

“Aluen hine iuengen”: Fairies, Arthur, and Ideal Kingship in Lawman’s *Brut*

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Abstract

*The supernatural themes that most readers know from the Arthurian stories, such as Merlin and Avalon, did not always serve as the primary focus in early Arthurian myths. Instead, Arthurian writers attempted to establish a reliable historical link with the past. Between the mid-12th and early 13th century, Geoffrey of Monmouth, Wace, and Lawman wrote a series of historical narratives that helped establish the foundation myth of Britain. Although each author built on the work of his predecessor, each writer also expanded and redacted scenes for his own literary purposes—particularly in relation to supernatural events. Compared to Geoffrey and Wace, Lawman uses supernatural elements more freely and emphatically. Not only does Arthur in *Brut* possess spiritual overtones, he also becomes a kind of liminal figure who has one foot in the world of men and one foot in the world of fairies. Much of Arthur’s liminality stems from Lawman’s use of Anglo-Saxon heroic tradition, especially when compared to a hero like Beowulf. And while it is tempting to read English literature as a vehicle for creating English nationalism, especially considering that many scholars seem to read Lawman’s Arthur as a co-opted hero for English nationalism, literature can serve other purposes than ideologically upholding nascent notions of nationhood. Unlike Geoffrey and Wace, both of whom use Arthur for predominantly political purposes, I argue that Lawman’s emphasis on Arthur’s spiritual qualities is meant not just to be emblematic of an English king but also to create a complex literary character who functions primarily to critique both Norman and English forms of ideal kingship.*

Although most readers are familiar with the magical elements of Arthurian stories—e.g. Merlin, Avalon, Excalibur, and various stories from the French Romance tradition—supernatural themes were not always the primary focus in the early development of the Arthurian myth. Instead, Arthurian stories attempted to establish a reliable historical link with the past. Between the mid-12th and early 13th century, Geoffrey of Monmouth, Wace, and Lawman wrote a series of historical narratives that helped establish the foundation myth of Britain. All three authors use the Arthurian story as the climactic narrative in their longer histories. And although each author built on the work of his predecessor, he also expanded and redacted scenes for his own literary purposes. One important point of variation between all three authors is the way they introduce and negotiate the supernatural events that pervade Arthurian stories. Between Merlin's prophecies and Arthur's mysterious birth and death, each author explores the supernatural elements of the Arthurian story with varying degrees of emphasis.

Compared to Geoffrey and Wace, Lawman uses supernatural elements more freely and emphatically. In Lawman's *Brut*, Arthur not only carries spiritual overtones, but he also becomes a kind of liminal figure who has one foot in the world of men and one foot in the world of fairies. Much of Arthur's liminality stems from Lawman's use of Anglo-Saxon heroic tradition, especially when compared to a hero like Beowulf. And while it is tempting to read English literature as a vehicle for creating English nationalism, especially considering that many scholars seem to read Lawman's Arthur as a co-opted hero for English nationalism, literature can serve other purposes than ideologically upholding nascent notions of nationhood. Unlike Geoffrey and Wace who use Arthur for predominantly political purposes, I argue that Lawman's emphasis on Arthur's spiritual qualities is meant not just to be emblematic of an English king but also to create a complex literary character who functions primarily to critique both Norman and English forms of ideal kingship.

I

The myth of Arthur did not begin with the Round Table, Camelot, or even his kingship. Instead, Arthur emerged from the shadows of partly oral and partly written traditions. After the Roman retreat and before the 6th century, stories of a British leader who managed to unite Britons together against the Saxons, Picts, and Scots began to surface. One of the earlier recordings of an Arthur-like figure occurs in the writings of Gildas, a sixth-

century monk who writes about the leadership of Ambrosius Aurelianus—a man who managed to rally the Britons and fend off the Saxons. Arthur's name, however, does not officially appear in writing until the ninth century, when Nennius writes about the success of the Britons and the heroic deeds of a man named Arthur who "fought with the Saxons, alongside the kings of the Britons, but he himself was the leader in the battles" (qtd. in Williams 6). There is also evidence to suggest that Arthur's name was gaining in popularity before and after the time of Nennius. In the *Annales of Cambriae*, [Annals of Wales] there are two entries that mention the battle of Mount Badon and the battle of Camlaun; and in *Gesta Regum Anglorum* [Deeds of the Kings of the English], William of Malmesbury mentions that the Britons rave and disturb the peace in their enthusiasm for Arthur (qtd. in Paton xi). In all of this, however, Arthur is a prominent leader and warrior but not a king.

