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The Creation of a King:
How Geoffrey of Monmouth Influenced the Story of King Arthur.

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Arthur, with a single division in which he had posted six thousand, six hundred, and sixty-six men, charged at the squadron where he knew Mordred was. They hacked a way through with their swords and Arthur continued to advance, inflicting terrible slaughter as he went. It was at this point that the accursed traitor was killed and many thousands of his men with him.¹

With the inclusion of this feat between King Arthur and his enemies, Geoffrey of Monmouth shows Arthur as a mighty warrior, one who stops at nothing to defeat his foes. However, this is not all that King Arthur was. Medieval literature and poetry depicted the legendary King Arthur as a fierce warrior, a compassionate and noble leader, and a just king. The legend of King Arthur has remained of the most fascinating and alluring legends that came out of medieval Europe. Many questions surrounding the true King Arthur including whether or not he even existed at all and how much of what is written about him is accurate. Much of the medieval ideas about King Arthur during the medieval period stems from a singular text by a Welsh monk and scholar, Geoffrey of Monmouth and his book *History of the Kings of Britain*. Geoffrey's book laid the groundwork for future Arthurian stories by other medieval authors such as Marie de France and Sir Thomas Malory, establishing Arthur's family, major conflicts throughout his life, and his death. Geoffrey also defined Arthur's character for both his immediate patrons and for later generations. A majority of future Arthurian authors built on Geoffrey's characterization of Arthur. Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History of the Kings of Britain* transformed King Arthur from an unknown king to a legendary hero that could be molded and transformed by other writers and cultures throughout the medieval period.

¹ Geoffrey of Monmouth, *History of the Kings of Britain*, Translated by Lewis Thorpe. London: Penguin Books, 1966, 261.

The topic of King Arthur has intrigued historians for centuries. The scarcity of documentation of Arthur prior to twelfth century British monk Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History of the Kings of Britain* continues fascinate contemporary historians. The influence of Geoffrey's work can be found throughout the twelfth century and, as will be discussed, continued into the sixteenth century and onward. Geoffrey's influence and development of the Arthur mythos can even be seen in current Arthurian media such as movies, television shows, and books. Many throughout the ages contested Geoffrey's stories, but these critiques could not diminish that mark that Geoffrey left on Arthurian literature, as well as medieval romance literature more broadly. Arthur has become an idealized medieval king, taking on a life of his own. Geoffrey gave writers, poets, and storytellers the tools to create their own Arthurian mythology founded on his initial concept. This paper will explore the scope Geoffrey of Monmouth's book, *History of the Kings of Britain*, and how it influenced medieval fiction, medieval politics, and traditional stories.

Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History of the Kings of Britain* is one of the most referenced pieces of Arthurian literature. Geoffrey was a Welsh monk, bishop, and magister at Oxford in the twelfth century. His history covers the kings of Britain from the fall of Troy through the sixth century. Geoffrey wrote in Latin, as did most clergy during that time period, and it was an attempt to fill in the knowledge gaps left behind by scholars such as Nennius (ninth century CE) and Bede (c.672-735 CE.) who Geoffrey references throughout his book. Geoffrey might have only included these writers to add some credibility to his work. Because Nennius briefly mentions a king named "Arthur" and Bede does not reference Arthur at all. Geoffrey explained in his work that he acquired a "very ancient book" that was said to have contained a large amount of knowledge on the past of England's rulers from "Brutus, the first King of the Britons

down to Cadwaller”.² Modern scholars thought that if this ancient book had ever existed, it would have been the source where Geoffrey obtained most of his information of King Arthur. Historian Geoffrey Ashe states that although the book in question has not been found, Geoffrey of Monmouth had some historical information as evidence has been found supporting some of the actions, such as battles and the building of fortifications, taken by Arthur in Geoffrey of Monmouth’s account.³ References to these sources suggest that Geoffrey of Monmouth had conducted some research when writing his history. This paper will use Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *History of the Kings of Britain*, a book written in the twelfth century that described Britain’s past kings in vivid detail.⁴ The book is regarded as mostly made up of Geoffrey of Monmouth’s fantasies but is renowned for starting the King Arthur phenomenon of the mid to late medieval periods and onward.

The vivid detail that Geoffrey uses to describe Arthur’s person, his life, Arthur’s military strategies and battles have led many to come to the consensus that the whole story is fabricated: a medieval romance written by Geoffrey of Monmouth without any historical value. The purpose of the history was likely to bolster the reputation of British kings in the high medieval period (1000-1250 CE) as, because of multiple wars, disputed successions, and the Norman invasion and conquest which occurred only one hundred years prior. King Stephen’s, the nephew of King Henry I, claim to the throne was also an issue. Geoffrey of Monmouth intended his *History of the Kings of Britain* to be read by nobility and historians. It was dedicated to nobles like Robert, Earl of Gloucester the bastard son of King Henry I of England, who was a prominent figure in the

² Geoffrey of Monmouth, *The History of the Kings of Britain*.

³ Ashe, Geoffrey. “‘A Certain Very Ancient Book’: Traces of an Arthurian Source in Geoffrey of Monmouth’s History.” *Speculum* 56, no. 2 (1981)

⁴ Geoffrey of Monmouth, *History of the Kings of Britain*, Translated by Lewis Thorpe. London: Penguin Books, 1966.

twelfth century civil war between King Stephen and his cousin, Empress Matilda (1139-1153). These nobles were figureheads within their communities and Britain as a whole.

According to Geoffrey of Monmouth King Arthur was born to King Uther Pendragon and Ygerne, a woman who was seduced by Uther deliberately using the magic of the wizard Merlin.⁵ Although Arthur, a Briton, is technically an illegitimate son of Uther, he still becomes the king of Britain at the age of fifteen after the murder of his father, Uther.⁶ Geoffrey opens his section on Arthur by describing him as extremely generous, with multiple people flocking to him because of his giving nature.⁷ Arthur won his first battle as king against an army consisting of Saxons, Scots, and Picts and their leader Colgrin.⁸ This was the first of many victories for King Arthur who established peace in Britain for twelve years.⁹

According to Geoffrey, Arthur's established peace is broken by the Gauls who engage Arthur and the Britons in combat.¹⁰ Arthur and his men, most notably Gawain, then engage in a fierce battle with the Romans and their leader Lucius. Arthur is eventually victorious and sets out to conquer the rest of Rome.¹¹ Geoffrey does not give any specific dates for these events.

