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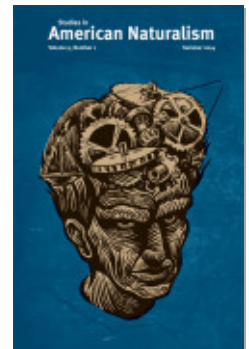
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“You can’t buck against the railroad”

*The Arthurian World of Frank Norris’s *The Octopus**

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As Joseph McElrath and Jesse Crisler observe, explanations as to why the Mussel Slough tragedy occurred varied among witnesses: “[Mills D.] Hartt related that the settler James Harris precipitated an exchange with [Walter J.] Crow, but it was not clear why. Clark gave a different account, claiming that he was talking to Harris when he was suddenly shot. What is clear is that, within a few seconds, all hell broke loose” (349). While hell also breaks loose during the Mussel Slough-inspired irrigation ditch battle in Frank Norris’s *The Octopus: A Story of California*, Norris inflects the madness of the scene by introducing an important twist: the battle does not begin because of any exchange between a farmer and a railroad employee, but because an animal creates a commotion that the farmers mistake for a sign of war:

There was but little room for [Christian] to pass, and, as he rode by the buggy, his horse scraped his flank against the hub of the wheel. The animal recoiled sharply, and, striking against Garnett, threw him to the ground. . . . [T]he incident, indistinctly seen by [the farmers], was misinterpreted. (992–93)

Critics have interpreted this scene variously: several accept George Meyer’s revolutionary reading that the battle proves that the farmers are greedy and villainous because they come to the irrigation ditch “predisposed to fire on their competitors with the slightest provocation” (356); and others such as Bert Bender believe that this scene reveals Norris’s racist ideology, since the “primitive [German] character Hooven fired the shot that set [the chaos] off” (91).¹ While they offer useful interpretations of the novel, these readings miss the literary echo to the final battle in Sir Thomas Malory’s *Le Morte d’Arthur*—an epic romance model that explains the incoherent play of conventions in *The Octopus*.²

Toward the end of *Morte*, Arthur and his men head for a battle with Mordred, usurper of Arthur's throne and land. Before he meets Mordred, Arthur has a dream that foretells his certain death. Arthur later cautions his men not to draw their swords against Mordred and his army, whom they are meeting to discuss land rights and avoid war. Just when both sides think they might survive the tense encounter without bloodshed, an animal intervenes: "so came an adder out of a little heath bush, and it stung a knight on the foot. And when the knight felt stungen, he looked down and saw the adder, and then he drew his sword to slay the adder, and thought none other harm. And when the host of both parties saw that sword drawn . . . both hosts dressed them together" (478).³ A snake starts the war that leads to the demise of Arthur and his kingdom. But the destruction of Arthur and his kingdom are products of a fate Merlin prophesies at the beginning of the book, when he tells Arthur, "But ye have done a thing late that God is displeased with you, and your sister shall have a child that shall destroy you and all the knights of your realm" (43-44). There is no bucking divine will in Malory.

We see similarities between both the background of the battle and the battle's immediate cause in both Malory's and Norris's texts. Just as the unanticipated bite of an adder precipitates war in Malory, the unanticipated kick of a horse does the same in Norris. But the similarities between the texts go much deeper than that. Magnus, like Arthur, hopes to forestall war if possible. Magnus tells his men on the way to the irrigation ditch, "I believe, gentlemen, . . . that we can go through this day without bloodshed. I believe not one shot need be fired. The Railroad will not force the issue, will not bring about actual fighting" (984). Annixter then echoes Magnus's sentiment: "if this thing can by any means be settled peaceably, I say let's do it" (984). Norris presents the farmers expressing cautious optimism that they might refrain from fighting, and an animal ruining this hope by intervening and creating confusion that leads to war. All that is missing is the idea that the battle is a product of fate—but a closer reading of the text shows that Norris accounts for this, too. Annixter himself expresses the impossibility of the railroad's ever conceding defeat when he tells the initial group of men who form the core of The League that "*You can't buck against the railroad*" (659). Their attempt to buck the railroad seals their fate: even the "revolvers and rifles seemed to go off of themselves" (993). As Norris depicts it, the fight at the irrigation ditch is not the product of "chance [that] intervened" (Meyer 356) but rather historically defined determinism woven into the fabric of the story.⁴

Evidence that Norris was thoroughly aware of the Arthurian legend

abounds. James Machor, one of the few critics to discuss Norris's novel as a romance and an epic, notes that Norris took courses at Berkeley on "Milton, poets of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, and English literature to the Restoration[, which] probably exposed him to Renaissance and medieval epics" (45). Machor states that "*The Octopus* and his literary criticism contain enough allusions to Milton, Homer, and the *Chanson de Roland* to suggest more than a second-hand knowledge of the [epic] mode" (45). But Machor misses the many allusions Norris makes to Malory's Arthurian legend, first published by William Caxton in 1485, in his many works. In his essay "The True Reward of the Novelist," Norris excoriates writers for failing to see romance in contemporary life: "The difficult thing is to get at the life immediately around you, the very life in which you move. No romance in it? No romance in *you*, poor fool. As much romance on Michigan avenue as there is realism in King Arthur's court. It is as you choose to see it" (1149). In addition, several of his novels make explicit references to the Arthurian legend. Norris's first book, *Yvernelle*, a romantic story of "Feudal France" set in verse, refers to the quest for "The Holy Grail" (14). In *The Pit*, Laura speaks of "the legend of chivalry" (24), a "young chevalier, pure as Galahad" (21), and seeks out a copy of Alfred Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* (154). A favorite of the young Norris, *Idylls* might first appear to be the natural referent for *The Octopus*'s romantic allusions—but *Idylls* lacks many of the scenes that are key to Malory's and Norris's texts; for example, Tennyson's epic poem does not mention the snake bite that incites the war that claims Arthur's life and kingdom, a part of the Arthurian myth that was Malory's invention. While Norris refers to other Arthurian legends in *The Octopus*, he most often echoes *Morte* when writing his tale of "the primeval, epic life" in a "rose-coloured mist" (609, 586).⁵ If we want to understand Norris's great epic romance of the West, we must turn to Malory.

Reading Norris in light of Malory helps explain how and why the novel depicts the farmers as tragic heroes rather than uniformly and consistently greedy capitalists. Norris exploits the content and generic structure of Malory's epic romance to cast the San Joaquin Valley farmers as a chivalric community—with its individual romantic quests, traditional understanding of contracts, and restrictive gender roles—doomed to fail in a world of emerging corporations.⁶ More specifically, the farmers fall because they do not understand the intricacies of corporate contracts. Indeed, the death of the agrarian way of life begins, not at the moment that the farmers battle the railroad employees at the irrigation ditch, but at the moment they sign their name to a corporate contract that creates The League. In an attempt

to find hope in despair, as Malory does after Arthur's death in *Morte*, Norris offers the allegorical story of Vanamee and Angèle, which allows him to cast the destruction of the farming community as an unfortunate but inevitable product of the universe working toward the greater good.