Arthur finally emerges as king of Britain in the 12th century when, in response to the political and cultural climate of his day, Geoffrey of Monmouth crowns him in the *Historia Regum Britanniae* [History of the Kings of Britain] in 1138 C.E. By the time the 12th century arrives, the Norman conquerors' connection to their history had begun to fade, and they started to take a greater interest in the history of the British island and its peoples. At the time, the Normans lacked a sense of historical precedent in their royal history as Kings of Britain. Geoffrey's *Historia*, along with his emphasis on Arthur as King, is arguably the product of his ability to seize this political and cultural opportunity. As W.R.J. Barron and S.C. Weinberg point out, "Geoffrey's *Historia* furnished a link with the ancient, honourable, seemingly stable world of its schoolroom texts" in an age that was conscious of the dark chasm between their historical origins and current political issues (xvii). Geoffrey himself, in his introduction to the *Historia*, complains of a similar void in the historical works of writers like Bede and Gildas: "nought could I find as concerning the kings that had dwelt in Britain before the Incarnation of Christ, nor nought even as concerning Arthur and the many others that did succeed him. . ." (trans. by Evans 3). By presuming to fill a historical gap and by writing a narrative about kingship itself, Geoffrey is able to claim Arthur as a figure from whom every future king derives authority because he transcends any one group of people's right to the throne.

Geoffrey establishes the tradition of Arthur as king and exemplar in two ways. First, Geoffrey states in the introduction that the history he is about to record is not propaganda for any particular race of people, but rather the history of kingship on the island itself. In the first sentence

of the *Historia*, Geoffrey writes, “Oftentimes in turning over in mine own mind the many themes that might be subject-matter of a book, my thoughts would fall upon the plan of writing a history of the Kings of Britain. . .” (Evans 3). Geoffrey’s intentional use of the term “Britain” reveals his disinclination to argue that any one tribe or ethnic group possessed a right to the British throne. Instead, his wording suggests an interest in the pattern of succession and governance that sets precedence for contemporary kings of Britain. Geoffrey’s historiography also has roots in the traditional “providential narrative” formula popularized by Bede. As Kenneth Tiller argues, “By making the Norman conquest part of a repeating cycle of sin and purgation that began with the Anglo-Saxon displacement of the Britons, these historians could thus establish continuity between English and Norman history” (31). With this narrative formula in place, Geoffrey is able to “flatter the Norman conquerors by displaying the greatness of the race they have subdued” and encourage them to live up to the expectations established by the kings of Britain who preceded them (Patton xx).

Second, Geoffrey carefully blurs the line between historical fact and fiction in order to create a living and transcendent myth of ideal kingship. Although he uses the word “history” in the title, Geoffrey blends Celtic mythology into his “historical” narrative. Geoffrey lived on the Welsh border and would have been aware of the stories of Arthur with whom the Britons were enamored. Geoffrey also includes the character of Merlin (a variation on the Welsh name Myrddin) and Merlin’s prophecies, which he claims to have translated from early Welsh verse. Such material adds both to the mystery of Geoffrey’s historical accuracy and the supernatural quality of Arthur himself. Additionally, Geoffrey’s allusion to a supposedly reliable historical source document, “the most ancient book” (Evans 3), has been called into question. This has led some scholars to argue that his narrative is a “romance, projecting upon historical reality . . . a golden age of triumph” (Barron and Weinberg xxii-xix). Finally, within this framework of history, romance, and Celtic mythology, Geoffrey situates the story of Arthur at the climactic moment of the narrative. King Arthur is the hero of Geoffrey’s historical-mythology, and as the hero, he becomes an archetype for British kingship.

Following on the heels of Geoffrey, Wace writes his own version of the history of the Britons in *Le Roman de Brut* around 1155 C.E. At the time, there were several other versions based on Geoffrey’s *Historia* in circulation, but Wace’s version trumped them all and solidified itself as the next step in the rise of Arthur as king (Jones vii). Wace was born in Jersey

and was educated in Caen and Paris, and he was deeply indebted to the French royal court. Presumably, Henry II funded Wace's "translation" of Geoffrey's *Historia*, and, according to Lawman, Wace may have presented the finished work to Eleanor of Aquitaine herself (Lawman 19-23). As a result, Wace's interest in the story of the Britons closely parallels Geoffrey's political aims, but Wace chooses to minimize the traces of Welsh influences and instead focus on the court and pageantry of Arthur's reign.