Arthur's final battle was against his own nephew, Mordred, who took control of Arthur's kingdom while he was away fighting the Romans in France.¹² Mordred then declared himself king and took Arthur's wife, Guinevere, as his own. Arthur, unable to stand for his nephew's

⁵ Geoffrey of Monmouth, *The History of the Kings of Britain*, 206-208.

⁶ Geoffrey of Monmouth, *The History of the Kings of Britain*, 212.

⁷ Geoffrey of Monmouth, *The History of the Kings of Britain*, 212.

⁸ Geoffrey of Monmouth, *The History of the Kings of Britain*, 212-213.

⁹ Geoffrey of Monmouth, *The History of the Kings of Britain*, 222.

¹⁰ Geoffrey of Monmouth, *The History of the Kings of Britain* 223-225.

¹¹ Geoffrey of Monmouth, *The History of the Kings of Britain*, 241-257.

¹² Geoffrey of Monmouth, *The History of the Kings of Britain*, 241.

treachery, heads back home to face him in battle. In the end, Arthur was able to defeat Mordred but is heavily wounded in the process. Geoffrey's story ends with the King being transported to Avalon in 542 CE; Geoffrey leaves Arthur's death or recovery ambiguous. Geoffrey story goes into great detail, giving other medieval authors a wealth of stories to pull from and expand on.

Literature Review

The discussion surrounding King Arthur has taken many forms in the past century. The various arguments and ideas can provide different views on the same sources. One historian view of Geoffrey of Monmouth's writing can differ from another based-on interest and specialty. An archeologist may provide details about a historical figure or site that a literary historian may not have been able to come up with, allowing for an alternative point of view. The various ways in which different scholars interpret Arthurian texts can shine light on how these medieval authors used Arthur or why they chose to focus on Arthur instead of other, more notable British kings.

Historians that search for archeological proof of Arthur may not be entirely successful in their endeavors, but they provide valuable information in how they analyze texts and sources. Although archeologist have been unsuccessful in finding any proof or remains that King Arthur existed, their input, allowing for an analysis of artifacts and geography that may not be available in other mediums. Authors like the historian and linguist Kenneth Jackson, who attempts to break down the small references in works such as Nennius, a monk living from the eighth to mid ninth century CE, to find out where Arthur may have fought his legendary battles, can be useful in providing evidence that the battles actually existed.¹³ Jackson argues that discovering proof that Arthur existed should be based more on what one can find written within historical texts and that any and all interpretations of a historical document should be taken into account. Jackson's

¹³ Jackson, Kenneth. "Once Again Arthur's Battles." *Modern Philology* 43, no. 1 (1945): 44-57.

vast knowledge of the Welsh language allows for a more in-depth analysis of Nennius' *Historia Brittonum* (*History of the Britons*). Jackson breaks down key words linked to specific locations described in the Nennian text that may have multiple meanings: words like "glen" which he states could be the name of a river or a description of the river as the word means "pure" or "clean" in Welsh.¹⁴ Jackson's work is significant because words are volatile and can change meanings in a small amount of time. What Jackson explains is that what one historian understands as the "pure" river could actually mean the "clean" river, thus changing a location entirely. Jackson understands this variability in language and gives analysis of how battlefield locations within Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History of the Kings of Britain* could be misconstrued by historians in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Another historian, Geoffrey Ashe, also takes an interest in the locations described within Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History of the Kings of Britain* and other medieval Arthurian works. Analyzing the geography and events described within Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History of the Kings of Britain*, Ashe concludes that Geoffrey of Monmouth may have written about a Roman hero and substituted the name with Arthur.¹⁵ Ashe's contribution allows for alternative perspectives on what is written by Geoffrey of Monmouth. Ashe uses medieval evidence, such as references to the *Annales Cambriae*, a collection of works dating from the mid tenth century to the thirteenth century.¹⁶ According to Ashe, Geoffrey of Monmouth may have taken the accomplishments and character of another British king, Riothamus, and used them to create his character of Arthur. Ashe's work focuses on uncovering the truth of who "King Arthur" really was as he concludes that Geoffrey of Monmouth's Arthur and the Arthur described in works like

¹⁴ Jackson, "Once Again Arthur's Battles", 46.

¹⁵ Geoffrey Ashe, "A Certain Very Ancient Book': Traces of an Arthurian Source in Geoffrey of Monmouth's History." *Speculum* 56, no. 2 (1981): 301-323.

¹⁶ The *Annales Cambriae* is also known as the *Annales of Wales*.

the *Annales Cambriae* may have actually been Riothamus whose name was mixed up in translation. Historical interpretations of archeological sites, such as battlefields and artifacts, can be helpful in determining whether ancient scholars, like Geoffrey of Monmouth, relied on other sources to construct their works. Clearly, Geoffrey of Monmouth relied on sources like Nennius and the *Annales Cambriae* as references in his work, meaning that Geoffrey of Monmouth's book was not entirely written without the consultation of historical documents.

Although Ashe and Jackson may not have found the remains of Arthur or an indication that the king was an actual person, their search is an example of how powerful the legend of King Arthur is. It shows a determination to prove or disprove Geoffrey of Monmouth's Arthur. This determination exhibits the allure of the legend of King Arthur hundreds of years after he was said to have lived and the influence of the medieval texts surrounding him.

Historians have also tackled the idea that medieval scholars fabricated their "histories" in order to progress in society. Wealthy lords and kings were often the patrons of scholars. Historian Gordon Hall Gerould expresses an interest in Geoffrey of Monmouth's possible ulterior motives. Gerould explains that the environment of twelfth century literature and the "romance" phenomenon had played a crucial role in the development of Geoffrey's *History of the Kings of Britain*.¹⁷ Gerould explains that the popularization of romanticizing literary works created an environment in which Geoffrey of Monmouth could create the character of Arthur in the fantastical way that he did, and have it catch on. Gerould's ideas show that the topic of Geoffrey of Monmouth's use of Arthur for political gain is not new.