“[H]is given word was sacred”:

Oaths, Agreements, and the Chivalric Code in *The Octopus*

Contract theory in Malory's *Morte* offers important insight into the workings of Norris's agrarian world. In *Morte*, Arthur's kingdom thrives by oaths that knights pledge to uphold; the chivalric Pentecostal Oath serves as the quintessential example of this. Every year at the high feast of Pentecost, knights of the Round Table are “sworn” “never to do outrage, nor murder, and always to flee treason. Also, and by no mean to be cruel, but to give mercy unto him that asketh mercy, . . . [and] alway [*sic*] to do ladies, damsels, and gentlewomen succour upon pain of death” (74). The belief that a pledge is a fixed agreement allows the knights to deal equitably with each other, for the oath operates as an unwritten law. Because the knights recognize the validity, stability, and power of the oath, Arthur's kingdom thrives for a time.

Compare this to Norris's account of pledges: while no explicit fraternal oath bonds the San Joaquin farmers together, the novel implies that the farmers operate under an understood one. An example of this is Annixter's and the Derricks' common irrigation ditch. The text never describes the “vast trench not yet completed” as the product of a contract; instead, it is a “joint” one, by which we are led to believe that the two men worked together to complete it (588). Hence, Annixter tells Genslinger that “Magnus and I have put about five thousand dollars between us into that irrigating ditch already” (654). The actual amount each has put toward the work and the specific details of the agreement are irrelevant. Magnus and Annixter agreed to create a ditch and so they work to create a ditch; no written contract is necessary. In fact, the irrigation ditch is only the first of many, as the two partners working together intend to expand as they both succeed on their respective ranches. Thus, the novel encapsulates the underlying ideology that unites farmers when describing Magnus's belief that “his given word was sacred” (726). For the farmers, words possess a stable and therefore sacrosanct meaning; they are capable of making contracts and agreements with a “given word” because they believe that words bind—and bond—farmers together.

Such a way of life—one based on the common belief in the word—creates two important social conditions worth noting in Norris's farming

community. First, it allows the farmers to enjoy porous borders between their ostensible properties. While the farmers control the railroad land, people enter and exit the land as they please. In fact, no traveler in the San Joaquin community comes upon a locked gate or sign-posted piece of property until after the railroad takes control of the land, at which time the railroad affixes a warning to what was Annixter's gate: "Warning. ALL PERSONS FOUND TRESPASSING ON THESE PREMISES WILL BE PROSECUTED TO THE FULLEST EXTENT OF THE LAW. By order P. and S.W.R.R." (1083). Rather, the farmers, as well as Vanamee, Presley, and Dyke, approach gates that require little more than simple opening, as is the case when Annixter manages to open the Derricks' fence "without dismounting" from his horse (714). Second, the agreements that allow free maneuvering and duplicity-free dealings among the farmers create the sense that the "Western farmers" are a fraternal brotherhood, much like the knights of the Round Table or any other chivalric order (599).⁷ As Annixter states at the meeting during his barn dance, the issue between the farmers and the railroad is "a family affair," with Presley and Vanamee importantly allowed into the family circle (796). Keeping the farmers together at the beginning is an instance of a chivalric code of sorts, wherein the farm owners conduct fair business with each other and peaceably pass through each other's space, as though all are living in one peaceful kingdom.⁸

In this world of "sacred" pledges, porous borders, and chivalric fraternity, romantic stories and quests are possible. Scholars have said a great deal about the Annixter and Hilma subplot, but none have made the obvious connection between it and traditional Arthurian romance: Hilma is the "maiden" (973), or "pretty milkmaid" as Donald Pizer calls her (128), in distress, and Annixter is the "Lancelot" who saves her (788). While the idea that characters in historical fiction are also characters of romance might seem strange at first, Norris says such relationships exist in "A Plea for Romantic Fiction": "look for Romance—the lady of the silken robes and golden crown, our beautiful, chaste maiden of soft voice and gentle eyes—look for her among the vicious ruffians, male and female, of Allen street. . . . I tell you she is there" (1168). This description of the chaste maiden ought to recall Hilma, who embodies "the original, intended and natural delicacy of an elemental existence, close to nature, close to life, close to the great, kindly earth" (644). Yet Norris complicates the traditional knight-saving-the-maiden-in-distress romance plot by making the knight the enemy of himself.

When he first appears in the novel, Annixter is nothing like a chival-

rous farmer. As McElrath and Crisler observe, “introduced as an irascible, antisocial, and domineering loner given to disagreeing with and bullying his fellow ranchers and his field workers, this combative misanthrope manifests additional self-centeredness in his relationship with the daughter of one of his employees” (371). One might say that Annixter’s great offense in his early dealings with Hilma—when he tries to “fix [her] up somewhere” without marriage (843)—is that he fails to live up to the oath of chivalry, and always to “do ladies, damsels, and gentlewomen succour” (Malory 74). Initially, Annixter’s only concern for Hilma is that she succumb to *his* desires. Perhaps this is why Norris applies the title “Lancelot” ironically in the barn fight scene: after his fight with Delaney—a fight Annixter wins by pure luck—Annixter “delivered himself of a remembered phrase, very elegant, refined. It was Lancelot after the tournament” (788). In the Arthurian tradition, Lancelot most often fights at tournaments because he wishes to earn honor for himself and bestow honor upon the lady for whom he fights. Annixter, at this moment no Lancelot at all, fights Delaney because he wants to claim Hilma as his own—but without giving her the honor due a maiden: he wants to engage in a liaison.

Annixter eventually learns that he must respect Hilma if he ever wishes to become her lover—and this realization leads to Annixter’s quest. Annixter’s quest is not unlike Lancelot’s when he quests for the Holy Grail in *Morte*. Lancelot wishes to see the Holy Grail more clearly but cannot because, as he learns from a dream, “My sin and my wickedness have brought me unto great dishonour. For when I sought worldly adventures for worldly desires I ever achieved them” (363). The grossest of Lancelot’s sins is his lust for Guinevere, which he atones for through a long, arduous process of prayer and reflection; Lancelot is eventually rewarded with a partial—but not complete—vision of the mystery of Holy Communion (403). Annixter does not wish to flee the embraces of a woman but win them, but the spiritual quest process he follows is similar to that of Lancelot. Annixter has to empty himself of his selfish lust and learn to love her. Norris describes this process in spiritual, meditative terms: “Annixter, his eye half-closed, his chin upon his fist, allowed his imagination full play. How would it be if he should take Hilma into his life, this beautiful young girl, pure as he now knew her to be; innocent, noble with the in-born nobility of dawning womanhood. An overwhelming sense of unworthiness suddenly bore down upon him with crushing force, as he thought of this” (868). Among the wheat, Annixter feels ashamed of his previous actions, thus making way for a divine revelation and sudden change: “This poor, crude fellow, harsh, hard, narrow, with his unlovely nature, his fierce

truculency, his selfishness, his obstinacy, abruptly knew that all the sweetness of life, all the great vivifying eternal force of humanity had burst into life within him. . . . "Why—I—I, I *love* her" (869). Replacing his selfish desires with more benevolent thoughts and beliefs, Annixter transforms into a chivalrous man, like a "little seed" that "had at last germinated" (869); among the wheat, Annixter succeeds in his quest to become a better, chivalrous man, eliminating the irony of the "Lancelot" title he receives earlier in the novel.