Wace's decision to exclude many of Geoffrey's Welsh sources changes the whole tenor of the Arthurian story. For example, Wace usually only hints at or simply omits Merlin's prophecies. In the scene where Merlin and Vortigern have discovered the dragons underneath the foundations of Vortigern's tower, Geoffrey records Merlin's prophecy of the coming kings of Britain in detailed imagery, some of which includes the coming of Arthur. Wace, however, chooses to exclude the prophecy altogether because, as he says,

I don't want to translate [Merlin's] book
Since I cannot interpret it;
I do not wish to say a thing
If it were not as I would say it. (trans. by Glowka 7,539-42)

Such reluctance arises again throughout the reign of Arthur, where Wace recalls Merlin's prophecies but insists that they have little or no bearing on what actually happened, and sometimes he chooses to cast doubt on the whole affair. Even at Arthur's death, Wace writes, "Arthur, *if* the tale's no lie, was mortally wounded in the body / and borne away to Avalon. . ." (13,275-77, emphasis added). In Wace's defense, there is some evidence, as Jean Blacker observes, of latent anti-Norman sentiments in some of Merlin's translated prophecies which could easily have dissuaded Wace from emphasizing Merlin's role in his historical narrative. Such circumstances suggest that "political rather than aesthetic considerations" guided Wace's editorial decisions as he wrote the *Roman de Brut* (Blacker 36). Even so, the result of Wace's narrative changes the tenor of the Arthurian story by giving it an air of detached regality and ceremonial pageantry.

Wace primarily concerns himself with the proceedings of Arthur's court and the example it sets for contemporary Norman royal courts. Although Wace redacts much of the supernatural elements found in the *Historia* on the grounds that it may not be true, he does not shy away from inventing new components for the story if it serves his purpose. For example, Wace is generally believed to be the first of the Arthurian

writers to introduce the Round Table to Arthur's court, highlighting the equality with which people were treated:

The vassals took their places there,
All chivalrous, all equal too.

.....

None of these men were able to boast
That he sat higher than his peer;
All were seated equally;
There was not one who was left out. (9753-54, 9757-9760)

In addition, Wace spends much more time embellishing the details of Arthur's courtliness and court pageantry than either Geoffrey or Lawman. The scene of Arthur's coronation alone is more than double the length of Geoffrey's and Lawman's narrative. The addition of the Round Table, the description of the feasting, and the detailed imagery of the procession that precedes the coronation scene illustrates Wace's familiarity with the ideals of behavior in the royal Norman court, and thus he suggests that his historical narrative is meant to celebrate those courtly traditions.

Based on Wace's and Geoffrey's narratives, both clearly wrote for a predominantly Norman audience and under Norman patronage. In the case of the *Historia*, Geoffrey recognized an opportunity to curry favor with the Normans by supplying them with historical precedents, while Wace seems to have written his narrative because of Norman patronage and in celebration of the Norman court. As a result, both historical narratives tend to function as a mirror and standard for Norman royal courts. Consequently, Arthur himself takes on French chivalric virtues and statesmanship. It is at this point in the development of the kingship of Arthur that Lawman writes the *Brut*. Charles Williams, an important twentieth-century poet and scholar of Arthurian romance, argues that while Wace maintained and elevated the culture and medieval splendor of Geoffrey's *Historia*, "Layamon wrote under the influence of older poets, of the Anglo-Saxons" (Williams 39). Writing within a distinctly English tradition, Lawman is free from the Norman political pressures that guided the narratives of Geoffrey and Wace. And with the backdrop of Anglo-Saxon heroic myths, Lawman can more easily emphasize the supernatural qualities of Arthur's character, which allows Lawman simultaneously to use Arthur to critique English and Norman forms of ideal kingship even as he reflects aspects of both.

