army was not nearly as successful as the naval forces. Edward offered to fight Philip in a chivalric duel but the French king declined, and Edward returned to England in November of 1340 where he unleashed “a vitriolic attack on his chief ministers” who he accused of “deliberately withholding necessary funds for his war effort.”301 Edward’s attack began a series of disputes between the king and his ministers. His ministers raised complaints about the war, and the king grew increasing frustrated with his financial difficulties. “The king entered into financial obligations that could not be met. Heavy taxes combined with seizures of wool and foodstuffs, combined with the corruption of local officials, led to widespread discontent in the localities.”302 The issues between Edward and parliament ended in 1341. Edward, after realizing that parliament had received wide support from many members of aristocracy, relented.303 He agreed to a number of concessions but received a new levy to help support the war effort.

301 Ibid, 152.
303 Ibid, 276.
The war in France resumed in 1342. “Massive grants were still needed to finance the war, and Edward was highly successful in persuading his subjects of his need for subsidies.”\textsuperscript{304} Besides gaining financial backing, Edward changed his tactics yet again. He hoped for better success in his second campaign. “The very different war strategies…meant that the burdens placed on England were not as great as they had been in the late 1330s.”\textsuperscript{305} As part of his new tactic, Edward put several armies on the field. The great presence of the English across the French countryside destroyed French morale, and in the early months of 1343, the French negotiated a truce which recognized English rights to Scotland, Gascony, and Flanders as well as to Brittany.\textsuperscript{306} The following two years during which the truce was in effect, Edward planned a three-pronged offensive, and prepared for an extensive campaign which he would launch in 1346.

Edward gathered a massive army, and brought his eldest son, Edward, the Black Prince, with him on campaign that would be “the beginning of a glorious military career”\textsuperscript{307} for the prince. The prince and his retinue participated in an advance that devastated the French countryside while Edward III quickly took Caen. The valuable prisoners and treasures taken from Caen showed the early success of the campaign.

The English and French eventually met head-on at Crecy in 1346. The English army, well experienced from its time spent on the Scottish battlefields in the 1330s, fought under not only an experienced king, but also earls who had fought at Halidon Hill in 1333 and served regularly in Scotland.\textsuperscript{308} Edward’s men not only knew how to fight cohesively but they frequently fought

\textsuperscript{307} Ibid, 161.
in retinues of mixed skills, consisting of men who were archers, knights, and foot soldiers. Another advantage Edward had before the battle of Crecy was his previous “encouragement of the culture and institutions of chivalry,” as argued by Nigel Sault in *Chivalry in Medieval England*. Edward’s adoption and physical display of chivalry brought prestige to his court, and strengthened the ties between himself and his knights.

The English decimated the French at Crecy where they destroyed the flower of French chivalry, and nearly captured the king of France. The English, when they came upon French soldiers, “quickly overwhelmed and killed them [the French]. They took no prisoners and asked no ransoms, acting as they had decided among themselves in the morning when they were aware of the huge numbers of the enemy.” According to Froissart, “the King of France was in great distress when he saw his army being destroyed piecemeal by such a handful of men as the English were…King Phillip would gladly have joined them [his knights] had it been possible, but there was such a throng of archers and men-at-arms in front of him that he could not get through. The farther he advanced, the smaller his numbers grew…” The battle allowed Edward to march on Calais, a port city in northern France, to which he laid siege. “The siege had both a primary and secondary purpose: capture of the port was crucial to the continuation of the English war effort, but the siege may very well have been designed to entice Philip VI into a second battle.” Eventually, Calais fell, but during the siege, Philip wrote to his Scottish ally and asked David II of Scotland to put pressure on the English in the hope that it would lift the siege at Calais. The Scots invaded northern England, but the attack proved disastrous. The

---

English captured the Scottish king, and killed many of the Scottish military commanders. “Amid the defeat of the French king at Crecy, the capture of the Scottish king at Neville’s Cross, and the fall of Calais, Edward III had much to celebrate”\textsuperscript{313} when he finally returned to England.

While in engaged in France, Edward did not neglect domestic affairs back in England. During this time “the status of the magnates as peers was fully recognized...[and] Edward faced no serious criticism from the magnates.”\textsuperscript{314} Edward bestowed his favor to numerous individuals, including the son of his former enemy, Roger Mortimer, and addressed issues of patronage readily and agreeably. Overall, Edward was a politician more than a “far-sighted statesman” and “it was the king’s need for money which largely conditioned his policies”\textsuperscript{315} throughout his reign. In most other matters Edward and his magnates did not come to severe disagreement which could boil over into civil war. Edward had earned the respect of the aristocracy by treating them like King Arthur treated his knights: as equals deserving of rewards for their loyalty.

When Edward returned to England amid the jubilant air from the victory at Crecy, he established the Order of the Garter as a central part of the victory celebrations, but the war with France entered into a lull after the Black Death ravaged both kingdoms in 1348. During this period, Edward dealt with the problems the Black Death created which included an economic, political and social catastrophe. With thousands dead from the plague, workers were in short supply. To maintain the level of income members of the aristocracy were accustomed to, Edward issued the Ordinance of Labourers “which obliged agricultural workers to accept employment at the wage rate that had been established in 1346,”\textsuperscript{316} and included entry fines for working the land. The fines boosted the income of the wealthy while further hurting the laborers. The loss of

so many individuals also helped concentrate more land into the hands of the upper class, which eventually led to growing tension between the upper and lower classes.

Philip VI’s death in 1350 gave Edward additional time to gather resources to resume the war in France. During this time, 1342 to 1356, Edward enjoyed remarkable support for many of his polices both at home and aboard. “The broad political consensus and stability of this period was also the result of a range of highly successful polices… management of the nobility by means of effective patronage was combined with political skill in managing the demands made through the Commons.”

He achieved a great victory with the Statue of Treason in 1352, which the aristocracy viewed as a chivalrous act for the statutes defined treason for the first time as a number of specific acts. “The statute marked an end to the cycle of political violence that had marred the entire reign of Edward II and the early years of Edward III, and it provided the aristocracy with greater assurance about the security of tenure of their estates.”

Edward also saw to the growing tension between the crown and the clergy (which had become increasingly French through the pope’s French connections). Edward restricted “the pope’s ability to reserve ecclesiastical appointments” and also declared that he would provide his own nominees for any open position within the Church on English soil.