Many scholars primarily focus on Geoffrey of Monmouth in their studies of King Arthur, but it is important to look at historians that focus on other aspects of the legend of King Arthur. How

¹⁷ G.H. Gerould, "King Arthur and Politics." *Speculum* 2, no 1 (1927): 33.

medieval folklore was spread is important because literacy was not prominent amongst majority of medieval people so many could not read the stories of Arthur. How then did Arthur become a national symbol and hero? Historian D.R. Woolf describes “the common voice” which is an explanation as to how Arthur may have developed into the folktale or legend that he became.¹⁸ According to Woolf the “common voice” was a collective agreement on what happened in any given story by those who were telling it and those who were listening.¹⁹

Woolf also provides important analysis of medieval antiquaries. Woolf states that it is highly likely that medieval antiquaries left details out of historical accounts that may have been unpleasant.²⁰ This suggests that medieval antiquaries, like Leland, may have known that certain details were true or false but left them in or removed them anyways if it helped further their careers.

Stories with developed characters can appeal to many cultures. A story from one culture can be adopted into another with slight cultural alterations. H.R. Davidson, a historian and antiquarian, also provides insight on how folklore is spread. She describes the spread of Arthurian legends and how Arthur was integrated into existing folklore. The example she gives is of the “returning king” and how the concept of King Arthur being revived may have developed because the concept of revival existed in the stories of other legendary figures like Thor and King Alfred.²¹ Davidson’s analysis supports the idea that “the common voice” was important to the development of medieval legends. Davidson’s analysis is also important because it can be used to look back on Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *History of the Kings of Britain* and understand

¹⁸ D. R. Woolf, "The 'Common Voice': History, Folklore and Oral Tradition in Early Modern England." *Past & Present*, no. 120 (1988): 26-52.

¹⁹ Woolf, "The 'Common Voice'", 38.

²⁰ Woolf, "The 'Common Voice'", 38.

²¹ H. R. Ellis Davidson, "Folklore and Man's Past." *Folklore* 74, no. 4 (1963): 536-37.

why he composed an Arthur that was noble and just even though there may not be any historical evidence to prove it.

Scott Littleton and Ann Thomas consider the role of cultural integration in medieval folklore by explaining the connection between common Arthurian tropes and stories within the Sarmatians, a group of people that migrated from Central Europe to Western Europe in the fifth century BCE to the fourth century CE.²² Littleton and Thomas report that there are similarities with Arthur's death from Sir Thomas Malory's *La Morte d'Arthur* story and the Sarmatian tale of the death of one of their kings. Littleton and Thomas' explanation between the connections of Sarmatian folktales and the tales of King Arthur show that there may have been a sharing of ideas or concepts from the descendants of the Sarmatians and those telling tales of King Arthur. Littleton and Thomas' claims about the connection between Central European folktales and those found in Geoffrey and Malory's telling of Arthur fit the description of Woolf's "common voice" as well as Ellis' description of cultural assimilation within folktales.

Due to the soaring popularity of King Arthur after the twelfth century CE several different types of sources that referenced the legendary king have been found, ranging in genre. This paper uses a wide range of primary sources to establish why the story of Arthur composed by Geoffrey of Monmouth became as prominent as it did. The different types of sources in this paper will include hagiographies, chronicles, histories, poetry, and folktales. Understanding each genre of primary source used allow the reader to understand why each source was written as they each vary drastically in style and purpose ranging from political and social advancement to the development of local lore.

²² Scott C. Littleton and Ann C. Thomas, "The Sarmatian Connection: New Light on the Origin of the Arthurian and Holy Grail Legends." *The Journal of American Folklore* 91, no. 359 (1978): 513-27.

Christian literature was common during the medieval period and a style of Christian literature was that of the hagiography, also known as *vitae*. Hagiographies were writings about a saint and entailed a variety of genres. Historian Thomas Head notes several types of hagiographies written during the medieval period including “lives of saints, collections of miracle stories, accounts of the discovery or movements of relics, bulls of canonization, inquests held into the life of a candidate for canonization, liturgical books, sermons, visions, and the like.”²³ The majority of Arthurian references in hagiographies were found in stories detailing the lives of saints and were often extremely exaggerated in their telling of saintly activities.

Another type of writing was the historical chronicle. This includes texts like Nennius’ *History of the Britons* written in the 9th century, a mixture of both a chronicle and a history, Bede’s 8th century *Ecclesiastical History*, Gildas’ *On the Ruin of Britain* from the 6th century, and the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicles* written in the 9th century and continuing into the twelfth century CE.²⁴ These texts were often written in the vernacular and contained important events that happened on specific dates or years.²⁵ These texts are significant because they are earlier sources and could have been used as references by later scholars such as Geoffrey of Monmouth.

Of these Nennius’ *History of the Britons* is the most important when looking at the past of King Arthur as it contains one of the earliest references to Arthur himself. Nennius chronicled the past in his *Historia Brittonum* or *History of the Britons*, describing many events throughout England’s past and remains as one of the only primary sources from the time period. In his text

²³ Thomas Head, “Hagiography”, *The ORB: The Online Reference Book for Medieval Studies*, College of Staten Island, City University of New York. Edited by Katherine Talarico. Accessed April 1, 2019.

²⁴ Nennius. *History of the Britons*. Translated by J. A. Giles. (Cambridge, Ontario), 2000; *Bede, the Venerable, Saint, 673-735. Ecclesiastical History of the English People; with Bede’s Letter to Egbert. London, England; New York, New York, USA: Penguin, 1990; The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, translated by Anne Savage. (Godalming: CLB, 1997); Gildas, *On the Ruin of Britain*. translated by J.A. Giles. Accessed December 4, 2018, http://www.tertullian.org/fathers/gildas_02_ruin_of_britain.htm

²⁵ Vernacular refers to the language that is common within an area. Something that everyone who can read could read.