II

Unlike Geoffrey and Wace, relatively little is known about Lawman’s biography and his intended audience except for what can be gleaned from the introduction and the overall style of the *Brut*. Introducing himself to his readers, Lawman writes:

An preost wes on leoden,	Laȝamon wes ihoten;
he wes leouenaðes sone	—liðe him beo Drihten!
He wonede at Ernleȝe	at æpelen are chirechen
Vppen Seuarne staþe	—sel þar him þuhte—
Onfest Radestone;	þer he bock radde. (Lawman, 1-5)

[A priest was in the land, he was called Lawman; he was Leovenath’s son—God be merciful to him! He lived at Areley by a noble church upon the bank of the Severn—he thought it pleasant there—close to Redstone; there he read books]

Based on Lawman’s own account, he is the son of Leovenath and he was a priest in a town that has now been identified as Areley Kings, a village ten miles outside of Worcester. Lawman’s language, however, is his most distinctive quality and the most telling aspect of his style. Geoffrey wrote in Latin and Wace wrote in French—Latin was the preferred language of the Church, French was the language of Norman royal courts, and both represent the language of the educated upper-class. The *Brut*, in the opening lines alone, provides a jarring contrast to the works of Geoffrey and Wace with its Englishness. Not only does he write in English, the language of a conquered people, but he also uses the traditional alliterative half-line verse of the Anglo-Saxons; which, for an English audience, would evoke the glory of a fading heroic past.

Apart from what can be inferred from the limited biographical evidence, language, and meter of Lawman’s *Brut*, the *Brut* is also “Anglo-Saxon in temper” (Lewis 23). Compared to Wace, to whom Lawman makes frequent allusions in his introduction, one can easily see a stark difference in the overall atmosphere of the narrative. While “Wace is busy with courts and progresses” (Williams 39), Lawman is busy with heroes, battles, and royal courts that sound suspiciously like Anglo-Saxon mead halls. For example, when the Romans arrive at Arthur’s court to summon him to the Roman Emperor Lucius, Wace and Lawman provide very different descriptions. In Wace’s version, the twelve ambassadors

arrive “hoary and gray, / Well adorned and well attired”; they came bearing “olive branches”; and before approaching Arthur’s throne they processed “beautifully and impressively, / They made a pass around the hall” (Glowka 10,623-31). In the *Brut*, however, the scene evokes a very different mood; it is colder, grayer, and does not include any form of a royal procession from the Roman ambassadors. The narrator makes a point of mentioning the “grætne ring of golde” each man wore (Lawman 12,349), recalling the great ring-givers from stories like *Beowulf*, and he further describes the room in which Arthur took counsel as “An ald stanene weorc; stiðe men hit wurhten” [an old stone fortification; strong men built it] (12,419). In every detail, the Anglo-Saxon world hangs over the events in the *Brut*.

III

One of the key features of heroes within the Anglo-Saxon world is the quality of liminality. Liminality, as Sarah Higley argues in her “Study of Liminality in *Beowulf*,” is consistent with the Anglo-Saxon view of the human condition, of being caught between heaven and hell here on Mid-dangearð [Middle Earth]. Consequently, in this view the most powerful beings whether good or evil “can make threshold crossings that ordinary men cannot . . . for they can occupy this and the Other world alike” (Higley 342). I will endeavor to show, by comparing Arthur with Beowulf, that Arthur also exhibits liminal qualities which, in addition to anglicizing Arthur, further emphasizes the importance of Arthur’s spiritual significance as it pertains to Lawman’s literary project.

In the case of Beowulf, he is not only a hero with superhuman strength but also a man capable of engaging with the supernatural world on its own terms. In the battle with Grendel, Beowulf decides to fight Grendel in hand-to-hand combat to ensure a fair fight (trans. by Heaney 677-87). As soon as the conflict begins, the narrator describes Grendel’s shock at Beowulf’s strength:

the captain of evil discovered himself
in a handgrip harder than anything
he had ever encountered in any man
on the face of the earth. (749-52)

It is important to note here that Grendel and Grendel’s Mother are both earlier described by Hrothgar as “huge marauders from some other world,” whose “ancestry is hidden in a past of demons and ghosts” and that they “dwell apart among wolves on the hills, on windswept crags and treacher-

ous keshes. . ." (1348-49, 1356-59). And after Grendel's Mother's revenge at Heorot, Beowulf pursues her into her own country where "the water burns" and no man or animal dares to dive beneath the surface of her mere (1366). Beowulf's battle with Grendel and his mother represents not just a physical battle but a supernatural battle as well—a battle in which only a man with supernatural qualities could compete. Beowulf, as a heroic character, portrays liminal qualities because he can engage with the natural and the supernatural world.