Annixter's transformation among the wheat effects important changes in both Annixter and Hilma. Donald Pizer observes that Annixter enjoys a sort of spiritual rebirth when he "identifies the emergence of the wheat with the bursting forth of his love" (128–29) at the moment he realizes in seeing the wheat "burst upward to the light" that "Once more the force of the world was revived" (*The Octopus* 870). As a result of his spiritual rebirth, Annixter becomes the chivalric man who does "ladies, damsels, and gentlewomen succour" (Malory 74). One of Annixter's first major chivalric moves is offering Dyke's mother and daughter, Sidney, a home after Dyke becomes a fugitive for killing a railroad worker. He tells her, "I want you to let me take care of you and the little tad till all this trouble of yours is over with. There's plenty of place for you" (922). As a trope of romance, Annixter's chivalrous endeavor to care for the Dyke family is perhaps second only to Hilma's transformation from maiden to queen. For just as the growth of the wheat transforms Annixter into a new man, Annixter's growth transforms Hilma into a new woman. Once a simple "girl" suffering from "confusion," Hilma experiences her own growth after her marriage to Annixter and the subsequent "dawn" of motherhood (973). Hilma "looked the world fearlessly in the eyes. At last, the confusion of her ideas, like frightened birds, re-settling, adjusted itself, and she emerged from the trouble calm, serene, entering into her divine right, like a queen into the rule of a realm of perpetual peace" (973). If to this image we add the image of Annixter, the only other person in the text with a "crown" who unites with the "queen" after going through his own transformation (672), we get the romantic image of the blissfully wedded king and queen, united by love after undergoing difficult trials. Together king and queen purchase a "round table of yellow oak" for their home (995)—a possible allusion to Arthur's Round Table and the perfect symbol of Annixter and Hilma's marital union: together they will reign as equals in their domestic domain.

Some critics might wish to object to the idea that the novel sympathizes with the farmers, but the Annixter and Hilma subplot is but one of many stories that "dull[s] all harsh outlines" (609) of the farmers in

Norris's epic romance of the agrarian West. George Meyer argues that the farmers are just as greedy, culpable, and evil as the railroad. More recently, Florian Freitag states that "the farmers in the valley are no 'bucolic agrarians,' but, like the Railroad, they too act like 'machines in the garden'" (106).⁹ This view of the farmers relies on the idea that the farmers abuse the land as much as the railroad abuses the farmers; not only are such generalizations untrue, but they also miss the many instances in the text in which Norris creates parallel situations in order to prove that the farmers are better people than the railroad employees.¹⁰ One of the ways the novel elevates the farmers is by contrasting their benevolent actions with the wicked actions of the railroad. The railroad costs Vanamee a job; Annixter gives Vanamee a job (676). The Derricks want to fire Hooven but do not because of his loyal service (714); the railroad fires Dyke in spite of his service (591). The railroad ruins Dyke and his family (854); Annixter rescues Mrs. Dyke and Sidney from abject poverty (922). Annixter throws a barn party and invites people from different social, economic, and ethnic backgrounds (768); the railroad throws a party and invites only the upper crust while the poor literally starve outside (1066). The constant paralleling of situations with different results shows that, far from merely being evil, money- and power-hungry capitalists, the farmers are, as Richard Chase suggests, symbolic protagonists in "the movement of agrarian protest and revolt which was in its heyday when Norris was forming his ideas in the 1880's and 1890's" (298). They are the "family" holding together a chivalric agrarian way of life in the face of the titanic corporate machine.

The products of the farmers' and the railroad's acquisitive acts also create an important distinction between the two sides. As John Dudley stresses, even if the farmers like forty-niners do work the land to the point of seeming exhaustion, the novel depicts their interaction with the land in literally and metaphorically productive ways (107–09). The "long stroking caress, vigorous, male, powerful" machines that till the soil are precisely for what "the Earth seemed panting" (*The Octopus* 680). The earth "quiver[s] responsive and passionate under this rude advance," with the men working the land representing the "Male" and the earth representing the "Female" in "the throes of infinite desire" (*The Octopus* 680). This image creates the sense that "earth *accepts* the violence of the machines *as part of the natural cycle of the wheat*" (Dudley 107; emphasis mine), which in turn suggests that the farmers' desire to "mine" the land is acceptable because their acquisitive drive is procreative and beneficial; without their acquisitive drive, there would be no wheat for people to eat.

The railroad, however, is anything but procreative; the railroad de-

stroys and consumes. Dudley notes that the railroad destroys the land's fecundity by replacing earth with constantly growing tentacle-like railroad tracks (109). Lyman Derrick thoughtfully studies the map that depicts the growth of the railroad, with its "diminutive little blood suckers that shot out from the main jugular and went twisting up into some remote county, laying hold upon some forgotten village or town, involving it in one of a myriad branching coils, one of a hundred tentacles, drawing it, as it were, toward that centre from which all this system sprang" (806). There is no procreation here—only predatory, even parasitic, behavior. Rather than help create towns or enliven a "forgotten village or town," the railroad grabs hold of it only to "draw it" into itself (806). Markets exist solely for the purpose of satisfying the corporation's ever-increasing acquisitive appetite—an "insatiable" appetite, as Walter Benn Michaels points out, that allows the railroad to "survive" (186). If the drive to survive produces a slaughter—as is the case with the sheep that walk through the fence—so be it: nothing can "buck the railroad" from its acquisitive gluttony.

The "ethical contrast between the creative act of the plows and the purely destructive act of the locomotive" ought to solidify the status of farmers as, generally speaking, tragic heroes in Norris's epic romance (Dudley 109). They are the only thing stopping the P. and S.W. Railroad, or one like it, from consuming the entire San Joaquin Valley, from consuming all the Mrs. Dykes, Sidney Dykes, Minna Hoovens, and Mrs. Hoovens of the world. And yet they fall. So the question naturally becomes, if this is Norris's epic romance about the agrarian farmers of the West, why do they fall? To answer that question, we must return to Malory.

"[T]he solemn pledges of the corporation":

Death by Corporate Contract

Epics generally describe the last days of a culture or people: prince Hector dies in Homer's *Iliad*, king Arthur dies in Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur*, the parents of humanity face death for the first time in John Milton's *Paradise Lost*. The deaths of these heroes signal an end of a way of life. Aristotle connects tragedy to the epic mode in his *Poetics*—a text that Norris would have read at Berkeley (McElrath and Crisler 122)—when he discusses the tragedy of Homer's *Illiad*. For Aristotle, the perfect tragedy is one in which a hero who "neither excels in virtue and justice, nor is changed through vice and depravity, into misfortune, from a state of great renown and prosperity, but has experienced this change through some error" or miscalculation (430–31).¹¹ Neither perfectly good nor evil, the hero is usually good—but he eventually makes a mistake that leads to his downfall.