In 1354 a peace settlement was drafted with the new king of France, John II, where England received “Aquitaine, Poitou, Ponthieu and Calais in full sovereignty in return for Edward’s renunciation of his claim to the French throne.” The new king of France, like his predecessor, was unwilling to grant England so much territory. In the light of the treaty’s failure,

---

319 Ibid.
320 Ibid.
Edward’s men “raided and pillaged almost at will,” across the French country under the leadership of the Black Prince. The following year, in 1355, Edward launched a more aggressive attack. The renewal of hostilities between the two kingdoms cumulated in a great English victory at Poitiers in 1356. After overcoming great odds as the French bickered over who would lead the charge into battle, the Black Prince led the English into battle with deadly efficiency. When the battle ended, the Black Prince and his army had killed some 2,500 French noblemen and taken the French king and 1,900 knights prisoner. Like Crecy, Poitiers shows the true violence inherent in chivalry, but which was still lauded as a great victory by the English elite and helped solidify Edward’s place as a chivalrous leader.

With the capture of the French king, England gained a strong position in negotiations, but their requests were too substantial. The heavy ransom fee and the territorial demands made by Edward led to a stalemate. The stalemate forced Edward “to raise a fresh army in 1359 while increasing his demands” of the French, in what Edward hoped would finally put him on the French throne. Edward sailed for France and began another campaign across the French countryside. Atrocious weather and continuing financial burdens forced Edward to end his campaign without another great victory. Negotiations with France resumed. The two kingdoms ratified a treaty in 1360, but “the details of the settlement were never finalized, and the French successfully chipped away at the edges of the English-controlled territories.”

---

Similar to the French misfortunes at Poitiers, the Scots also endured “a devastating winter campaign.”\(^{327}\) The campaign destroyed Scottish resolve and “the capture of the French king...deprived them of their main foreign ally.”\(^{328}\) The two sides came to a quick accord. The Scot-English treaty recognized David II as a king who paid homage to Edward III. David would also pay the English an enormous ransom for his release. Edward’s refusal to kill either the French or Scottish kings demonstrated his chivalrous nature toward other elite men as the defeated were not killed but ransomed.

The decade of the 1360s saw the return of the plague in 1361-1362, and the marriage of the Black Prince to Joan of Kent, as Edward tried to extend the influence and power of his family. Edward, after creating the principality of Aquitaine, formally gave the territory to his son.\(^{329}\) Between 1369 and Edward III’s death in 1377, increasing issues with parliament and other domestic strife plagued the king in the last decade of his reign. Militarily, France regained much of the land Edward III had conquered earlier in his reign; the war increased Edward’s financial burden and forced him to ask parliament for subsidies. Additionally, Edward dismissed many men from powerful positions. Sickness hit Edward in 1371 and permanently limited his involvement in government until his death in 1377.

To maintain the power and prestige of the king, Edward’s second son, John of Gaunt, quickly emerged “as the de facto leader of domestic government during the winter of 1371-72”\(^{330}\) as Edward’s health grew worse. The king’s health fluctuated throughout the ensuing years and allowed corruption to blossom within the court that coincided with further outbreaks of the Black Death and economic instability and fragility.

\(^{328}\) Ibid.
\(^{329}\) Ibid, 175.
As Edward III’s subjects sought explanations for the reversal of English fortunes abroad, it was almost inevitable that they should diagnose the problem as a loss of unity and will within the royal family, the court, and the government. In particular, it was the matter of public scandal that royal policy was being manipulated by a group of royal favourites led by...Alice Perrers.\(^{331}\)

With the death of his wife, Edward III’s mistress, Alice Perrers, had begun to play a greater, controlling role in politics by exerting her will over the aging king.\(^ {332}\) She and a small group of men used the king’s illness to claim his patronage and support. They gathered vast amounts of land and wealth, much to the annoyance of the majority of the aristocracy.

As the government failed economically, militarily, and politically in the face of massive population decline, economic struggles, financial loss, defeat in France and the corruption within the government, the last years of Edward’s reign were far from the glory he achieved in his heyday. The king’s health continued to grow worse and by the mid-1370s, evidence suggested that Edward had suffered a series of stokes.\(^ {333}\) He had little physical presence in politics and left more and more power to his son John. John of Gaunt ran the government with the help of other powerful members of the aristocracy, but the power remained with Edward III’s mistress. The so-called “Good Parliament” of 1376 tried to remove Alice and her close group of friends, but the parliament failed when Gaunt “set about undoing the parliament’s work,”\(^ {334}\) and reversed the sentence of Alice and her associates in order to restore royal authority and make clear the king still held power. With the firm hand of the king failing, many nobles welcomed a new leader, and the magnates encouraged Edward to name his grandson, Richard, the new heir, following the death of Edward’s eldest son, the Black Prince. Too many powerful men mistrusted Gaunt and

\(^{333}\) Ibid.
his power. They would not support him as king, but the same noblemen held high expectations for Richard. One chancellor even proclaimed “that the prince had been sent to England by God in the same way that God had sent His own Son into the world.”335 A year after naming his grandson Richard II his heir, Edward III died in 1377.

Edward III fulfilled many of the characteristics important in a chivalrous king that are found in the Arthurian literature. Edward’s success as a king rested on his ability to channel the ideas and popularity of chivalry. He was willing, after the 1330s and early 1340s, to work with his magnates instead of against them, receive their advice in matters of state and, especially in his early years, entered into tournaments to win support from the magnates by establishing himself as a successful knight who participated in and readily utilized the propaganda of chivalry. With his victories in the Hundred Years’ War, Edward demonstrated his skill in combat, which was crucial to a king’s success, and he properly rewarded his followers for their loyalty.

The victory at Crécy and the establishment of the Order of the Garter changed the dynamics of the knightly class, while bolstering Edward’s reputation as a chivalrous leader. Before, knights had fought in tournaments, sought glory in war and tried to emulate the chivalry of the literature, but not until Edward III did many of these knights voluntarily participate in war overseas that did not culminate in a crusade like Richard I and Edward I’s trek to the Holy Land. The cost of such an endeavor rarely outweighed the benefits, and few knights or lords sought glory overseas in war. The laws Edward implemented in order to force his knights to fight in France changed after Crécy. “After the heady victory of Crécy, however, opposition to overseas military service melted away. There were prizes to be won, towns to be sacked, and prisoners to

---

be taken and ransomed. War could be made to pay.\(^{336}\) Chivalry, a military guideline that obscured the violence of the elite, was far different in reality than in literature, but it could be used to encourage the elites of society to fight in battle and support their king like never before. Social mobility became achievable like never before to knights who made their fortune in the war in France, and between the dreams of rank and wealth knights flocked to Edward’s side. However, wealth and rank were not the only factors that drew knights to Edward like bees to flowers. The nobility were expected to fight in the king’s wars. “To fight in a just cause brought honour and recognition to a knight, enhancing his fame and reputation. As Froissart put it ‘brace men [fight] to advance their bodies and to increase their honour.’ The idea that to be noble involved some sort of career in arms was central to the medieval conception of chivalry.”\(^{337}\) Thus, military service through the proper demonstration of chivalry, provided knights with an opportunity to advance both politically and economically as they had never been able to before.