Lawman picks up on the liminality of heroes like Beowulf and intentionally reflects them in the character of Arthur. Arthur's transformation into a liminal hero begins with his conception and runs throughout the rest of his life. Merlin's "lehecraeft" [magic], for example, brings about Arthur's conception (9448). After Uther has despaired of winning Ygerne for himself, he allows Merlin to disguise him so that he can satisfy his longing for Ygerne. As a result, Ygerne conceives Arthur "al þurh Merlines wizel" [all through Merlin's magic] (9606). Then as soon as Arthur is born, "aluen hine iuengen" [elves take charge of him] (9608). The elves enchant Arthur with strong magic; they give him strength to be the greatest knight; they secure his rise to power; and they grant him long life (9609-15). With all of these gifts and enchantment, the elves ensure that he becomes the "mete-custi of alle quike monnen" [most generous of all living men] (9614).

Arthur's supernatural qualities come into play throughout the rest of his life as well. Like Beowulf, Arthur is able to traverse and even has knowledge of supernatural landscapes. Similar to the description of Grendel's mere, in an uncanny scene surrounding a Scottish Loch, Arthur explains to his cousin Howel the strangeness of the waters. In this Loch, there are four kinds of fish and they all manage to remain separated from each other; at the end of the Loch there is a small lake that, according to Arthur, "alfene hine dulfen!" [elves dug it!] (10977). Arthur goes on to explain that at the edge of the region near the seashore there is another lake that contains evil waters. The lake mysteriously does not flood when the sea pours into it, but afterwards, it swells and will flood out over the land, and the only way to keep oneself safe from its flooding waters is to face it and "þat water him glit bisiden and þe mon þer wuned softe, after his iwille. . ." [that water glides beside him and the man stands easily, just as he wishes] (11000-01). Howel, after hearing these words, is amazed. Where Arthur could have learned such information is not mentioned, leaving readers to infer that Arthur's knowledge and awareness of the surrounding landscape is linked with his own enchantment.

In addition, one of the more important aspects of narrative variation effected by the theme of liminality is Arthur's doubtful death. In Geoffrey's narration of the story, Arthur received deadly wounds "and was borne thence unto the Isle of Avalon for the healing of his wounds. . ." (trans. by Evans 236). Geoffrey does not mention Merlin's prophecies, or whether Arthur eventually died of his wounds, or even an explanation of the significance of Avalon. Instead, he provides a bland description of the time and place of Arthur's departure along with a quick side-note about him having transferred the crown to "Constantine, son of Cador, Duke of Cornwall" (*Historia* 236). Wace, on the other hand, although he dramatizes the scene more than Geoffrey, seems to find the whole event questionable:

Still the Britons wait for him,
And so they talk of him with hope:
From there [Avalon] he'll come; he's still alive.
Master Wace, who made this book,
Wants not to say more of his end
Than Merlin the prophet said of it.
Merlin said—and he was right—
That Arthur's death would be in doubt.
The prophet said the very truth.
It's always been in doubt since then
And will be every day, I think,
If Arthur's dead or if he's living. (trans. by Glowka 13279-90)

Wace's version of Arthur's death is oddly uncharacteristic of his narrative style since he expands on Geoffrey's version by including a prophecy of Merlin. In effect, however, Merlin's prophecy is an excuse for Wace to provide social commentary and not, as Lawman's version suggests, a sign of Arthur's liminality. Even so, Wace still does not stray far from his explicit goal of writing a strict "history" of the events. In order to garner trust from his audience, he does not say that the events are false. Instead, he implies reasonable doubt. He agrees with Geoffrey's version to the extent that mystery surrounds Arthur's departure to Avalon after receiving deadly wounds, but he interprets the uncertainty of Arthur's death as an explanation for what must have been one of the popular beliefs among his audience.