With this in mind, reading Arthur's rise and tragic fall in *Morte* will help shed light on the farmers'—and specifically Magnus's—downfall.

Arthur is a leader, by his birth, whose very being justifies his rightful kingship. Malory emphasizes Arthur's innate right to rule with the story of the sword in the stone, which promises that "Whoso pulleth out this sword of this stone and anvil is rightwise king born of all England" (28). All of the best knights in the realm try and fail, but Arthur "lightly and fiercely pull[s] it out of the stone," not once but five times (29). The sword legitimizes Arthur's kingship and leads directly to his coronation, where "he was sworn unto his lords and the commons for to be a true king, to stand with true justice from thenceforth the days of this life" (30). When Arthur loses the sword during his fight with King Pellinore, the Lady of the Lake replaces it with Excalibur, an even greater sword that has the ability to cut steel. Arthur's ability to wield such majestic weapons serves as a testament to his unique ability to lead, which in turn helps draw the greatest knights of the world under his rulership.

In wielding martial power, Arthur brings together the greatest knights, but he also employs those knights to satisfy his desire for greater power and more land. The quintessential example of this mixed blessing is the Roman war episode, in which Arthur, faced with the decision to fight against Rome, asks his knights whether he should fight after declaring, "for truly I will never pay no truage to Rome, wherefore I pray you to counsel me. I have understood that Belinus and Brenius, kings of Britain, have had the empire in their hands many days, and also Constantine the son of queen Heleine, which is an open evidence that we owe no tribute to Rome, but of right we that be descended of them have right to claim the title of empire" (99). With this declaration in mind, Arthur's counselors promise to fight against Emperor Lucius and Rome. They win—but not before Arthur momentarily succumbs to martial excess. Arthur's slaying of Lucius sends the Roman soldiers into flight—they know they have lost the battle—but Arthur and his men follow "the chase, and slew down right all them that they might attain. . . . And there were slain on the part of Lucius more than an hundred thousand" (106). Arthur's victory secures for him the Roman emperorship, but more importantly it helps solidify his status as the greatest king of England. To achieve such status, though, Arthur has to go to extremes, killing even those who wish to escape a losing battle. The work all but excuses Arthur's martial excess; as Caxton summarily points out in his preface, the text relays the story of "the most renowned Christian king, first and chief of the three best Christian, and worthy, King Arthur" (1). Arthur's excess places him squarely in the cat-

egory of tragic hero that Aristotle defines: Arthur is a generally good but not perfect king whose excess in service to the well-being of the kingdom is excusable, even acceptable—so long as it does not violate the terms of the Pentecostal Oath.

As to be expected of a tragic hero as Aristotle defines him, an error leads to the hero's downfall; for Arthur, excess eventually infects his kingdom and leads to its, and his, collapse. Because Arthur and the Round Table knights are so great, the Holy Grail makes an unannounced and unrequested appearance to his court. The great honor also ends up being Arthur's undoing since the knights choose the individual grail quest over kinship with their king. When the grail enters Arthur's feasting hall, "there was all the hall full filled with good odours, and every knight had such meats and drinks as he best loved in the world: and when the holy Graile had been borne through the hall, then the holy vessel departed suddenly, that they wist not where it became" (353). Full of self-pride, the knights, led by the ostentatious Gawain, "avow . . . that I shall hold me out a twelve-month and a day, or more if need be, and never shall return again unto the court till I have seen [the Graile] more openly than it hath been seen here" (353). Long before Lancelot's trysts with Guinevere lead to the war with Mordred, Arthur loses grip of his kingship when his knights make a vow—a verbal contract—that causes them to displace a contract between men for a religious abstraction. Realizing the damage that the new vow and Grail quest has done to his kingdom, Arthur, with "tears . . . in his eyes," declares to Gawain, "Alas! . . . ye have nigh slain me with the avow and promise that ye have made. For through you ye have bereft me of the fairest fellowship and the truest knighthood that ever were seen together in any realm of the world" (353). The image of an emotional Arthur runs counter to the image of the stately conqueror seen in the Roman war; he never fully recovers the appearance of majestic prowess after this moment. In the end, the work proves that Arthur's ability to wield great power also makes him susceptible to being a victim of it; the world's greatest king is also his own greatest enemy.

I bring up Arthur's rise and tragic fall for two reasons: first, because it shows that a new contract leads to the disintegration of the Round Table fellowship, leaving Arthur as the head of a broken organization; second, because it demonstrates that Arthur's excess was both a strength and a weakness, allowing him to create a kingdom, but also making him impotent as the one person to hold that empire and its great knights together. Norris exploits these two formal configurations in *The Octopus* through Magnus, an Arthurian leader whose own excess crushes and destroys him.

But whereas the verbal contract of others destroys Arthur's kingdom, Magnus all but destroys the chivalric, oath-based community when he signs his name to the contract that creates The League.

Like Malory's Arthur, Magnus possesses innate qualities that make him a natural leader among his men. He exhibits his lordly presence the moment he first appears in the text: "Magnus—the Governor—was all of six feet tall, and though now well toward his sixtieth year, was as erect as an officer of cavalry. He was broad in proportion, a fine commanding figure, imposing an immediate respect, impressing one with a sense of gravity, of dignity and a certain pride of race" (626). The narrator implies that Magnus's greatest qualities are martial: he stands like an "officer," possesses a "commanding figure," and naturally "imposes" his will on others. But Norris even more directly portrays Magnus as the king of the agrarian community by calling him the "king of his fellows" (831) and noting that he possesses a *je ne sais quoi* quality that makes "other men loo[k] to him as the leader" (628). Magnus even owns an agrarian version of Excalibur, a "cane with a yellowed ivory head" that he always carries, and the narrator continually reminds the reader that Magnus keeps the cane always with him (627). McElrath states that "Magnus is the self-styled leader, the grand representative of what he likes to imagine as the 'The People.' Actually he is nothing more than the principal of a special interest group. He looks and publicly acts as though he is wearing a toga and sporting laurel" (141). It would be more accurate to say that Magnus acts as though he is a king wearing a crown, and that his fellow farmers, not he, have placed that crown on his head. Magnus never asks to be the leader of the group; his friends always thrust him into the position of power. To use Machor's phrase, he is "a kind of 'natural leader' of classical epic" (48). Magnus is no Arthur, but he is the "king" of a band of men.