To further channel the power of chivalry and cement his place as a chivalrous king, Edward created the Order of the Garter after the victory at Crecy in 1346. With the Order, he deliberately enacted chivalrous ideals and encouraged those ideals among his knights. The Order of the Garter “was to become the most illustrious and important of the chivalric orders of the Middle Ages…a major reason for its success was its association with a monarchy riding high on the back of chivalric achievement.”\(^{338}\) As an order meant to mimic the knights of the Round Table, the Order of the Garter included some of the greatest knights of the time, such as Edward III and his son, the Black Prince, and consisted of twenty-four other renowned knights. The company was militarily focused and emphasized loyalty to the king and the display of knightly,

---

\(^{337}\) Ibid, 127.
\(^{338}\) Ibid, 103.
or chivalric, acts.\textsuperscript{339} Order “membership was based on chivalric accomplishments…and embodied Edward III’s vision of kingship, chivalric in nature and international in scope.”\textsuperscript{340}

Edward had held a fascination with the King Arthur legends from early in his reign. His interest in King Arthur can be seen from the early 1330s up until his death. “In 1334, the king appeared in the lists wearing the…arms ascribed to Sir Gawain in fictive armorial tradition.”\textsuperscript{341} He and his wife visited the supposed grave of King Arthur at Glastonbury Abbey in 1331, and soon after he announced his plans to emulate the Knights of the Round Table in a new order.\textsuperscript{342} During this time, Edward was also “a great patron of tournaments, the great festivals of chivalry,”\textsuperscript{343} in which he himself participated. Notable contemporary historians “regarded Edward III as the epitome of chivalry [and] Edward’s reputation enabled him to recruit many foreigners to his cause [because] he was able to appeal to the chivalric feelings of men of many countries,”\textsuperscript{344} as King Arthur did in the literature, through the sponsorship and participation in tournaments, success in warfare, and expression of knightly characteristics. Edward’s military success had transformed into political success through his proper performance of chivalric masculinity. The importance and impact of King Arthur, and the chivalric culture in Edward’s reign, cannot be ignored. Edward displayed the characteristics of chivalry, which included honor, generosity, bravery, courtesy, piety, and the participation in tournaments as well as warfare. He treated other lords with respect and honor, and he offered his followers the opportunity to demonstrate their own chivalric prowess. His ability to emulate Arthur and use the propaganda of chivalry led to his ultimate success as a king.

\textsuperscript{342} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{344} Ibid, 206.
Edward III’s successor, Richard II (r. 1377-1399), the son of Edward, the Black Prince of Wales and the grandson of Edward III, came to the throne at the age of ten in 1377. Richard’s father, the Black Prince, died before Edward III in 1376, and to secure the throne Edward named his grandson the heir after the parliamentary commons put pressure on the king to designate Richard as heir. Many members of the aristocracy believed that Richard was king “not by election, nor by any such path, but by lawful right of succession,”345 and his recognition as the heir allowed for the smooth succession between kings. In order to suppress any potential discord with the young king, powerful lords, such as Richard’s uncle John of Gaunt, continued to highlight tradition and stress loyalty to the king. Even with the law and tradition on his side, Richard II died twenty-two years later after losing the throne to his cousin Henry Bolingbroke. Richard demonstrated how a king who failed to perform chivalric masculinity represented failure as a king and as a man. His failure also revealed the need for a ruler to conform to the aristocracy’s vision of kingliness via chivalry in order to maintain power.

Richard’s coronation took place on July 16th, 1377. With Richard not yet out of his minority (he was ten), a group of councilors were established to act in place of the king. The council, as a governing body, oversaw the kingdom for the first years of Richard’s reign, managing matters of patronage, fiancé, war, and public order.346 The council’s main burden concerned the continuing war with the French. The French had launched devastating raids against the English during Richard’s accession to the throne, and a series of expeditions designed by the council to restore order and reclaim lands in France failed to meet the expectations of the aristocracy. The council’s decisions lacked strategic vision, and the king, in his minority, could

---

not act to provide coordination and direction. To support the ever increasing war burden, the council increased taxes to pay for their overseas’ costs. The government paid for the war by imposing a wool custom, a tax on moveable property, and a poll tax that taxed each individual for living within the kingdom. The third poll tax had been designed to pay for the war, but many taxpayers evaded it, unable to pay the required amount. To bring in acceptable revenue, men were appointed to find the defaulters. Over-taxed, a peasant resistance built in the ensuing weeks and “by the end of May the whole of south-eastern England was ablaze.”

Scholars attributed several events to the beginning of the Great Revolt of 1381. In the final months of his father’s reign, Gaunt struggled to maintain the upper class’s confidence in the monarchy as Edward III proved unable to meet the demands and expectations of the ruling class. Gaunt, in an effort to maintain royal power, helped create the 1377 poll tax. Acting under his father’s name, Gaunt introduced “an hitherto unheard-of tax…namely that he should take a groat, or four pence, from each lay person of either sex older than fourteen years- except for notorious paupers who begged publicly.” Under the acting government, during the final years of Edward III’s reign and the beginning years of Richard II, the administration continued to follow the example set by the 1377 poll tax. The government introduced more taxes to raise money for the war and the defense of England’s borders. The taxes, however, “because of the corrupt administration,” were inadequate to cover the government’s needs.

---

350 Ibid, 53.
351 Ibid, 53.
352 In 1358, due to the pressures of high taxation on a small populace, France also witnessed a similar peasant revolt called the Jacquerie.
A third poll tax, introduced in 1380, requested that “three groats should be given from each lay person of the realm, within franchise or without, both male and female and whatsoever estate or condition, who have reached the age of fifteen…this is on condition that at all times the levy shall be made in due order and form and that each lay person shall be charged equally according to his means…” The third poll tax encountered increasing resistance and collectors of the tax grew reluctant to carry out their duties. “As is fully revealed by trustworthy and notable evidence, the men commissioned by us as taxers and collectors of the subsidy…have spared many persons of the country: they have omitted some deliberately, some through negligence and others through favour. The result is that a large part of the said subsidy…is concealed and withheld from us…” As apparent from the records, peasants, in reality small landowners, were unwilling to pay the tax, and in some instances, the tax collectors were hesitant to enforce the collection. Pressed too hard with further attempts to collect, the peasants revolted in southern England. The revolt quickly spread across parts of England and alarmed the government with its ferocity and novelty. “The problems created by labor shortage at home and military failure abroad were the subject of much contemporary comment…the great revolt of 1381 obviously started, not to say stunned, contemporaries…”

The ever increasing taxation led, according to one contemporary chronicler, Jean Froissart, to the discontent. The spread of information, as well as the rumors of revolt, were so fast that “…there were very much people in London informed, such as had great envy at them that were rich and such were noble; then they began to speak among them and said how the

---

realm of England was right evil governed.”