Nennius first makes mention of Arthur and describes his twelve battles against the invading Saxon army. He is fantastically described as a Christian military commander who was able to singlehandedly strike down 960 Saxons “from one charge.”²⁶ However exaggerated Nennius’ claims are, they are undoubtedly important when looking at the emergence of Arthurian lore as one of the first references of Arthur.

Folktales and oral storytelling were other types of sources that will be used in this paper. *The Mabinogion*, a compilation of stories from Welsh oral tradition from the twelfth and thirteenth centuries that was eventually turned into a manuscript in the 1500s CE.²⁷ Folktales were often passed down through generations within a community. They took bits and pieces of other stories to eventually form their own stories with their interpretation. If a story was brought from a culture outside of their own it would often be modified with elements from the new culture that it was brought into. Folktales and oral stories can describe the nature of community and region and what was important to them.

Poetry is another type of primary source that will be looked at in this paper. One of the more prominent poets of the twelfth century was Marie de France who wrote her *Lais*, or poems for nobility and kings.²⁸ *The Lais of Marie de France* was a set of poems written by a woman poet known only as Marie who lived during the late twelfth century. Some speculate her to be the half-sister of Henry II of England (r. 1154-1189), but that has not been confirmed. Most of her stories were romantic or fantastic in nature and became popular during her time. One story in particular, entitled *Lanval*, deals with a knight of King Arthur’s court who is being seduced by the Queen, Arthur’s wife. The stories written by Marie de France highlight the popular high

²⁶ Nennius, *History of the Britons*.

²⁷ *The Mabinogion*. Translated by Jeffrey Gantz. London: Penguin Books, 1976.

²⁸ Marie de France, *The Lais of Marie de France*, Translated by Glyn S. Burgess and Keith Busby, (London: Penguin Books), 2003.

medieval romantic style. Her stories are filled with a sense of courtly love. Marie de France's Arthur heavily contrasts with Nennius' description of a brutal, hyper-warrior Arthur but fits with Geoffrey's description of Arthur's court.²⁹ Marie de France may have been seeking social and political gain through her work, as the most common readers were nobles. Marie de France's use of Arthurian stories exemplify the use of Arthur as a political tool.

The era in which Geoffrey of Monmouth wrote his *History of the Kings of Britain* was also the era of romance literature. The romance genre emerged in the late 11th century and continued throughout the medieval period. Beauty and courtliness defined the genre as emphasis was put on appearance and individual refinement. David Burnley explains that courtly behavior involved mastering various social skills. Courtly etiquette was important and there were proper ways to greet both men and women, roles for various members of the court, and certain activities such as jousting and wrestling.³⁰ The goal of courtliness and the romance genre was ultimately self-improvement of the individual. Burnley also points out that war was looked down upon in this era as, according to the ideals of courtly behavior, it meant that individuals would spend more time fighting and less time on personal refinement. Burnley recognizes that no single definition encompasses all of courtly or romantic literature, but that courtly literature can be categorized in many different ways. There are courtly works that are written specifically for the nobility or a royal court; there are works that attempt to instruct individuals on courtly conduct but ultimately the substance of courtly literature changed with societal values.³¹ Geoffrey of

²⁹ Marie de France, *The Lais of Marie de France*, Translated by Glyn S. Burgess and Keith Busby, (London. Penguin Books), 2003.

³⁰ David Burnley, *Courtliness and Literature in Medieval England*, (New York. Adison Wesley Longman Inc.), 1998, 53-61.

³¹ David Burnley, *Courtliness and Literature in Medieval England*, (New York. Adison Wesley Longman Inc.), 1998, 122-123.

Monmouth's choice to write his book in this romantic style signifies that he was attempting to appeal to high medieval courtly culture.

Geoffrey was writing his *history* during a civil war known as "The Anarchy" that was being fought between Stephen of Blois, the King of England from 1135 to 1154 CE, and his cousin, Empress Matilda who had a claim to the English throne. The reason for the fighting was due to the unexpected death of King Henry I's son, William the Atheling, in 1120 after an accident at sea, famously known as the Tragedy of White Ship. This resulted in questions about who should rightfully succeed Henry I as he had several illegitimate children, nephews, and a legitimate daughter but did not have any surviving legitimate sons. Problems arose when Henry I, unable to conceive another male heir, died and choosing Matilda, his daughter, to be his successor. Henry I's favorite nephew, Stephen Count of Mortain and Boulogne came to England after his death seeking to contest for the throne.³² Stephen ultimately garnered more support from both citizens and the Church, becoming King of England. The decision made Stephen an enemy of Matilda and a civil war was waged between the two.

Geoffrey of Monmouth is arguably the main focus of Arthurian history as his book *History of the Kings of Britain* is credited with starting the King Arthur phenomenon in the high medieval period. Geoffrey wrote his book and dedicated a portion of it to Robert, Earl of Gloucester, the illegitimate son of King Henry I, stating

I ask you, Robert, Earl of Gloucester, to do my little book this favour. Let it be so embedded by your knowledge and your advice that it must no longer be considered as the product of Geoffrey of Monmouth's small talent. Rather, with the support of your wit and wisdom, let it be accepted as the work of one descended from Henry, the famous king of the English; of one whom learning has nurtured in the liberal arts and whom his innate talent in military affairs has put in charge of our soldiers, with the result that now, in our

³² Jim Bradbury, *Stephen and Matilda The Civil War of 1139-53*. Gloucestershire: Alan Sutton Publishing Ltd. 1996. 15; Stephen of Mortain and Boulogne was more commonly known as Stephen of Blois.

own lifetime, our island of Britain hails you with heartfelt affection, as if it had been granted a second Henry.³³

The intention of Geoffrey of Monmouth when writing his history was likely to bolster and develop a background on the kings of England and tie their lineage back to the highly thought of Romans. Geoffrey's appeal to Robert of Gloucester was used to gain the favor of influential member of society so that his book would become more popular. Geoffrey may have also been seeking a patron in Robert of Gloucester which would explain the dedication to him.