Norris plays with the idea of Magnus and his band as a quasi-Arthurian court, especially when he presents the farmers first meeting about fighting the railroad corporation's unjust rates. Norris writes, "Around the table the chairs in which the men had sat throughout the evening still ranged themselves in a semi-circle, vaguely suggestive of the conference of the past few hours, with all its possibilities of good and evil, its significance of a future big with portent" (674). The image is not only "vaguely suggestive" of a conference, but of Arthur's meeting with the Round Table before his war with Rome, where he discusses the possibilities of good and evil, as well. This scene suggests that Magnus and his men are not quite equal or united. For one thing, they sit only in a "semi-circle," suggesting that a perfect unity does not quite exist. Magnus himself proves to be the

one who hinders the completion of the circle in the scene, as he refuses to beat the railroad by dishonest means. The leader and his men are not in concord, and the perfect circle operates as a symbolic stand-in for their lack of harmony. As Annixter makes clear, the farmers are not yet as unified as they should be, but he for one would like them “act together for once. Let’s stand in with each other in *one* fight” (728). Still, the gesture of Arthurian unity exists, suggesting the possibility that the farmers *could* unite as one force—with Magnus as the great leader—if they but work together.

Just because Magnus initially refuses to fight the railroad with unethical means does not mean that he does not wish to beat them, or become rich. Like Arthur, Magnus is a man of excess:

He was always ready to take chances, to hazard everything on the hopes of colossal returns. . . . He had been as lucky in his mines as in his gambling, sinking shafts and tunneling in violation of expert theory and finding “pay” in every case. Without knowing it, he allowed himself to work his ranch much as if he was still working his mine. The old-time spirit of ’49, hap-hazard, unscientific, persisted in his mind. Everything was a gamble—who took the greatest chances was most apt to be the greatest winner. (628)

McElrath and Crisler employ Magnus’s gambler mentality to argue that “those characters associated with the all-grasping ‘octopus’ are not wholly different from the far-from-saintly ranchers. . . . The ranchers, and especially their leader, Magnus Derrick, are also thralls to the acquisitive instinct” (345). To the extent that Magnus like the railroad desires land for the purposes of accumulating power, they are correct. But excess is in part what makes Magnus an alluring figure to those who follow him; they find little fault with Magnus’s farming methods because they, like he, wish to be great winners in the wheat business. Magnus is great precisely because he knows that those “who t[ake] the greatest chances [are] most apt to be the greatest winner[s].” What separates Magnus from the railroad is his unwillingness to cheat to win. Magnus is willing to gamble—to test his luck—but only if the rules of play are consistent. Living in a world in which the word is sacred and stable, Magnus expects a level playing field from his opponents.

Magnus exposes his own Aristotelian tragic flaw when he allows his excess and his belief in the stability of the word to lead him to believe that the corporation will deal fairly with him. Magnus does not realize that the railroad determined the outcome of his gamble long before he staked it: the house was predetermined to win; he learns that the “word” or “oath”

that is common in the farming community is no longer viable in the corporate world, a world of excess not governed by ethics. In the novel's view of American life, the replacement of the oath with a signed contract effectively leads to the replacement of the agrarian farmer with the corporation.

The beginning of the shift from solemn pledge to signed contract is most evident in the first meeting with the group that originally conceives of *The League*: Harran and Magnus Derrick, Broderson, Osterman, and Annixter. During the meeting, Genslinger, reporter for the *Bonneville Mercury*, asks the farmers whether they will buy the land. When the farmers unanimously answer in the affirmative, at the rate of "about two dollars and half per acre" (96), as advertised in the pamphlets the railroad distributed in order to entice settlers on their land, Genslinger shouts out in disbelief: "For two and a half! . . . You don't suppose the railroad will let their land go for any such figure as that, do you?" (653). The farmers *do* believe that the railroad will sell at such a figure; to them, the advertisement is a written "pledge" (653), an oath by which the railroad must abide. And as Annixter says, a pledge is an "agreement" that "they [the railroad] have got to stick by" (654). McElrath believes that the farmers are "thick-witted to the degree that they actually construed the Railroad's *handbills*, advertising low-priced land, as 'legal paper'" (143). But stupidity has nothing to do with the farmers' belief that words—whether spoken or printed—contain a fixed, legally-binding meaning. Instead, Magnus, Annixter, and the rest of the farmers expect nothing less of the railroad than they do of themselves; their tragic flaw is that they want the railroad to operate under the assumption that its "given word was sacred" (726). As Daniel Mrozowski notes, "The great business transaction that centers the plot . . . comes coated with epistemological anxieties caused by the corporate person" (172). The question the text seems to pose at this point is, will the corporate person follow the same rules as a chivalric farmer?

The answer, of course, is no; the corporation will not play by the same rules as the farmers. Norris very deliberately places the destruction of this notion of existence at the very moment of its apex: the grand dance at Annixter's new barn. In this scene, the corporation redefines the rules of the contract at the very moment that farmers celebrate the community made possible by the sacred word. Magnus's letter from the railroad reads, "By regrade of October 1st, the value of the railroad land you occupy, included in your ranch of Los Muertos, has been fixed at \$27.00 per acre. The land is now for sale at the price to any one" (794). Mrozowski says that the railroad's raised land prices "dra[w] attention to the ridiculousness of both . . . the assumed faith in and the very possibility of a sacred corpo-

rate vow" (172). While the novel does suggest that a sacred corporate vow is impossible—proving time and again that the octopus will do whatever it takes to feed—it does *not* show that the farmers' faith in a sacred vow is ridiculous. The farmers thrive because the chivalric community upholds the sacred vow, so they have every reason to believe that the corporation will abide by it. That the corporation does not—and that its refusal to abide by the vow means certain financial ruin for the farmers—forces the farmers to enter into a corporate contract of their own: the contract that creates The League.

The creation of The League signals the destruction of the chivalric farming community, replacing the notion of "family" with an "*Organization*" (797). The narrative description prior to and after Magnus's final signature melodramatically presents this loss. Realizing that Magnus is about to sign himself to the contract—effectively signing himself in as head of The League's Corporate body—Annie Derrick, "distraught with terror" (800), grabs her husband. Saying "no" to the signing of the contract seven times, and twice telling Magnus "don't sign" (800), Annie knows what is at stake in Magnus "signing on the dotted line." But she fails. The moment Magnus signs, Annie realizes that "Her husband no longer belonged to her" (800). Signing the contract makes Magnus the head of The League, head of the corporate body that "surged forward, roaring" at the sight of his signature (800). Norris may very well be expressing the Paulian belief that "the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life" (*King James Bible*, 2 Cor. 3.6), suggesting that contracts imply the loss of trust in the spirit of the word. After all, once the contract creates the league, oaths are no longer stable and trustworthy: Genslinger publishes the story of Magnus as a blackmailer even after assuring Magnus that he would not find "anything disagreeable in [the] Saturday morning [paper]" (941), and Shelgrim's book-keeper "promises" to "reform" his alcoholism but never does (1034). A Paulian reference or no, the signing of the contract is the moment Magnus ceases to become the Arthurian leader of an agrarian "family"; it is the moment that Magnus becomes the Shelgrim of the farmers' corporate body.