The writings of “John Ball”, believed to be a pen name, helped inflame the situation within England. He encouraged the rebels to action but tried to maintain order within the unruly ranks of growing violence.

Ynglond, awake now- *consurgunt jugiter hostes*, and good hede take thu: *fac ostia, dirige postes*. The ryche maketh myry, *sed vulgus collacrematur*; The pepulle is very, *quia ferme depopulator*…Ynglond goose to noght *plus facit homo viciosus*…monslaughter and theft *crucis ad votum redimuntur*…In age as he grows *sua crescat gatia fructu*; Fulle lytelle he *knows quanto dolet Anglia luctu.*

[England, awake! [our] enemies jointly arise, and good sense take you, bar the gates, batten the doors. The rich make merry, but the common people weep; the people are weary, since (the land) is nearly laid waste…England goes to ruin and the sinful creature is more esteemed…Manslaughter and theft are exonerated when cash speaks up for them…As he [the king] grows older may his grace flourish in fruit for he little knows with how much sorrow England suffers.] *(Translation Kestner)*

John Ball’s works called for the rebels to stand together under God and to unite under one leader, rather than spread out in an unorganized rebellion.

The situation that led to the Great Revolt of 1381 was the combination of increased taxation, failure abroad in the war with France, and the large population decrease from the Black Death. The peasant class had too many grievances against the government. Once united under a set of leaders, notably Wat Tyler, the revolt grew into a crisis to which the government hesitated to respond. The peasants “directed their evil actions against the duke of Lancaster and the other lords of the realm because of the exceptionally severe tenths and fifteenths and other subsides lightly concede in parliaments and extortionately levied from the poor people.”

---

359 The call by John Ball is reminiscent of the chivalry found in the elite. He calls them together to commit acts of violence but for the honorable cause of protecting England.
As the rebellion grew, encouraged by men such as John Ball and Wat Tyler, many counties, especially within the east, reached a state of near anarchy. The quick and sudden flare-up grew into the Great Revolt; the lack of governmental reaction gave the rebels more room to make their demands, and their threats, well-known. “The government and the ruling classes were seized by panic and paralysis,” and hid within the Tower of London to debate how to deal with the rebels. “The king’s advisors divided into the hawks [those in favor of a violent response against the rebels] and the doves [those for peaceful reconciliations]. The former, favoring various counter-measures, urged the deployment of troops to dispel the rebels by force. Their rivals…favored conciliation, arguing that by negotiation the rebels could be persuaded to depart in peace.” The doves succeeded in winning support for negotiations.

The doves set up a meeting between Richard II and the rebels. Richard promised the rebels he would fulfill their demands, but instead of calming the mob, this inflamed them further. The king and his administration attempted to meet with the rebels a second time later that day. Wat Tyler agreed, and the administration prepared to deal with the rebel leader once and for all. Before negotiations could begin, a man among the king’s entourage struck out and killed Wat Tyler. With his death, the rebels dispersed, now both leaderless and unequipped to respond to the king’s well-armed forces. Following Wat Tyler’s death, “a series of commissions were issued to arrest and to try the rebels. Richard himself led the judicial visitations…[and] what amounted to a series of bloody assizes had begun.” Many of the wealthier, small landowning rebel leaders were pardoned, at least those deemed too important to alienate. The poor suffered the most after the revolt’s failure. In all the government reacted to the revolt with what could be considered moderation, and though minor riots occurred immediately after the Great Revolt, none

---

362 Ibid.
363 Ibid, 54.
“threatened to provoke another major upheaval – itself an indirect tribute to the king and the council’s wisdom in treating the defeated rebels with a sensible combinations of firmness and caution.”\textsuperscript{364} The assembly of the Commons appeared to blame the government’s errors rather than the peasants themselves and “the immediate abandonment of the poll tax…removed at least some of the grievances which caused the explosion.”\textsuperscript{365}

With the Great Revolt in the past, the administration began to move forward. The effect of the revolt on the young Richard ushered in a turning point for Richard II’s politics. The king and his advisors limited their tinkering with the tax system, and, because of the shock caused by the sudden and bloody revolt, the nobility demanded greater obedience from the lower classes, wanting to reinforce the hierarchy of society, and created “a greater emphasis on religious orthodoxy,”\textsuperscript{366} which rested on the acceptance of the king as the authority figure. For two years after the revolt, Richard retreated from playing a large role in politics as the government adjusted to the new expectations of the king. Richard married Anne of Bohemia in 1382, a marriage that tied the Plantagenet line to the Holy Roman Empire, and he spent most of 1382 touring the country with his new queen to gain support from all levels of society.\textsuperscript{367} Once the dust settled in 1383, Richard began to play a greater, more authoritarian role in politics.

A new court formed around the young king. Unfortunately, many of the young men who became members of Richard’s inner circle were disliked by John of Gaunt, Richard’s most senior and powerful uncle, the son of Edward III, and the man behind many of the political decisions during the king’s minority. In addition to the worries of Richard’s inner circle, his

\begin{footnotes}
\item[365] Ibid.
\item[367] Ibid, 55.
\end{footnotes}
“failure to respond vigorously to the diplomatic and military recovery in France,”\textsuperscript{368} aroused growing discontent. Despite the loss of land, Richard did not mount an attack. He preferred peace to war. “Richard was neither by instinct or taste warlike.”\textsuperscript{369} England’s lack of response to French attacks encouraged the French to consider invading England itself. When word of such a possibility reached English shores, the government quickly prepared a military response to ward off an attack on home soil. The government needed money to support the war effort. In order to levy a new tax to raise the funds for the kingdom’s defense, parliament had to be called.

One of Richard’s closest allies, the chancellor de la Pole, asked the Commons during the parliament of 1386 for a large grant of taxation to support the war effort. The Commons responded to this request with anger and distrust, the Revolt of 1381 was still fresh, and they demanded de la Pole be put on trial for charges of malfeasance. Richard refused to charge de la Pole until his advisors reminded him of an earlier king, Edward II, “who had defied the popular will,”\textsuperscript{370} or the will of the aristocracy, and wisely gave way. Found guilty, de la Pole lost his position as chancellor, and forfeited his estates.