Geoffrey also dedicated a large piece, *Prophecies of Merlin*, to Alexander of Blois, a highly regarded bishop of Lincoln. Historian Gordon Hall Gerould explained that:

It is not inconceivable that the ambitious author may have believed the time propitious to launch a history designed at once to put such fellows as William of Malmesbury and Henry of Huntingdon in their place, to flatter the followers of Earl Robert who had Celtic blood, and to show all the world that young King Stephen had predecessors as glorious as any of whom King Louis could boast.³⁴

If the accusation is true, then Geoffrey of Monmouth could have been seeking some sort of reward, whether it be monetary, political or clerical when writing his history. Robert of Gloucester had ties to both Stephen and Matilda as he recognized Stephen as the King of England but and was also the half-brother of Empress Matilda. He was also liked among the people and would have likely succeeded Henry I if he had been a legitimate child. Geoffrey states his intentions for popularity, saying "with the guidance provided by the two of you, my work may appear all the more attractive when it is offered to its public."³⁵ These statements show that Geoffrey's intentions were, from the start, to have his book become popular amongst the nobility and others who could read. Geoffrey's attempts to gain notoriety through popular

³³ Geoffrey of Monmouth, *History of the Kings of Britain*, Translated by Lewis Thorpe. London: Penguin Books, 1966. 51-52.

³⁴ G.H. Gerould "King Arthur and Politics", 34

³⁵ Geoffrey of Monmouth, *History of the Kings of Britain*, Translated by Lewis Thorpe. London: Penguin Books, 1966. 52.

nobles could explain why Geoffrey chose to use exaggerated stories that were more fictional than historical.

Geoffrey of Monmouth's writing style appealed to the popular "romance" genre of the time. His tales of Arthur are fantastical, making Arthur an idealized nobleman, the peak of courtliness. Geoffrey successfully portrays King Arthur as a noble ruler that fights for honor. Geoffrey of Monmouth explains in his introduction of Arthur that "Arthur was a young man only fifteen years old; but he was of outstanding courage and generosity, and his inborn goodness gave him such grace that he was loved by almost all the people."³⁶ This description of Arthur's character sets him up as someone who should be looked up to and a shining example of chivalry. Geoffrey then gives examples feats performed by Arthur. He explains that Helena, the niece of the Duke of Hoel, Arthur's cousin, was taken by a giant who meant to "befoul" her "with his filthy lust".³⁷ The giant, in this story, attempted to steal a young virgin women and Arthur sets off to save her before the giant is able to defile her. Although Helena dies, Arthur's attempt to save the Duke's daughter and fight the giant shows the reader that Arthur is fighting against the degenerate behavior and championing justice.

With Geoffrey's writings and the stories that he created for past British kings, England now had an assortment of heroes for the royalty to draw from. Thus, establishing a sense of Arthur's honor is a focus of Geoffrey's book. Geoffrey depicts this honor, stating "As soon as victory was assured, Arthur ordered the bodies of his leaders to be separated from the carcasses of the enemy. Once they were gathered together, he had these bodies prepared for burial with royal pomp and then they were carried to the abbeys of their own native districts and interred

³⁶ Geoffrey of Monmouth, *History of the Kings of Britain*, 212.

³⁷ Geoffrey of Monmouth, *History of the Kings of Britain*, 238.

there with great honour.”³⁸ By explaining his chivalry, Geoffrey is establishing Arthur as an honorable hero, taking care of his soldiers and treating their bodies with respect.

Geoffrey’s decision to use King Arthur, a figure that had little to no background before Geoffrey’s work, was likely a well thought out choice. Historian John J. Parry explains that Geoffrey may have picked Arthur as a large focus because of his unknown background, using Arthur as a blank slate.³⁹ The lack of biographical details allowed Geoffrey to create a background for him, developing a father in Uther Pendragon and tying Arthur, and subsequent kings of England, into the lineage of the famous Roman Constantine. This Roman heritage validate those kings and subsequently increase the validity of their rule in the eyes of other rulers and people of the kingdom.

Geoffrey of Monmouth also writes of Arthur’s influence on other nobles. He states that “Arthur began to increase his personal entourage by inviting very distinguished men from far-distant kingdoms to join it. In this way he developed such a code of courtliness in his household that he inspired peoples living far away to imitate him. The result was that even the man of noblest birth, thought nothing at all of himself unless he wore his arms and dressed in the same way as Arthur’s knights.”⁴⁰ This description of Arthur shows that Geoffrey wanted to use Arthur as a basis for emulation. By describing Arthur as the pinnacle of courtliness and stating that other nobles from far off lands wanted to be just like him, Geoffrey was inviting his readers to be like his Arthur as well.

Geoffrey of Monmouth’s Arthur became widely popular in the twelfth century and read by many high medieval nobles and scholars, such as Henry of Huntingdon (c.1088-c.1157 CE)

³⁸ Geoffrey of Monmouth, *History of the Kings of Britain*, 257.

³⁹ John J. Parry, “Geoffrey of Monmouth and the Paternity of Arthur.” *Speculum* 13, no. 3 (1938), 271-277.

⁴⁰ Geoffrey of Monmouth, *History of the Kings of Britain*, 222.

and William of Malmesbury (c.1095-1135), both of which thought highly of Geoffrey's work. The French poet, Marie de France (c. 1160), expressed her own version of Arthur in her *Lais*, a collection of poetic stories with various themes. It should be noted that there is very little known about Marie de France's background. She could be an illegitimate sister of Henry II of England, writing her *Lais* for him but that cannot be said with certainty. Regardless, Marie was a twelfth century poet writing for the nobility. One of these poems, *Lanval*, depicts Arthur as "unjust and shallow" which is the complete opposite of Geoffrey's generous and honorable hero.⁴¹ Marie shows Arthur in this way by describing the way he treats his knight, Lanval, who was extremely loyal and never did anything to break Arthur's trust.⁴² Marie states "Lanval had spent everything he had, and was sent nothing from his lord [Arthur]."⁴³ Although Marie initially refers to Arthur as "courtly" she changes the character into someone who does not properly care for his subordinates. Arthur as an unjust king goes against what Geoffrey of Monmouth had established. Historian David Chamberlin suggests that Marie "modified sources for her own purposes, given her wit and opportunity" alluding to the idea that Marie knew what others thought of Arthur, that he was a just king, and twisted those concepts in order to show that King Henry II of England was a much better king.⁴⁴ Marie's use of Arthur shows an alteration of Geoffrey's Arthur for personal gain, prospering off of the popularity of King Arthur and drawing attention to her own version of him, portraying him with negative characteristics.