Lawman's retelling of Arthur's death continues to build on Wace's dramatic interpretation, but it further emphasizes the supernatural qualities of Arthur's character. In Geoffrey and Wace, the sequence of events is told

only through the perspective of the narrator. But in Lawman, the atmosphere of the scene intensifies as Arthur makes his final speech in which he gives instruction to Constantin and explains where and to whom he is going. Arthur begins by exhorting Constantin to uphold the laws of Uther and defend “mine Bruttes” (14,274). The whole scene is reminiscent of Beowulf’s final speech to Wiglaf after he slew the dragon. Just before his death, Beowulf boasts of his legacy, asks to see the treasure he has won, and explains to Wiglaf that he must follow his “whole brave high-born clan / to their final doom” (2815-16). Where Beowulf’s story ends, however, Arthur continues. The most important expansion of Arthur’s final scene in the *Brut* includes Arthur’s explanation that “And ich wulle uaren to Aualun, to uairest alred maiden, / to Argante þere queen, aluen swaðe sceone” [And I will go to Avalon, to the fairest of all women, Argante, the fairest of fairy women] (14,277-78). The queen of the fairies will heal Arthur of his wounds and prepare him for his return to Britain. And finally, the scene ends in the same way that Arthur’s life began:

Æfne þan worden	þer com of se wenden
Pat wes an sceort bat liðen,	sceouen mid vðen,
And twa wimmen þerinne	wunderliche idihteæ
And heo nomen Arður anan,	and aneouste hine uereden
And softe hine adun leiden,	and forð gunnen liðen

(14,283-87)

[With these words, there came sailing from the sea a small boat that was driven by the waves, and two women wonderfully arrayed were in it; and they quickly took Arthur, and quickly bore him up and gently laid him down, and sailed away.]

Given that these women arrive immediately after Arthur describes that he will depart to Avalon and to Argante, it is safe to assume that these are the “fairy women” Arthur referred to earlier. Like at his birth, elves immediately place Arthur in their charge.

Following Wace, Lawman also bookends Arthur’s life with Merlin’s prophecies, but instead of offering social commentary, he demonstrates a greater amount of trust in the accuracy of Merlin’s predictions—a natural authorial decision given Arthur’s association with the supernatural up to this point in the narrative. On three different occasions, Merlin accurately prophesies the coming of Arthur and his accomplishments. The first prophecy was given to Vortigern; the second occurs at the rising of the

star after Aurleius' death; and the third prophecy occurs when the hermit approaches Merlin about Uther's desire for Ygerne. Given Merlin's track record, Lawman places a greater amount of trust in his predictions. So in the second to last line of the poem, just before he explicitly states what is otherwise hinted at in Geoffrey's and Wace's versions, Lawman claims that all of Merlin's prophecy is true (14296). He then goes on to write that Merlin's prophecy is accurate on two counts: (1) Merlin accurately predicted that Arthur's death would be grievous, and (2) "þat an Arður sculde zete cum Anglen to fulste" [that an Arthur should come again to aid the English] (14297). Because Arthur's kingship is of supernatural origins and divinely ordered as seen in the prophecies of Merlin, there is no doubt in Lawman's story, unlike Geoffrey's and Wace's, that Arthur will return to Britain.

Lawman's certainty that Arthur will return is rooted in Arthur's liminality because Arthur crosses the threshold between the earth and the world of fairies. It is as if Lawman poses a rhetorical question: "Since he has crossed from the natural to the supernatural, why couldn't he make the crossing again?" Unfortunately, Arthur's liminality and the supernatural element in Lawman's *Brut* is often ignored or glossed as a minor interesting distinction. For example, W.R.J. Barron and S.C. Weinberg argue,

Though greatly increased in Layamon, the element of the occult is not thematically engaged; Arthur is not supernaturally guided in his mission as a national messiah, as his predecessors were by Merlin whom Arthur never meets. It merely adds a gloss of fairy prince to his more realistic roles as war-leader, world conqueror, lawgiver and Christian king. (xliv)

What I have tried to show, however, is that Arthur's liminal qualities are as important as his "more realistic roles." Lawman's depiction of Arthur as a liminal figure has roots in Geoffrey's *Historia*, but Lawman's expansion of the material, in the context of Anglo-Saxon heroic tradition, verges on a complete reimagining of Arthur's character. Ultimately, this difference between Lawman and his predecessors allows the Arthur of the *Brut* to transcend and critique the cultural and political notions of ideal kingship presented in Geoffrey's and Wace's historical narratives.

IV

At this point, it is tempting to argue, as many scholars have, that Lawman's characterization of Arthur depicts the Anglo-Saxon age of heroes

more idealistically than the rule of Norman kings. For example, John Brennan argues that Lawman's narrative effectively shifts the dynastic history of Britain into a national epic of the English (19). But strictly reading Arthur as a pure anglicized form of kingship misses the subtlety of Lawman's characterization of Arthur. Lawman's Arthur is a complex combination of English and Norman forms of ideal kingship, who, nevertheless, can transcend and critique those ideals because of his liminality.