The call for change and action did not end with de la Pole’s removal and trial. Richard’s lack of response to the war, and the limited numbers that formed his inner circle led members of the nobility to encourage the creation of a council which would monitor the king and his household, and limit the power of his favorites. “A ‘great and continual council’ was appointed for twelve months to survey the estate and condition of the household, to look into the cost of defending the realm, and to enquire into all gifts of fees and offices that the king had made.”\textsuperscript{371} Richard contested the intrusions into not only his personal life but also how he governed. He

\textsuperscript{368} Nigel Saul, \textit{The Three Richards}, (London and New York: Hambledon Continuum, 2005), 56.
\textsuperscript{369} Ibid, 94.
\textsuperscript{370} Ibid, 57.
\textsuperscript{371} Ibid.
asked that his powers be clarified by the country’s highest judges, and the judges backed Richard at each point.

Once those intent on overseeing the king learned of the judges’ complete support of Richard, they acted quickly to prosecute the king’s main allies. The group became known as the Appellants and included men like Henry Bolingbroke, John of Gaunt’s son and a powerful member of the aristocracy in his own right. The king responded to the Appellants by mobilizing a force but the army was quickly outmaneuvered by the Appellants who entered London in early 1388. The Appellants gained control of the city and the government, and ordered parliament to meet. The so-called Merciless Parliament destroyed Richard’s inner circle, created tensions and animosities between members of the aristocracy, and publically challenged Richard’s authority. Such a challenge to his authority caused him great humiliation, which Richard fought to avenge in 1397.

For Richard, luck came when “the alliance between the Appellants and the parliamentary commons began to break down” in the autumn of 1388. The following year the Appellants’ power weakened so significantly that Richard seized control of the government. He dismissed the Appellants’ councilors, appointed his own and, over the next several years, distributed his patronage more evenly, limited requests for taxation, and allied himself with his uncle, John of Gaunt, which “brought stability and strength” to the kingdom. Richard and John of Gaunt worked closely after the Appellant’s fall as John’s ambitions, and therefore the threat he posed to Richard, had lessened both in England and Spain, where he had a claim to the throne through his wife.

---

373 Ibid, 59.
374 Ibid, 60.
Determined to rebuild the power of the crown, Richard established a “baronial-style affinity so that never again would he find himself as powerless in the face of his enemies as he had been in 1387,”375 where his barons would be loyal to him and no one else. In addition, Richard pushed for the levying of taxes in peacetime in order to pay for the costs of government. He strove to project an image of the monarchy that was both greater and nobler than ever before to encourage obedience. He did this by demanding new ways of addressing the king, wearing expensive clothing, and developing an aloof approach with his subjects so that he appeared more mysterious. “By such measures, Richard cultivated an image of ‘distance’. He raised himself above his subjects. The image he had of himself was captured in the great Westminster Abbey in portrait – a king who was iconic, god-like, and all powerful.”376 Richard’s attempt to create an image of wealth and power earned him criticism. His advisors and later chroniclers worried he removed himself too far from his subjects, notably the aristocracy, who, in many cases, were not so far removed from Richard socially or economically.

Without warning in 1397, Richard struck out at his enemies. He had the three senior Appellants arrested, claiming he had discovered their plot against him. Once the three men were put on trial, all evidence and charges related to events from nearly ten years before. The sudden usurpation, as argued by Nigel Saul, probably related back to the renewed criticisms of the king’s spending, and authoritarian rule, to which Richard reacted angrily. Due to the criticism, Richard renewed his “campaign for obedience…[and believed] ‘every subject should be obedient to the king and his laws’,”377 in order to create peace and unity. As Richard made his proclamation, the court itself grew divided. Some members supported the views of the Appellants and others

375 Nigel Saul, The Three Richards, (London and New York: Hambledon Continuum, 2005), 60
376 Ibid, 60-61.
377 Ibid, 62.
supported Richard. The tension came to fruition between Henry Bolingbroke and Thomas Mowbray.

Thomas Mowbray insisted that the king’s pardons were worthless and that the inheritance John of Gaunt left upon his death to Henry would be destroyed by the king. John of Gaunt, the Duke of Lancaster, held enormous power and wealth within England. “The Lancastrian inheritance was the most extensive in England,” and once Gaunt died it would move into Henry Bolingbroke’s hands, a man who had been an Appellant and could easily rival Richard. Richard distrusted Henry, and once John of Gaunt’s power fell into Henry’s hands, Richard believed his cousin would become a considerable force within English politics.

Henry, upon hearing what Mowbray had reported, took the news to the king to confirm the rumor. The king ordered the two men to appear before him. Both men told a different story and it was decided the matter could only be resolved through a trial of arms. “At the last moment he [Richard II] called the duel off, sentencing Hereford [Thomas Mowbray] to exile for ten years and Norfolk [Henry Bolingbroke] to exile for life.” Richard removed two dissenting voices, one of whom threatened Richard’s throne more than anyone.

Not long after Henry’s exile, John of Gaunt died. Richard seized Henry’s inheritance, and extended Thomas Mowbray’s sentence from ten years to life. Richard left for Ireland believing his kingdom to be safe. Henry, who had resided in Paris during his exile, slipped away upon hearing that Richard had sailed for the Emerald Isle. Henry landed in Yorkshire and immediately gathered a following in rebellion against the king. Throughout the next few weeks, Henry drew more support as Richard’s popularity, little as it was, faded away.

379 Ibid, 64.
Henry drew supporters to him not only because of Richard’s poor governance, but also because the aristocracy viewed him as a chivalric and masculine man; many joined him for they thought he would be a better king than Richard. In *Mum and the Sothseggar*, an early fifteenth century text, the author called Henry “a doughtful doer in deedes of armes and a comely knight ycome of the grettist, foul of al vertue that to a king longeth, of age and of al thing as hym best semeth.”380 [A fearsome participant in deeds of arms and a handsome knight one of the greatest, full of manly qualities which belong to a king, of age and of all things he seems to be the best.] The author continued on to praise Henry; Henry had been blessed by God; he could lead people and rule a realm in peace by stabilizing the land and refraining from war.

Henry had participated in two Crusades, and was known as a chivalrous man. He even confronted Richard II on numerous occasions, going as far as to accuse Richard to taxing the kingdom while not at war.381 “The signs are that he was deliberately seeking to create a chivalric image for himself in the mould of the Lionheart two centuries earlier.”382 Men such as Henry deserved the loyalty of the other members of the aristocracy, and “more than measured up to the expectations of his subjects. He was everything that the unwarlike Richard was not. He stood for the highest chivalric ideals of the day.”383 Richard had chosen a formidable enemy.