Although Marie de France's iteration of an arrogant King Arthur differed from Geoffrey's more noble and romantic vision of the character there is no doubt that the two are

⁴¹ David Chamberlin, "Marie de France's Arthurian *Lai*: Subtle and Political", in *Culture and the King: The Social Implications of the Arthurian Legend*, Edited by Martin B. Shichtman and James P. Carley, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994.

⁴² Marie de France. *The Lais of Marie de France*. Translated by Glyn S. Burgess and Keith Busby. London. Penguin Books, 2003.

⁴³ Marie de France. *The Lais of Marie de France*.

⁴⁴ David Chamberlin, "Marie de France's Arthurian *Lai*: Subtle and Political".

linked. Marie likely chose to use Arthur and his court in *Lanval* because it was popular amongst the nobles that she was writing for at the time. Marie de France transforms the Arthur that Geoffrey established to tell her own story, using Arthur as an antagonist instead of a protagonist. If Chamberlin's suggestion that Marie was using Arthur to show that the King Henry II, successor of King Stephen, was a better ruler than past British kings. Just as Geoffrey used Arthur to bolster the kings of England, Marie could be using the character to show that the Henry II superior to the kings of the past.

Stories of King Arthur continued long after the twelfth century. Similar to Geoffrey's *History of the Kings of Britain*, *Le Morte Darthur*, a book, or collection of stories, written by Sir Thomas Malory (c. 1415-1471), depicted the events of King Arthur's life until his death. However, unlike Geoffrey who wrote his story as a history, Malory wrote *Le Morte Darthur* as the finale for his tragic tale. The full story consists of the Arthur's life, as well as the lives of Merlin, Lancelot, Gareth, Tristan and Isolde, and the story of the Holy Grail. Historian James J. Wilhelm states that Malory derived the majority of his sources from France but that he had written a story that is inherently separate from other Arthurian works of the past.⁴⁵

The death of King Arthur, as told by Malory, bares a uncoincidental resemblance to Geoffrey of Monmouth's description of Arthur's death. Although Malory may have used the French *Mort Artu* and the English *Le Mort Arthur* as sources and influence for his work, Geoffrey of Monmouth's influence is clearly visible within the work.⁴⁶ In Malory's tale Arthur is usurped by Mordred, who has also planned to wed Guinevere, Arthur's wife. Malory writes

⁴⁵ James J. Wilhelm, "Sir Thomas Malory: *Le Morte Darthur* ('The Death of Arthur')", in *Culture and the King: The Social Implications of the Arthurian Legend*, Edited by Martin B. Shichtman and James P. Carley, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994, 529-530.

⁴⁶ James J. Wilhelm, "Sir Thomas Malory: *Le Morte Darthur* ('The Death of Arthur')", in *Culture and the King: The Social Implications of the Arthurian Legend*, Edited by Martin B. Shichtman and James P. Carley, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994, 529-530.

As Sir Mordred was ruler of all of England, he did make letters specified that King Arthur was slain in battle with Sir Lancelot. Wherefore Sir Mordred made a parliament and called the lords together, and there he made them to choose him king; and so was he crowned at Canterbury, and held a feast there for fifteen days. And afterward he drew him unto Winchester, and there he took the Queen Guinevere, and said plainly that he would wed her, which was his uncle's wife and his father's wife... Then came word to Sir Mordred that King Arthur had raised the siege from Sir Lancelot, and he was coming homeward with a great host, to be avenged upon Sir Mordred.⁴⁷

Malory's description of the betrayal of Arthur by his nephew Mordred is clearly a reference to Geoffrey's *History of the Kings of Britain* which similarly ends with Mordred's betrayal of Arthur. The similarities show that Geoffrey's *history* was still influencing Arthurian romance writers well into the fifteenth century, three hundred years after *History of the Kings of Britain* was written. Malory builds upon the foundation that Geoffrey of Monmouth created to create a story that evoked a sense of Geoffrey's original work while maintaining a story that was truly his own.

Although Malory may have written *Le Morte Darthur* to pass the time while in prison, or to gather most Arthurian stories in one location or, more likely, to tell a compelling story there is the possibility that Malory may have written *Le Morte Darthur* to contrast his own values as he wrote a story of chivalry and courtliness while serving a prison sentence for possible violent crimes.⁴⁸ The basic structure of Geoffrey's Arthur, courtliness, justice, and strategist remain in Malory's work. Arthur's values in Malory's story could have once again used for political and social movement. Sir Thomas Malory's legacy is tied to the romance that he created while he himself did not follow these values. Malory may have chosen to write about Arthur because Geoffrey created Arthur as the pinnacle of courtliness and morality, and ideal that Malory was

⁴⁷ Thomas Malory and Thomas Wright, *La Mort D'Arthure: The History of King Arthur and of the Knights of the Round Table*. 2nd ed. Library of Old Authors. London: J.R. Smith, 1866.

⁴⁸ James J. Wilhelm, "Sir Thomas Malory: *Le Morte Darthur* ('The Death of Arthur')", in *Culture and the King: The Social Implications of the Arthurian Legend*, Edited by Martin B. Shichtman and James P. Carley, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994, 529-530.

unable to meet. If that is the case than Geoffrey's Arthur, and its subsequent versions, led Malory to choose an ideal that was meant for British nobles in the twelfth century, and ideal that remained relevant into the 15th century.