That Magnus undergoes a radical change of perspective upon becoming the corporate head of The League is most obvious in his discussion with Cedarquist. Cedarquist tells Magnus that the farmer and manufacturer could join forces and become superpowers by expanding their markets to Asia. Magnus finds the idea enticing, and he considers the possibility—not as the chief farmer who originally sought to alter the "system of excessive rates"—but as the head of a corporation who could

wield seemingly infinite power (660). He dreams of the “farmer suddenly emancipated, . . . set free of the grip of Trust and ring and monopoly acting for themselves, selling their own wheat, *organising into one gigantic trust*” (830; emphasis mine). It is at this moment that Magnus most resembles the “flawed . . . epic heroes undone by the gods they both worship and flout. . . . Magnus’s undoing in part results from a paradox beyond his control. . . . But it is also as much a product of his own desire for self-aggrandizement” (Machor 48). I would also suggest that at this moment Magnus is less himself and more the head of the corporation. Magnus is not thinking about wealth for himself—but wealth for the entire corporate body; indeed, he is thinking about the growth and strength that The League might enjoy if it could somehow subvert or destroy the octopus, and he is willing “to do evil that good might come” (1097).

The problem with The League is that it is not the railroad, and Magnus is not Shelgrim. Whereas Shelgrim can obfuscate any sense of personal culpability by delegating his work to any number of his agents (most notably S. Behrman), Magnus cannot. So whereas Shelgrim can dismiss any responsibility for action as the workings of a corporate “force born out of certain conditions” (1037), Magnus must pay for the actions of his corporation—even if he is not the originator of those actions. As a result, Genslinger successfully blackmails Magnus for bribing two members of the railroad commission even though the idea, and the initial bribe, comes from Osterman. Genslinger manages to manipulate Magnus precisely because he knows that Magnus is leader, or “Governor,” of The League (938). He even tells Magnus, “I can put my hand on the two chairmen you bought before it’s dark to-day. I’ve had their depositions in my safe for the last six weeks” (938). The problem with Magnus as head of The League is that he can be held responsible for its actions; he is unable to hide behind the corporate veil, as Shelgrim does. When Genslinger later publishes his piece on Magnus’s blackmail, he all but decapitates The League. At the meeting following the irrigation ditch battle, an unnamed leaguer effectively drops the guillotine when he says that The League “was organized . . . to protect *all* the ranches of this valley from the Railroad, and it looks to me as if the lives of our fellow-citizens had been sacrificed . . . in defense of one of them—Los Muertos—the one that Mr. Der-rick owns” (1014). Magnus has no choice but to step down at this point, and The League, like the farmers at the irrigation ditch, suffers its death at the hands of the railroad and its seemingly endless pool of agents and employees. The agrarian way of life dies because it cannot compete with the surreptitious inner workings of the corporation.

Unlike Arthur, who dies tragically but heroically while trying to defend his kingdom from his usurper son, Magnus survives his fall from leadership. Magnus becomes a shell of himself after the weight of the bribe scandal crushes him: “The Governor had aged suddenly. His former erectness was gone, the broad shoulders stooped a little, the strong lines of his thin-lipped mouth were relaxed, and his hand, as it clasped over the yellow ivory knob of his cane, had an unwonted tremulousness not hitherto noticeable” (893). Magnus still possesses his cane, the symbol of his leadership, but he has lost everything else, including control over his own body. As if the destruction of body and soul were not enough to demonstrate his crushing defeat, Norris emphasizes Magnus’s fallen state by making him an employee of the corporation. Magnus seals his own abdication as the leader of both the farming community and the corporation when, in an ironic turn, he swears an oath to Berhman that “I’ll be loyal to the railroad” (1077). Forced to live out his existence as a middling employee for a corporation responsible for the death of his son and fellows, Magnus ends the novel a shadow of the great king he once was. The land turns out to be Magnus’s Holy Grail—a thing he prized and imagined but never realized; he chased his grail until he literally had nothing left, in the end agreeing to be a lackey for those who held the cup out to him but never let him grasp.

“[A]ll things . . . work together for good”:

Lasting Hope in *Le Morte d’Arthur* and *The Octopus*

Norris’s epic romance is structured so that nothing the farmers could have done would have stopped the railroad from destroying them. There is no escaping the octopus’s deadly tentacles; the farmers are the last great products of a nearly deceased era. Admittedly, this argument goes somewhat against the critical grain. Scholars such as Donald Pizer contend that Norris structured the story in such a way to suggest that the farmers are “equally responsible . . . for the shedding of blood” (141).¹² In other words, the farmers are equally responsible for their own demise. In this argument is the implicit suggestion that, had the farmers been more attuned to nature and the “natural law of supply and demand which determines the production and distribution of wheat,” they might not have met such an untoward fate (Pizer 140). But the text forecloses such an argument by offering the highly symbolic story of Dyke, the ex-railroad employee turned hops farmer who understands the natural law of supply and demand.

Until he realizes that the railroad has cheated him out of everything he owns, including his house, Dyke is the ideal, cooperative hops farmer

Pizer and others say the wheat farmers are not. Before taking out a loan to grow the hops, Dyke visits the railroad's office to check freight rates for the fall, when his hops would be ready for shipment. An exorbitant rate would destroy his plans, render him poor, and leave his daughter without an education. After checking the "tariff schedule" (735), the clerk announces that the rate is "two cents a pound" (735). Dyke finds the information so reassuring that he immediately goes to the railroad's main agent, Behrman, and takes a mortgage out on his house in order to secure the rest of the funds he will need to plant, harvest, and bring his hops to market. With the land "prime" and "in shape," and with a "foreman who knows all about hops," Dyke is ready to give the market what it needs (734). In short, Dyke agrees to pay the railroad's rate without argument, works with Behrman to bring his product to the market, and even treats his land properly by engaging an expert to help with growing his product. If anyone should succeed where the farmers fail, it is Dyke.

And yet Dyke meets nearly the same fate as the farmers; like them, he is blindsided by the corporation. Operating under the chivalric assumption that the rate he receives verbally is a contract, Dyke "signs" an agreement and is therefore "contracted" to deliver his hops to someone in San Francisco (849–50). Dyke soon discovers, however, that the "promise" he thought he secured from the railroad no longer exists (853). Rather than the two cents that Dyke assumed the tariff schedule guaranteed, he realizes that the railroad has introduced the new rate of five cents. The honest and hardworking Dyke, befuddled by the change, asks the most imperative question of the book, "What's your basis of applying freight rates, anyhow? . . . What's your rule? What are you guided by?" (854). Enter the railroad's lead agent and mortgage holder on Dyke's property, Behrman. "[W]ith the tap of one forefinger on the counter before him" at the enunciation of each word, Behrman tells Dyke, "*All—the—traffic—will—bear*" (854; emphasis mine). There is nothing natural about the railroad's understanding of the law of supply and demand, because, as Behrman makes clear, the railroad is interested in neither supply nor demand but in pure profit. The Dyke subplot proves that the agrarian way of life dies, not because farmers fail to treat the land or railroad fairly, but because they simply fail to understand that a corporation's job is to maximize profit at *any* cost, human or otherwise. And as Annixter predicted at the beginning of the novel: "*You can't buck against the railroad*"—especially in a world of corporate contracts (104).