As a critique of Anglo-Saxon heroism, *Beowulf* and the *Battle of Maldon* serve as helpful examples. For all of the similarities between Arthur and Beowulf, their stories end with different visions of the impending future. Neither Arthur nor Beowulf father any children, and in their final speeches they must transfer their royal powers to someone else. Beowulf's death, in particular, not only marks the end of an era, but also the imminent destruction of his kingdom and his people. In his last words to Wiglaf, Beowulf says,

You are the last of us, the only one left
of the Waegmundings. Fate swept us away,
sent my whole brave high-born clan
to their final doom. Now I must follow them. (trans. by Heaney
2813-16)

Following Beowulf's death, there are two characters who foreshadow an ominous future for the Geats. First, Wiglaf recognizes that despite Beowulf's victory over the dragon and of having won the gold, his actions were not in the best interest of his people: "Often when one man follows his own will / many are hurt. This happened to us. / Nothing we advised could ever convince / the prince we loved, our land's guardian, / not to vex the custodian of the gold. . ." (3077-81). Second, at Beowulf's funeral, a Geat woman sings of the coming nightmare of invasion (3150-55). Beowulf's heroism has left his kingdom stranded because there is no one to take his place. The Anglo-Saxon hero cannot protect his posterity.

In Lawman's *Brut*, however, the death of Arthur sounds a different note. Despite their heroic similarities, Arthur stands in direct contrast to Beowulf's failure. Arthur's death represents the successful transfer of power not the ominous destruction of a whole civilization. Unlike Beowulf, Arthur is able to say to Constantin, "and hald heom alle þa lazen þa habbeoð istonden a mine dazen, and alle þa lazen gode þa bi Vðeres dazen stode" [and uphold for them all of the laws that have been in place during my days, and all of the good laws that stood in Uther's days] (14276).

Arthur's kingdom has been established as a political system not unlike the Norman political system represented in Wace's *Roman de Brut*. The future kings of Britain need only to maintain the laws he has already set in place. The future of Arthur's kingdom does not depend upon Arthur but on the maintenance of the laws.

By the same token, Arthur also exhibits similar Anglo-Saxon heroic foibles, which add to the complexity and even paradoxical nature of Arthur's character. Such complexity, however, aligns with Lawman's purpose that Arthur should serve as a critique, not an emblem, of cultural and political ideals. In the *Battle of Maldon*, for example, Arthur shares the same excessive pride as Byrhtnoth. After a standoff with Viking invaders, Byrhtnoth foolishly allows the Vikings to cross the river for the sake of a fair fight. But, as J.R.R. Tolkien points out, Byrhtnoth's decision stemmed from a heroic pride that turned excessive; it drove him "beyond the bleak heroic necessity to excess" (20). Arthur has a similar vice, which, as Dennis Donahue has pointed out, is clearest in Arthur's tendency toward anger and dismissal of good counsel (135). Such tendencies eventually lead Arthur, like Byrhtnoth, to engage in a reckless war with Rome at the expense of his own people.

Alongside his critique of English heroism, Lawman also uses Arthur as a vehicle to critique the atmosphere of detached cynicism and skepticism created by Norman ideals of royal courts. While some of his critique is probably grounded in personal experience, it also clearly stems from the representation of Norman courtliness in Wace's *Le Roman de Brut*. Although Wace's emphasis on the processions, the pageantry, and the courtliness of Arthur's reign help elevate Arthur's status in the imaginations of his readers, such an emphasis simultaneously conveys the idea that Arthur rules from his throne and not among his people. Arthur becomes more of an idea and less of a person. C.S. Lewis similarly observes that in Wace, "the Norman courtesy can be callous, the Norman lightness can be cynical;" the *Brut*, on the other hand, is "more sensitive" (27). For example, in the scene where Arthur hears of Uther's death, Lawman writes:

Ʒus heo gunnen tellen	and Arður sæt ful stilleæ
Ænne stunde he wes blac	and on heuwe swiðe wak,
Ane while he wes reod	and reousede on heorte.
Ʒa hit alles up brac	hit wes god þat he spac;
Ʒus him sæaide þerriht	Arður, þe aðele cniht:
"Lauverd Crist, Godes sune,	beon us nu a fultume,
þat ich mote on life	Goddes layen halden." (9923-29)

[Thus they began speaking and Arthur sat completely still; one moment he was pale and quite lacking color, and the next moment he was red with heartfelt grief. When it all broke out, he spoke well; Thus Arthur the noble knight said: "Lord Christ, Son of God, be a help to us at this time, that I may with my life uphold God's laws."]