The popularity of Marie de France, Thomas Malory, and Geoffrey of Monmouth's romantic writings reveal that genre and style as well popular culture do well to push a character and story to greater heights. Arthur may not have become as big of an icon during the medieval period as he did if Geoffrey had written his character without the romantic tropes. The constant claims of Arthur's superiority in *History of the Kings of Britain* indicates to the reader that of all that characters Geoffrey wrote about, Arthur is the one that they should focus on. The underlying characteristics that Geoffrey had set up allowed for other authors to integrate Arthur into their own works. This is apparent in the lack of deviation of Arthur's fundamental character traits after Geoffrey's *History of the Kings of Britain*. Marie de France's Arthurian court is still looked upon by its characters as an important and admirable establishment, even though she transitions away from this later on. Malory's Arthur hardly differs from that of Geoffrey's even though there is a large gap in time between the two writers. Arthur, from that point forward, is depicted as an honorable hero in every popular story and folktale just as he was in Geoffrey's work.

Geoffrey's "history" was intended to be read by the nobility and judging by how it influenced the likes of Marie de France and Sir Thomas Malory, it accomplished what Geoffrey had intended. However, the story that Geoffrey developed was also picked up and adapted by those outside of the nobility. The legend of King Arthur spread to other people as well in the form of oral and written folktales. These tales can be found in collections like the *Mobinogion* (c. twelfth to fourteenth century) which houses many Welsh stories. The story of *Peredur* within the *Mobinogion* depicts Arthur as a side character and adapts another story, Chretien De Troyes'

Perceval into the vernacular. The story makes only slight references to King Arthur but establishes him as respectable, a trend started by Geoffrey of Monmouth as Peredur's mother states "Court of Arthur, where there are the best, and the boldest, and the most bountiful of men"⁴⁹ describing Arthur's court as a place filled with courtly men. The development of *Peredur* follows H.R. Woolf's "common voice" theory in that it is a story with pieces of other stories interweaved. Troyes' *Perceval* and the characteristics of Geoffrey of Monmouth's King Arthur are present in the story, but it has been adapted for a Welsh audience. These adaptations are highlighted as small changes within the story. One example is that Peredur encounters a severed head on a *salver*, changed from the holy grail in Troyes' story.⁵⁰ Peredur also includes the hunt for a "stag" that has "one horn" or a unicorn.⁵¹ These small changes were likely made to integrate traditional Welsh or Celtic lore into the story of *Perceval*, adding a sense of familiarity to the story.

The taking of one story and incorporating and adapting it to fit an adoptive culture and make it relevant to the people is common. This adds layers to an already established story, building upon it and creating something completely different. Author and historian H.R. Ellis Davidson explain that many folk stories throughout the middle ages were combinations of "mixed local traditions and many different layers of belief". One of these "local traditions" was that of oral story telling. Stories were most commonly passed down orally as the majority of people during this time period did not know how to read. This oral tradition came with variations of the same story. As D.R. Woolf explains:

The visual may render the oral unnecessary, but where the past exists only in the mouths of the people, the modern folklorist, the student of African history and the recorder of working-class memories must still turn to the "common voice".

⁴⁹ The Mabinogion. Translated by Lady Charlotte Guest. London: Bernard Quaritch, 1877.

⁵⁰ The Mabinogion, 90.

⁵¹ The Mabinogion, 122.

This “common voice” is “what almost everyone in the area agreed what happened in the past” and is the corner stone for the passing down of oral folktales. This adoption of various tales of Arthur and the mixing of cultures via oral traditions and the “common voice” undoubtedly helped it to develop into the expansive legend it has become since Geoffrey of Monmouth initially wrote about King Arthur.

The limited knowledge about Arthur’s past may have also played a key role in how his story was passed around. The character, not having a known background, was easily moldable as is apparent in Geoffrey of Monmouth’s rendition of Arthur’s past. Different cultures and societies crafted their own narratives about Arthur and adopted those they connected with more. Geoffrey’s Arthur is a noble and courtly individual while Marie de France describes Arthur as the antithesis of courtliness, undermining the established Arthur for her own needs. Welsh storytellers took the tale of Perceval and adapted it to fit their own culture and language. These changes to Geoffrey of Monmouth’s original iteration show that the level of adaptability of a character plays an important role in how that character is able to progress, change, and live on.

Geoffrey of Monmouth and Marie de France were not the only two individuals that used King Arthur to garner a reputation. The sixteenth century English antiquarian John Leland was another scholar who seemingly used the idea of Geoffrey’s King Arthur to further their career. Leland served Henry VIII of England as a librarian and antiquary. In Leland’s itinerary from his time in Wales from 1536 to 1539 CE he makes references to Arthur stating that there was a legend that Arthur had killed a giant who was washing his hands in a river.⁵² Leland also makes references to Arthur’s Hill within his writings.⁵³ These references might seem small but they

⁵² John Leland, “Leland’s Itinerary in Wales”, Edited by Lucy Toulmin Smith. London. George Bell and Sons. 1906. 106.

⁵³ John Leland, “Leland’s Itinerary in Wales. 107.

indicate that there was areas within Wales that were named for Arthur, showing how prominent that legend was. The reference to giants also shows the connection between King Arthur and local mythology as Leland states that the local “dwellers” say that the giant was buried nearby.⁵⁴ The mention of a giant by Leland and the local Welsh inhabitants could be an alteration of the Geoffrey of Monmouth’s story of Arthur slaying a giant. Leland gives little information and does not describe why the giant was killed so the nature of this assumption is uncertain.

As a writer for the king, Leland would also play an important role in furthering the king’s position, similar to how Geoffrey of Monmouth’s writing helped to bolster King Stephen’s position and English nationalism as a whole. Leland was also a defender of Geoffrey of Monmouth and publicly stated that Geoffrey’s *History of the Kings of Britain* was a truly historical text. John Leland also got into conflict over the credibility of Geoffrey of Monmouth and the validity of Geoffrey’s claims about King Arthur with historian and scholar Polydore Vergil (c.1470-1555). Vergil sought to disprove Geoffrey’s claims as he did not view Geoffrey as a proper historian. John Leland debated Vergil on the matter and argued against him on the claims against Arthur and Geoffrey. Historian James Carley breaks down the basis for both Leland and Virgil arguments stating

Leland saw that an attack on Geoffrey was an attack on the very foundations of the British myth. He believed implicitly, moreover, in the authority of the British book given to Geoffrey by Walter, archdeacon of Oxford. Leland's faith in Walter's book is not surprising, since Leland himself devoted the better part of his life to the examination of recondite and obscure ancient manuscripts. In this stance, too, we have the voice of the ancients asserting itself loudly. Vergil, on the other hand, clearly represents the sceptical voice of the puny moderns, and he is directly addressed in the text under the pseudonym which will be his in Leland's subsequent writings as well: Codrus, the name applied by the Roman poets to those poetasters who annoyed other people by reading their productions to them.⁵⁵

⁵⁴ John Leland, “Leland’s Itinerary in Wales. 107.