There is no denying that the end of Norris's novel is puzzling. Presley's belief that "all things, surely, inevitably, resistlessly work together for

good" would seem, as Crisler and McElrath argue, to be an "ironic" assertion that "ring[s] dissonantly in a grim, pessimistic tale" (125). After all, moments before enjoying his epiphany of the wheat, Presley recognizes the scope of the railroad's destruction:

The monster had killed Haran, had killed Osterman, had killed Broderson, had killed Hooven. It had beggared Magnus. . . . It had enticed Lyman into its toils . . . ; it had hounded Dyke from his legitimate employment and had made of him a highwayman and criminal. It had cast forth Mrs. Hooven to starve to death. . . . It had driven Minna to prostitution. It had slain Annixter. . . . It had killed the very babe within [Hilma's] womb. (1096-97)

The mass of bodies left in the wake recall the sheep slaughtered by the railroad at the beginning of the book. The farmers and their families, like the sheep, ended up standing on the railroad's tracks too long, and became victims of the seemingly unstoppable force that is the P. and S.W. Railroad corporation.

Yet I agree with Pizer, Frye, and others who argue that the end intends to offer genuine hope in the face of seemingly bottomless despair. Pizer argues that Norris's belief in Le Conteian evolutionary theism allows him to believe that things eventually work toward the good (114). Without negating the idea that Norris uses Le Conteian idealism as a means to offer a hopeful conclusion at the end, I would like to suggest that offering hope when things seem at their worst is also a convention of epic. Milton, for example, offers a moment of hope as Adam and Eve leave Paradise to face death at the close of *Paradise Lost*: "Som natural tears they drop'd, but wip'd them soon; / The World was all before them, where to choose / Thir place of rest, and Providence thir guide" (XII.645-67). Death does not separate Adam from Eve, or Eve from Adam, or either from God, "Providence," who will guide them through the world. But perhaps an even better example of an epic (romance) offering hope in the face of despair is Malory's *Le Morte*. After receiving his seemingly fatal wound from Mordred, Arthur boards a ship with three queens who "brought him to his burials" (481). But the story refuses to submit to such an end; instead, Malory writes that "some men yet say in many parts of England that king Arthur is not dead, but had by the will of our Lord Jesu in another place. *And men say that he shall come again*, and shall win the holy cross" (481; emphasis mine). And on Arthur's tomb is the verse, "*Hic iacet Arthurus Rex quondam Rex que futurus*": here lies Arthur, once and future king (481). England has hope because Arthur might come again; he might, like the wheat in Norris's novel, rise again and provide for his people.

The rebirth that Norris's novel espouses is not quite as literal as Malory's—but it is as hopeful. The story of Vanamee and Angèle operates on an allegorical level to demonstrate, as Richard Davison notes, that "Regardless of all the vacillating, capricious, or indifferent men, there will always be an Annixter, a Hilma, a Vanamee, an Angèle, a . . . Magnus Derrick" (III). To achieve this end, Norris portrays Angèle and her daughter as identical persons inhabiting different bodies. When she was sixteen, Angèle had "her wonderful eyes, violet blue, heavy lidded, with their astonishing upward slant toward the temples, the slant that gave a strange, oriental cast to her face, perplexing, enchanting" (605). When she first appears in the novel, Angèle's daughter receives an almost identical description: "her eyes, heavy lidded, slanting upwards toward the temples, perplexing, oriental, were closed" (888). Angèle's quasi resurrection stands as a testament to Norris's own claim about the Vanamee plot, that it is "pure romance" (*Collected Letters* 123). From this romance emerges Vanamee's dictum: "Evil is short-lived. Never judge of the whole round of life by the mere segment you can see. The whole is, in the end, perfect" (1086). Several critics argue that Vanamee is untrustworthy and delusional, and that the novel uses his story to lampoon the belief that immediate evil eventually works toward the good (McElrath and Crisler 124; McElrath 57–58; Meadowsong 31). But the fact remains that major characters—including Father Sarria—admit that Angèle's daughter looks exactly like her. The true Angèle cannot return, but something of her—a part of her—lives on, and Angèle's "story" or "idyl" symbolizes both the rise of the wheat and the eventual resurrection of a chivalric community (1086). By extension, Angèle's story suggests that, though Annixter will not return, the ideals he represented will; there has to be another similar to Annixter for his death to make sense in a universe working toward the greater good.

More perplexing than Angèle's romantic resurrection is that it comes about through rape. There is no denying that Norris exploits Angèle's body to tell his allegorical story of resurrection. Indeed, one side effect of Norris's reliance on Arthurian tropes is his reification of traditional gender roles and stereotypes.¹³ On the one hand, Norris creates female characters whose intellect and moral fortitude far exceed that of women in Malory's *Morte*. Annie Derrick is well read and supremely intelligent, being the only character who knows what will happen to Magnus if he signs his name to The League contract. Hilma refuses to accept Annixter's repeated offers to be his paramour, agreeing to be with him only after he makes a proper offer of marriage and promises to be a better man. In *Malory*, women are either figures needed to start, further, or conclude male quests,

or are women of questionable repute. On the other hand, women in Norris prove to be submissive figures who have little actual power in the male chivalric community: though Magnus knows his wife is intelligent, he refuses to heed her warnings when she says “don’t sign” the contract to join The League (800); Hilma enters “into her divine right, like a queen” when she becomes pregnant—but she loses her power when she miscarries the child after Annixter’s death, leaving her as a “queen in exile,” perhaps in a way similar to Guinevere when she exchanges her throne for a nun’s cloak (973, 1080). Even mother earth *accepts* the “rude,” even violent, sexual “advance” of the farmers and their tools (680). As Norris employs them, women allow the chivalric community to function and prosper, but he limits their contribution to what they can offer men; they are maidens that help move the epic romance of the chivalric farmers along.

Norris’s text even shares with Malory’s its censorious attitude toward sexuality more generally. Sexuality helps lead to the destruction of Arthur’s kingdom in *Morte*: first, through Arthur’s liaison with his sister, which produces a bastard, Mordred, whom Merlin prophesies “shall destroy you and all the knights of your realm” (43–44); and second, through Guinevere’s affair with Lancelot, which formally shatters the Round Table brotherhood and leaves Arthur vulnerable to Mordred’s attack. While not as ominous in its portrayal, *The Octopus* does depict sexuality as a predominant force that has ever-present potential to tear the farming community apart at the seams. Before he transforms himself through his spiritual quest, Annixter constantly stands on the cusp of committing rape, as he tries cajoling and even berating Hilma into being his “girl,” a woman he can “put his arm around” when he wishes (841). Rape also nearly destroys Vanamee, as he physically and spiritually crumbles for sixteen years following the rape of Angèle by the mysterious “Other.” In some ways, Norris even escalates the threat sexuality has on the chivalric community by tying it to the relationship between man and land. The farmer’s risk obliterates the very entity that makes their community possible when they, with a “long stroking caress, vigorous, male, powerful” (680), literally plant their seeds into the ground. The sexual violence they enact is procreative and positive, but the novel also makes clear that it borders on the destructive, since overworking the land could destroy it, killing both the land and the farming community. There is always a tension between creative and destructive sexuality in Norris—a tension that the novel never resolves.