Challenged by such a well-liked and able opponent, Richard returned from Ireland. He had not hastened to reach England’s shores, and by his return many of his powerful supporters had abandoned Richard’s cause in favor of Henry Bolingbroke. Richard surrendered to Henry after offering little resistance. Henry called an assembly of the Lords and Commons, and on the 29th of September 1399, Richard lost his throne. In January the following year a rebellion, led by

---

383 Ibid, 114.
the former king’s closest followers who had the most to lose under Henry IV, rose against the
new king in the hopes of restoring Richard to the throne. Their failure led to Richard II’s death in
1400.

Richard II ruled England for twenty-two years, coming into his own in the aftermath of
the Great Revolt of 1381 and falling when Henry Bolingbroke rose against him. What happened
during Richard’s years as king which would make the nobility abandon him, and choose a man
who had been exiled by the king himself? As part of the propaganda within medieval kingship,
kings viewed themselves as individuals chosen by God and were thus divinely favored. Kings
were expected to act with the best interests of the realm in mind. Such a broad expectation
included handing out judicial sentences, acting fairly and chivalrously, creating peace and
prosperity within the kingdom, providing authority and leadership, and, if the opportunity arose,
attaining glory in victorious battle. Richard II, while he did not fail at all of these kingly
requirements and expectations, appeared unable to act within the confines of medieval English
expectation in regard to chivalric masculinity and to use chivalry as a form of propaganda.

The underlying answer to Richard’s fall originates in his failure to properly perform
chivalric masculinity and therefore all the expectations of a king within medieval England.
According to Judith Butler, “if the body is not a ‘being,’ but a…surface whose permeability is
politically regulated, a signifying practice within a cultural field of gender hierarchy and
compulsory heterosexuality…[then] gender is a performance with clearly punitive
consequences.”384 Such a performance of gender, both of masculinity and femininity, is a
construction in which a society has collectively agreed to “perform, produce and sustain”385 or a
specific set of gender traits which are expected to be enacted. When they are not, such failure is

---

385 Ibid, 140.
punished. The failure to uphold those gender traits, especially when one holds power as with Richard II, threatens the established and accepted norm of the ruling elite. As Richard failed in numerous ways to uphold the expected image of kingship and, through kingship, the ideal of chivalric masculinity upon which kingship rests, his failure led others to view him as incapable and unworthy of being king. Henry Bolingbroke, who represented chivalric masculinity as so noted in *Mum and the Sothseggar*, appeared as a stronger, better king than Richard II.

Richard made enemies of powerful men, like Henry Bolingbroke, and excluded other powerful members of the nobility from his inner circle, creating distrust, jealously, and anger. While he attempted to learn from his mistakes after the fall of the Appellants, Richard failed to form lasting bounds of loyalty between those most threatening to his position, and his chosen friends were considerably weaker and fewer than his enemies. Most significantly, by making an enemy out of Henry Bolingbroke, a man lauded by contemporaries for his chivalric qualities, his proper performance of chivalry, Richard lost his throne.

Richard II had a deep belief in the power and superiority of the king. He believed in the “unique God-given nature of his office. He regarded it as a duty laid on him by the Almighty to maintain rights, liberties and privileges pertaining to his office…a body of rights known as the prerogative.” To Richard, the crown was a “source of honor and nobility [where] the office of king [was] the sole legally constituted source of authority in society,” and that all honor came directly from the king. “The association between the Almighty and Richard’s kingship was a theme frequently emphasized in the literary and artistic imagery” of Richard’s reign. Richard expected a binding obligation from his subjects, noble, freeman and villein alike. He believed he

---

387 Ibid, 236.
388 Ibid, 248-249.
389 Ibid, 385.
deserved, as king and supreme authority within the land, the obedience and loyalty of his subjects. He was haughty instead of chivalrous. He developed, especially in the later years of his reign, aloofness towards many members of the aristocracy, and an authoritarian style of rule. He began to form a close group of friends and advisors, extending to them greater favors and privileges than he did to those outside his circle. Richard placed himself so far above his peers, the aristocracy found little which they could love in Richard.

Richard was not a military man and continually strove for peace both within and outside his kingdom while attempting to forge his authoritarian idea of rule. During his reign, England made little, if any, progress in the Hundred Years’ War. His military achievements were significantly lacking in comparison to those of his father and his grandfather, Edward III. After 1389, he consistently sought peace with France, and because of his desire to avoid war, Richard had to find alternative avenues in which to demonstrate chivalry. “Chivalric expectations…rested on him,” and aristocracy, the men who upheld Richard’s claim to the throne, expected that Richard act in a war-like manner.

As he sought peace with France, he needed another avenue in which to demonstrate his chivalry, and so Richard fostered associations with his long-dead namesake, Richard I, known for his military accomplishments during the Crusade and his attempts to reconquer territories in France. To compensate further for his lack of martial interest, Richard began to hold and promote tournaments, yet he himself did not participate. He used the tournaments to not only associate himself with war and chivalry, but also to recreate and stress his position at the tournaments. “He sat on a high dais and looked down. He elevated himself. He used tournaments to stress hierarchy. In this way, he reconciled their martial character with his emphasis on

---

sovereignty.” 391 Richard clearly recognized his failure to perform an expectation of masculinity, that of chivalry, and he tried to express his chivalric tendencies through other avenues. Even through his association with Richard I and hosting numerous tournaments, Richard could not fulfill the desire of the aristocracy for in the end they turned to a man who could.

As Richard stressed his lofty position above his subjects, he increasing encouraged the use of “highness” and “majesty” as the main form of address for the king instead of promoting ideas of equality as did King Arthur with the Round Table. Not only did Richard require such forms of address in person, but also in letters and official documents. He expected “physical expressions of deference,” 392 increasing demonstrating his attempt to make the kingship not only the sole source of authority, but indisputably so in which subjects were required to give obedience. He dressed to outdo and awe. Richard made sure that every inch of his person was carefully and specifically calculated to create a specific image of power. “The production and manipulation of the royal image were both carefully controlled. Nothing was left to chance…Richard was concerned to present himself as an icon of regality,” 393 who was even untouchable by his peers.

Beside his lack of martial interest and his growing sense of self-importance, Richard also failed to produce an heir. Marriage in the Middle Ages not only marked the movement into adulthood but served to provide political stability in creating allies and securing the next, undisputable heir. Richard’s marriage to Anne did indeed have political motivations, but, the marriage, more importantly, failed to produce children. When Anne died in 1394, Richard remarried three years later, choosing as his bride the daughter of the French King, Charles VI, and using the marriage as a vehicle for peaceful relations between England and France. A six-

393 Ibid, 235.
year old at the time of her marriage, Isabella would be unable to consummate the marriage for many more years, despite Richard’s need for an heir.\textsuperscript{394} Without an heir, Richard could have chosen one from among his large family or his close friends in order to limit any succession fears. However, “he did everything in his power to prevent the emergence of a front-runner…Richard was, in classic fashion, employing the tactics of divide and rule. He was deliberately sowing uncertainty in people’s minds. In most other reigns, such a policy would have been eschewed as conducive to disorder…Richard thought that, by creating insecurity in others, he would find the security that he craved for himself.”\textsuperscript{395} His inability to provide stability through such a common avenue painted Richard in an unmanly light.