⁵⁵ James P. Carley "Polydore Virgil and John Leland on King Arthur: The Battle of the Books." *Interpretations*15, no. 2 (1984). 87.

Leland used anecdotal evidence such as locations and remains as well as artifacts associated with Arthur to combat Virgil's claims against the Geoffrey and his Arthur.⁵⁶ Virgil claims that Bede would have likely written about Arthur if he truly existed as Geoffrey of Monmouth and John Leland say he did, however, Carley points out that historians may not have found all of Bede's manuscripts so it is unknown if Bede truly did not write about Arthur.

Leland likely defended Geoffrey and his claims about Arthur because it validated the king that he was receiving patronage from. Just as Geoffrey made up an elaborate tale to bolster his political career Leland likely did the same. Whether or not Leland actually believed that Geoffrey of Monmouth was telling the truth is neither here nor there. The fact is that Leland made people believe that Geoffrey was right in his defense against Polydore Virgil's attack on Arthur and Geoffrey of Monmouth.

Another major significance of this argument was that it was occurring five centuries after Geoffrey had written *History of the Kings of Britain*. The way in which Virgil and Leland throw down intellectual blows shows that many still believed that Geoffrey of Monmouth and his telling of events were true. Leland and Virgil also specifically argue about King Arthur. Arthur is the central figure in their debate as he is the most prominent figure in Geoffrey's "history". This expresses that Arthur was still a hot topic in the sixteenth century. Leland's itinerary also indicates that individuals went out of their way to visit sites that King Arthur may have visited, indicating that some people still wanted to be like Arthur, as Geoffrey suggested that they should.

⁵⁶ James P. Carley, "Polydore Vergil and John Leland on King Arthur: The Battle of the Books." *Interpretations* 15, no. 2 (1984): 87.

Thomas Malory's *Le Morte Darthur* and John Leland's *Itinerary* and debate with Polydore Virgil show, at the very least, that Geoffrey of Monmouth and King Arthur had not fallen into obscurity by the sixteenth century. Romance and courtly culture were still very much alive in the fourteenth century when Thomas Malory was writing, and the ideals of Geoffrey of Monmouth's Arthur and courtly etiquette were still important to the British monarchy in the sixteenth century or John Leland would not have defended Arthur as passionately as he did. Geoffrey's initial story had evolved into a multicultural phenomenon that had been adapted and changed while still maintaining Geoffrey's fundamental character choices.

The limited knowledge about Arthur's past, or if he ever existed, may have played a key role in how his story was passed around. The character, not having a known background, was easily moldable as is apparent in Geoffrey of Monmouth's rendition of Arthur's past. Geoffrey completely fabricated Arthur's lineage and, with information on the hero being as scarce as it was, Geoffrey's declaration went relatively uncontested. Different cultures and societies crafted their own narratives about Arthur and adopted those they connected with more. Marie de France crafted an Arthur that allowed her to support Henry II while Welsh storytellers took the tale of Perceval and adapted it to fit their own culture and language. These changes to Geoffrey of Monmouth's iterations show that the level of adaptability of a character plays an important role in how that character is able to progress, change, and live on.

The development of King Arthur into the legend it has become was not the outcome of just one person's writing and interpretation or just one point in time, but various political climates, social movements and cultural integrations. Geoffrey of Monmouth may have written his history to gain an advantage monetarily or politically, but it cannot be said that his stories did not inspire and spark many others to adapt his version of Arthur for their needs about. However,

the social climate of the time cannot be left out of the equation when thinking about the development of Arthur. Marie de France her romantic poems about Arthur to influence a growing trend of chivalry among Europe's elite. As author and translator William Comfort expresses "As an ideal of social conduct, the code of chivalry never touched the middle and lower classes but was the religion of the aristocracy and of the twelfth-century "honnête home".⁵⁷ This chivalrous "religion of the aristocracy" is likely the reason that the English King Richard I sought to go on crusade. The cultural evolution of the tale can also not be undermined when looking into the reasons why these legends came to be so popular. The adaptation of these stories and the addition of new interpretations based on the culture in which they were told is important in realizing that this legend is culmination of various European cultures. Medieval Welsh, English, and French influence Arthurian lore and helped to create various interesting stories that are all intertwined.

What most of these Arthurian stories of the medieval period share is a link to Geoffrey of Monmouth. His fantastical style captivated audiences and urged them to be like his character, Arthur. Geoffrey championed Arthur to catch on, making him the backbone of English chivalry and a popular character in European romances. The way in which Geoffrey portrayed Arthur as a perfect individual, strong, courageous, and brave on the battlefield yet generous and just with his subjects created a hero that would be hard to compare with. In that respect, Geoffrey succeeded in creating a true icon for centuries after his death.

Geoffrey of Monmouth's King Arthur is a character that has stood the test of time. Adaptation, alteration, and retellings cannot erase the mark left by Geoffrey on the legend of King Arthur. Modern interpretations of the story are always being developed, referencing the

⁵⁷ Troyes, Chrétien De, and William Comfort. Arthurian Romances. Digireads.com, 2009. Cloud Reader.

folktales of the past and while also taking various liberties to add in their own spin on the tale. To this day King Arthur is one of the most popular legends of medieval Europe. Movies, animations and novels depicting and focusing entirely on the legendary king still play a large role in modern culture and captivate the minds of many. Although not much is known concerning the true past of King Arthur of Briton, what he has become will certainly live on as a legend.

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