Norris borrows and transforms Arthurian tropes from Malory’s *Morte* in service to his great epic romance of the chivalric agrarian community of

the West. As he presents them, Norris's farmers are tragic heroes locked in a hopeless battle with an unbeatable beast. Yet watching the farmers fight against such incredible odds makes the historical story of a group of farmers killed at Mussel Slough enthralling. And the epic romance that Norris employs to tell the story helps him get at a grim truth: there is no defeating the corporate beast; but so, too, does it suggest that good comes from the corporate beast's acquisitive drive. Good has to come from evil, or else the deaths of Annixter, Harran, Mrs. Hooven are meaningless. Refusing to see death as the final meaning of existence, Norris, like Malory, finds hope even in death.

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NOTES

1. For arguments similar to Meyer's, see Vance; McElrath 140–43; and Eby 37–47. For additional readings of Norris and race, see Frye 215–19; and Lye 77–89.

2. Hereafter cited as *Morte*. For discussions of *Le Morte* as a romance and an epic, see Guerin; Tolhurst; and Whetter.

3. All citations of *Le Morte d'Arthur* come from James Strachey's edited edition of Caxton's text, published by the Macmillan Company of New York. The front material states that the first edition of the text was printed in March 1868 and reprinted with slight alterations in the same year. It then was subsequently reprinted in 1869, 1871, 1879, 1882, 1884, 1886, 1889 (with a new introduction), 1891, 1893, 1897, 1898, and 1899. In other words, Norris would probably have encountered this version of the text in his personal or university reading. The Caxton/Winchester debate that rages on in Malory studies need not apply here because Norris would not have had the Winchester manuscript available to him. Eugene Vinaver notes in his seminal three-volume edition of *The Works of Sir Thomas Malory* that Malory borrowed the adder sequence from *The Stanzaic Morte Arthure* (vol. 3 1650). But as Larry D. Benson and Edward E. Foster point out, the *Stanzaic Morte* was unpopular and published very infrequently, so the chances that Norris would have had access to the text are highly unlikely <<http://www.lib.rochester.edu/camelot/teams/alstint.htm>>.

4. Conceptions of determinism differ from the traditional definitions of fate in that determinism often attributes the absence of free-will to a godless natural cosmos, whereas fatalism attributes all consequences as part of a Supreme Power's greater plan.

5. Norris makes direct and indirect references to Tennyson's work in the novel. Presley includes Tennyson among the authors whom Presley "fl[ings] aside" when try-

ing to write his great poem, "The Toilers" (821); Norris also mentions several times that the narrative sometimes appears to be an "idyl," which may be a reference to Tennyson's famous *Idylls* (1086). Norris clearly had other Arthurian texts in mind as he wrote the novel as well. Stephen Brennan has told me that Norris probably borrowed from Wagner when he wrote his description of "Parsifal and Lohengrin; the one with a banner, the other with a swan" (1050). This seems most reasonable, too, since Wagner was responsible for reintroducing Percival using the archaic spelling. Norris also refers to the *Romaunt de la Rose*, a Medieval poem that describes the art of love.

6. Generic readings of *The Octopus* have been popular for some time. See Graham 105–15; Vance; McElrath and Crisler 350–55; Link; and Meadowson. For more general readings of romance in Norris, see Reninger; and Johnson. It is important to note that two scholars—Thomas Austenfeld and Florian Freitag—discuss *The Octopus* in relation to a "naturalist aesthetic" (Freitag 97). However, as Paul Young observes, Norris had his own "peculiar naturalist aesthetic," and "and it should be noted that, despite its critical champions then and now, 'American naturalism' in the 1890s was less a movement than a jumble of proffered peculiarities" (646). In Norris's case, naturalism was but "a form of romanticism" ("Zola as a Romantic Writer" 1108); therefore, I understand naturalism not as a genre of its own but a subset of interests within the romance genre. Norris's essay "Zola as a Romantic Writer" is an invaluable resource for those interested in naturalism and romance in Norris studies.

7. Sacred words joined together a number of fraternal brotherhoods, both in (historical) literature and real life. Froissart's *Chronicles*—a work with which Norris is very familiar—discusses the Order of the Garter. Started by King Edward III in the fourteenth century, knights thought the order would "strengthen the bonds of friendship among them" (Froissart 66). To become a member, a knight had to "sw[ear] a solemn oath to the King always to observe the feast and the statutes, as these were agreed and drawn up" (66). Norris even adds the interesting detail that, at least early in the novel, the railroad workers band together to form the "Brotherhood" (591), a fraternal community that fights the P. and S.W. Railroad's management for fair wages.

8. Norris's text is rife with romantic and chivalric language. The word "cavalry," a word that shares its root with chevalier (knight), appears four times in the text, three times in relationship to Magnus as "an officer of the cavalry" (626, 744, 798), and once as Osterman hangs up his "cavalry poncho" (656). Vanamee and Angèle's "idyllic" love is not a story but an "idyl" (606, 877, 1086). Magnus, the "one-time mining king" who exudes a certain "courtliness of matter that had always made him liked" (813, 768), is "king of his fellows" (831). Gerard receives the label "Railroad King" three times (1059, 1063, 1067). At one point, Shelgrim's office is a "castle," "the stronghold of the enemy" (1031–32). De La Cuesta treats his wife "as a queen" (594), and twice Hilma receives the title "queen" (672, 1080). Annixter becomes "Lancelot," "a chevalier," after his battle with Delaney (788). Romantic words "cavalier" (970), "maiden" (973), and "chivalrous" (594) appear once in the text, and the word "romantic" itself appears three times (586, 593, 688). "Romance" appears a total of 22 times, and epic shows up 12 times.

9. See also Pizer; and McElrath.

10. Annixter *does not* farm his land like a forty-niner. Part of his criticism of Magnus's farming methods arises from the fact that Annixter knows the proper way to farm: "At college, he had specialised in finance, political economy, *and scientific agriculture*" (25; emphasis mine).

11. I choose Theodore Buckley's translation of Aristotle because it was in its third edition in 1890, the same year Norris began attending Berkeley. Stephen Brennan has pointed out that other scholars translate the Greek word for "error" as "miscalculation."

12. See also Vance; McElrath 140–43; and Eby 37–47.

13. For more on the issue of gender in *Morte*, see Finke and Schichtman; Armstrong; and Martin.

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