Richard II’s increasing authoritarian view on kingship, while used to cement his power as king, worked against him. Chronicles that appeared after his death called him a tyrant. Nigel Saul commented that the tyranny present at the end of Richard’s reign consisted of a “perversion of legitimate rulership.”\textsuperscript{396} Rulers, as commonly believed, were created for the protection of the people and based upon the given consent of the large majority of the aristocracy. After Richard’s fall, the chronicles and political commentaries which appeared claimed he ruled unjustly and deserved his deposition. According to Nigel Saul, “there appears to have been little or no factual distortion in them [the articles].”\textsuperscript{397}

If we can accept Saul’s statement, one of the most telling records of Richard’s failure as a king can be found in the political commentary titled \textit{Richard the Redeless} [Richard Without Counsel]. The unknown poet produced the work either in the later years of Richard II’s reign or during the early years of Henry IV’s reign. The work offered advice to Richard, and future kings,

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{394} Nigel Saul, \textit{The Three Richards}, (London and New York: Hambledon Continuum, 2005), 145.
\textsuperscript{395} Ibid, 156.
\textsuperscript{396} Ibid, 213.
\textsuperscript{397} Ibid, 214.
\end{flushright}
on how to properly act and govern a kingdom. The poet claimed that Richard failed because he
was poorly advised, fostered fear, mistrust, and anger among his peers, and became, over time,
increasingly tyrannical. The poet identifies, above all, Richard as the source of the problems
which overtake England during Richard’s reign. He accuses Richard of treachery and theft which
impoverished the realm, and also accused Richard of “heavy taxation in peacetime, all for the
extravagance and waste of Richard’s court.”\(^398\) The author of Richard the Redeless provides a
unique and unrestrained contemporary view on Richard II, and reveals the contemporary
thoughts and views of the man who ruled the kingdom. Those views often perceive Richard as
lacking the traits necessary (chivalric masculinity) to properly rule.

The poet said “Richard that regned so rich and so noble, that wyle he werrid be west on
the wilde Yrisshe, Henrri was entird on the est half, whom all the londe loved, in length and in
brede, and rosse with him rapely to rightyn his wronge…”\(^399\) [Richard who reigned so richly and
nobly, that while he warred in the west on the wild Irish, Henry advanced from the east, whom
all the land loved everywhere and rose with him quickly to right his wrong.] The author argued
that the people held little love for Richard, and they abandoned him at the first opportunity
because he ruled over others without regard for their wellbeing. The poet said that Richard’s
revelry and rest were taken away because of his greed and wickedness.

By dride, or be dynits, or domes untrewe, or by creauce of coyne for castes of gile, by
pil lynge of youre peple, your prynces to plese, or that youre wylle were wrought, though
wisdom it nolde; or be tallage of your townnes without ony werre, by rewhles routus that
rffled evere, be presigne of polaxis that no pete hadde, or be dette for thi dees, deme as
thou fyndist…”\(^400\)

[By fear, or by blows, or bad judgments, or by monetary credit for tricks of guile, by
robbing your people, to please your princes, or that your will was executed, though

\(^398\) “Richard the Redeless,” Richard the Redeless and Mum and the Sothsegger, ed. James M. Dean, (Kalamazoo,
\(^399\) Ibid, 23.
\(^400\) Ibid, 26.
wisdom says no, or taxing your towns without war, by ruthless gains who ransacked everywhere, by appraising of pole-axes that no one had, or by debt for their dice, you judged as you found them…] (Translation Kestner)

The poet accused Richard to putting more thought into his appearance than into governance. When he did govern, he used the laws and taxes to his own ends and judged any who went against him as he saw fit. Richard also surrounded himself with young lords who never studied nor cared for government. “That nevere reed good rewle, ne resons bookis.”401 [Who never studied good government, nor reason’s books.] Such lords were unable to provide Richard with advice he needed to properly run his government.

To more thoroughly demonstrate his point, the author of Richard the Redeless had the allegoric form of Wisdom attend the king’s court to which the author commented “als sone as they wiste that Witt was his name, and that the kyng knewe him not, ne non of his knyghtis, he was halowid andyhuntid and yhotte truss…”402 [As soon as they knew that Wisdom was his name, and that the king and his knights did not know him, he was hooted at and hunted and sent way.] To the poet, not only did Richard surround himself with poor governance, but those who would offer wisdom were chased from court and hunted. If good council was available, Richard made sure not to heed it. Richard’s advisors were to be blamed but because Richard disregarded the advice of wiser men, Richard was to be blamed as much as any for his failure to be a good and just king.

By the end of his political commentary, the poet concluded that Richard misruled through numerous means. Richard failed as a king through over-taxation, personal faults, the lack of good consul, and for pursuing pleasure over ruling the kingdom. “Of many mo wrongis they

402 Ibid, 41.
werched than I write couude.” They made many more wrongs than I could write.] To the poet, Richard was not a man other men should admire. He failed to fulfill specific expectations of kingship and therefore failed to properly perform chivalric masculinity, the ideology which formed the crux of medieval English masculinity. Men like Henry IV, who the poet referred to as the Eagle, were worthy of the admiration and loyalty of their peers because they properly performed chivalric masculinity.

To contemporary members of the aristocracy, Richard II failed as a king and as a man. As kingship is a position only a man can hold, Richard’s failure to act the man and embody the role of the chivalric masculine image, threatened the power of elite men both politically and socially. Richard II was not a warrior, and he failed in most of his military acts. He removed himself from his social and political peers by placing himself above them. He lacked compassion, and was suspicious and vengeful towards those who spoke against him in any manner. Richard produced no children, helped foster fears of successional war, and chose to be exclusive in his friends and extremely limited in his patronage. His failed performance and inability to properly uphold the kingly expectations of masculinity via chivalry led to his quick removal. His failure as a man led to his failure as a king. As stated by Nigel Saul, “The reasons for Richard’s downfall were many…yet beneath the short-term and personal factors there was a deeper problem. Richard had set himself completely at odds with the model of chivalric kingship.” Richard could not properly emulate the keystone of King Arthur, nor could he fulfill, via other means, the requirements needed for a king to maintain his power. Richard’s failure to perform chivalric masculinity led to his downfall and his eventual death.