By expressing Arthur's vulnerability, grief, and sense of duty in this moment, Lawman humanizes him in a way that Wace and Geoffrey did not. Insofar as Arthur is an ideal king, he is also a realistic king as well. Lawman's emphasis on Arthur's humanity in this moment also helps bolster Arthur's liminal qualities because it balances his supernatural characteristics with his humanity, underscoring his function as a character that stands on the threshold of the natural and supernatural world. While Arthur portrays important Norman qualities in Lawman's critique of Anglo-Saxon heroism, Lawman also recognizes that a king must be more than an idea; he must be able to empathize with his people.

Finally, in light of Wace's insistence on censoring any element of the Arthurian myth that cannot be verified, Lawman uses the Round Table scene as a metaphor that subverts the Norman tendency to monopolize history for its own political purposes. In addition, Lawman reveals his own awareness of the way in which a variety of stories on a single subject, whether consistent or contradictory, can still convey truth. After the appearance and establishment of the Round Table in Arthur's court, Lawman retains Wace's narrative structure by including a follow-up commentary on whether the stories of Arthur and his Round Table are true. Unlike Wace who claims in his commentary that the stories cannot be true, Lawman instead offers what Elizabeth Bryan describes as a "sophisticated meditation on history, narrative, and truth in which Lawman uses the table as a metaphor or models for the possibilities of true history" (27). Because Wace is skeptical of the historical truth of Arthur from the very beginning of the narrative, he routinely dismisses unverifiable elements of Arthur's story by blaming the numerous stories that have cropped up around the history of Arthur. Wace insists instead on the reliability of orderliness and ceremony. The Round Table, therefore, is simply a symbol of the Norman courtliness he so admires. For Lawman, on the other hand, the truth of Arthur's reign cannot be so easily dismissed or minimized. As Bryan argues, the "Accretion of stories and storytellers is represented" in the symbol of the Round Table "not as a threat but as a source of truth. Negotiating the very multivocality that Wace blames is the hopeful act of the truth seeker" (32).

Throughout his narrative, Lawman relishes in embellishing his stories, from the graphic descriptions of battle scenes to the long-winded speeches of generals and kings. Especially in the Arthurian narrative, Lawman sees all of the stories, whether fictional or real, come together in a single persona. As a character imbued with natural and supernatural qualities, English and Norman ideals, Arthur embodies the very act of discovering and understanding the link between the past and the present. For Lawman, it is not important whether every story of Arthur is a verifiable fact, but how those stories help critique and refine contemporary cultural and political ideals.

Conclusion

The historical context of Lawman's *Brut* provides an instructive frame of reference for our interpretation of his narrative and of Arthur in particular: it is an English epic intended for an English audience who had been conquered by the Normans only a century earlier. Lawman, perhaps dangerously, Anglicized heroes who, since Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia*, had traditionally been propagated as exemplar Norman heroes. Hence, many scholars have tended to read Lawman's *Brut* as an English nationalistic response to Norman culture and politics. Nonetheless, Lawman's depiction of Arthur is not an unadulterated iteration of Anglo-Saxon heroism—he shows signs of the same heroic foibles found in characters like Beowulf and Byrhtnoth while also exhibiting some of the virtues of a Norman king. Lawman also includes descriptions of Arthur that suggest Christ-like divinity, further complicating and heightening the spiritual significance of Arthur. The Eucharistic imagery, for example, in an earlier prophecy from Merlin, resonates throughout the narrative:

of his breosten scullen æten aðele scopes;
scullen of his blode beornes beon drunke.
[. . . of his breast noble poets shall eat;
of his blood shall men be drunk.] (9411-12).

Lawman's consistent emphasis on the spiritual and liminal qualities of Arthur reads not just as a gloss on his role as fairy prince or English hero, but as qualities that add to the complexity of Arthur's character. Such complexity ultimately allows Lawman to use him as a literary figure who can critique cultural and political ideals because he does not perfectly reflect any one form of national ideology.

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