---

Conclusion

The proper performance of gender plays a crucial role within a society. If cultural values are inscribed on and projected from a body, via the performance of gender, then those cultural values are constantly threatened through the proper or improper performance of an individual’s gender. The performative aspect of gender makes gender unstable and highly susceptible to change if performers fail to repudiate the discourse correctly. Any change within a socially accepted performance can create immediate and dangerous reactions to those who act outside the gendered norm, and fail to perform their gender in the culturally chosen form. For example, successful or unsuccessful kings, men at the pinnacle of political power, are expected to perform gender in precise, perfected forms. Those who fail not only represent a political weakness but a weakness within masculinity that suggests men cannot hold or maintain political power. Western societies, even in the Middle Ages, view such failure as incompetence and weakness—everything masculinity should not be. Gender can then be classified as a strategy to employ specific cultural traits in order to survive and gain power within a given culture. Judith Butler stated that:

As a strategy of survival within compulsory systems, gender is a performance with clearly punitive consequences…indeed, we regularly punish those who fail to do their gender right…The various acts of gender create the idea of gender, and without those acts, there would be no gender at all. Gender is, thus, a construction that regularly conceals its genesis; the tacit collective agreement to perform, produce, and sustain discrete and polar genders as cultural fictions is obscured by the credibility of those productions – and the punishments that attend not agreeing to believe in them; the construction ‘compels’ our belief in its necessity and naturalness.

Any strategy can arguably be considered a form of propaganda used to convince other members of society of one’s right to power. In time, chivalry became the propaganda of politics in the High Middle Ages. For the warrior elite of medieval England, chivalry was specifically used as propaganda by kings such as Edward III to achieve social and military success.

405 Judith Butler, Gender Troubles: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity, (New York: Routledge, 1990), 130.  
406 Ibid, 139.
Within medieval England during the Plantagenet dynasty, the expectations that elite men act chivalrously, or perform chivalric masculinity which included such ideas as acting honorably, courageously and courteously, directly affected the success of a king. If a king acted chivalrously, or properly performed chivalric masculinity as demonstrated within Arthurian literature, then those who supported the king, men of significant power and resources themselves, accepted the king’s power due to his prowess as a chivalric leader. In particular, if a king could emulate King Arthur, the keystone of chivalry, they achieved and maintained a position of power over their peers.

When kings failed to deliver on those expectations, those closest to him in power frequently acted to restore the balance. His failure to perform chivalric masculinity endangered the entire ideology of the warrior elite by destabilizing the naturalized and mystified ideologies of chivalry and sex. Elite warriors believed chivalry, the pinnacle of elite masculinity, justified their right to rule which also mystified the violence found therein (which “allowed” them power in the first place). Failure undermined their entire foundation to power. Kings who failed to properly emulate the propaganda of King Arthur threatened the social order. If they could not demonstrate the qualities which gave the elite their power, they could not maintain noble support and, in the end, political power. Richard II’s failure to properly perform chivalric masculinity led his subjects to quickly abandon him when they recognized a stronger military leader in Henry Bolingbroke, a man who more fully emulated the character of King Arthur and the traits inherent in chivalry.

As chivalry reified elite male rule, and mystified the violence of elite men by pretending to follow a correct form of power found in the character of King Arthur, chivalry became the foundation to elite power. In particular, the character of King Arthur acted as the keystone to the
entire system from which all good things stemmed, and was used to maintain a fantasy of peace, perfection, and sustain the ideals of society. The Plantagenet kings of England were expected to emulate the actions and characteristics of King Arthur. Plantagenet kings who successfully channeled Arthurian qualities were hailed as great leaders who brought prosperity and honor to their kingdom. In this way, a king had to use the performance and propaganda of chivalric masculinity to forge the image of an elite man who deserved his power and authority.
The peak of the pyramid is where the kings, land-owning elites like earls and barons, and powerful members of the church are placed. Within this, masculinity also forms a hierarchy. As men “ran” society, so too did the differences between what made a man masculine and what made him less masculine. Those who achieved masculinity within their tier rose closer to the top.

Here we find merchants, clergy, craftsmen and knights who have not risen into the ranks of the land-owning elite but who try to emulate the ideas of chivalry which are inherent in the upper hierarchies.

Within the hierarchy of society there existed in the High Middle Ages a hierarchy of men which followed the hierarchy of society, beginning with the king and endings with serfs and slaves.

At the bottom of the pyramid villeins (free-laborers), and serfs (laborers bound to the land), followed by slaves, make up the large majority of the medieval population but even within this group, masculinity acts as another hierarchy where villeins stand above serfs and serfs above slaves. Within each subgroup, there are more divisions. A serf who acts as an overseer for his lord has attained a higher status than one who does not. His success is derived from his ability to properly perform the requirements of masculinity for his tier.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Name</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>978-1016</td>
<td>Ethelred II the Unready</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1016</td>
<td>Edmund Ironside</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1016-1035</td>
<td>Cnut the Great</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1035-1040</td>
<td>Harold I Harefoot</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1040-1042</td>
<td>Harthacnut</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1042-1066</td>
<td>Edward the Confessor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1066</td>
<td>Harold II</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1066-1087</td>
<td>William the Conqueror</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1087-1100</td>
<td>William II</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1100-1135</td>
<td>Henry I</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1135-1154</td>
<td>Stephen I</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1154-1189</td>
<td>Henry II</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1189-1199</td>
<td>Richard I</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1199-1216</td>
<td>John I</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year</td>
<td>Work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1138</td>
<td>Geoffrey of Monmouth, <em>Historia Regum Britanniae</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1138-1399</td>
<td><em>The Rise of Gawain: Nephew of Arthur</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1155</td>
<td>Wace, <em>Roman de Brut</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1169-1181</td>
<td>Chretien de Troyes, <em>Knight of the Cart or Lancelot</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1200s</td>
<td><em>The Mabinogion</em>, includes <em>Gereint and Enid, Owein</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1210</td>
<td>Lazamon, <em>Brut</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1390</td>
<td><em>Gawain and the Green Knight</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1460s</td>
<td>The Arthurian works of Sir Thomas Malory</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 3.1  
Chronology of the Plantagenet Kings to the Tudors

*The Plantagenets*
1216-1272  Henry III  
1272-1307  Edward I  
1307-1327  Edward II  
1327-1377  Edward III  
1377-1399  Richard II  

*The Lancasters*
1399-1413  Henry IV  
1413-1422  Henry V  
1422-1461  Henry VI  

*The Yorks*
1461-1483  Edward IV  
1483  Edward V  
1483-1485  Richard III  

*The Tudors*
1485-1509  Henry VII  
1509-1547  Henry VIII
Bibliography


