Translating Troy
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For admirers of Ernst Kantorowicz’s *The King’s Two Bodies*, the myth of King Arthur has an irresistible appeal.¹ Arthur’s identity as *rex quondam rexque futurus* resonates with Kantorowicz’s analysis of the theological character of early modern royal succession, whereby the death of a king (the body natural) is a recurrent episode in the metaphysical life of sovereignty (the body politic). Scholars have identified this juridical insistence on the semipernity of the sovereign in late medieval incarnations of a King Arthur who never dies or dies and returns in messianic fashion.² Yet, as Giorgio Agamben points out, Kantorowicz fails to acknowledge the absolutist nature of sovereignty that this political theology entails. Rather than merely perpetuate the *dignitas* of the kingship, Agamben suggests that “the metaphor of the political body appears . . . as the cipher of the absolute and inhuman character of sovereignty.”³ In other words, the expense of the principle *le roi*


ne meurt jamais is the evacuation of value from human life. By mitigating the impact of a king's death on the political body, sovereignty is simultaneously maintained and dehumanized. In this light, Arthur's legendary sempiternity is demystified as a trace of premodern statecraft.

Optimism about Arthur's return abounds in most Arthurian texts, but resistance to such political theology can be found in the early fifteenth-century alliterative Morte Arthure, an intimate portrayal of Arthur as a prideful sovereign. Any enthusiasm for Arthur's virtue, which is called into question throughout the poem, must be attenuated by the concluding lines. In a manner unbecoming of England's greatest king, Arthur orders his knights to track down Mordred's children, kill them, and hurl their bodies into the sea (4320–21). 4 While many readers may forgive Arthur for this cruel act of infanticide, we know that this image of drowning innocent children did not match the chivalric sensibility of Sir Thomas Malory who, despite having drawn much of his material for his "Tale of Arthur and Lucius" from the Morte, prefers a more laudatory ending for Arthur and turns to his French sources in describing Arthur's final days. 5 For the Morte-poet, the callous extermination of the innocent progeny of an enemy is merely one example of the extensive collateral damage that war produces. The result of this compassion for the victim and condemnation of the sovereign is a poem that expresses great ambivalence about the benefits of war and territorial expansion.

Arthur's decision to execute his enemy's children is especially unsettling because it is also an obliteration of a kinsman's genealogical line, a ramifications of Guinevere's adultery with Mordred, who is described as a "Malebranche" (4174). 6 In a poem fraught with invocations of noble heritage and imperial lineage, the extermination of potential contenders to the throne of Britain is more than an act of revenge or self-preservation. Arthur's concern with the progeny produced from Guinevere and Mordred's adulterous union calls attention to the tortuous course of the genealogy of empire that is defined by disruptive and transgressive acts such as Brutus' accidental patricide.


5. Hamel, Morte Arthure, 4.

Arthur's dying wish, unsettling in its willful sacrifice of the innocent, is an awakening from the fantasy of empire, a vision of Arthur's return as an imperial messiah. Instead of gesturing toward an ethereal transfer of Arthur's body to Avalon, Arthur dies a tyrant. Such a characterization reflects an ultimate rejection of the *translatio imperii*, which privileges the imagined transfer of sovereignty from Troy to Rome to Britain and interrogates the nature of royal authority. Essentially, Arthur's willingness to sacrifice children for the sake of empire forces readers to ask the following question: is it possible for monarchs to assert their authority without engaging in acts of cruelty and willful violence?

For most readers of this poem, this question strikes a flat note amidst the poem's enthusiasm about war and its investment in Britain's Trojan genealogy. After all, this poem is the most ostentatiously imperialistic of the alliterative genre in that its subject is King Arthur, the legendary champion of British sovereignty. However, as the poem progresses, it becomes evident that the *Morte*-poet is not as interested in praising Britain's greatest king as he is dedicated to critiquing the British fantasy of Arthur, which imagines him as the worthy inheritor and perpetuator of imperial authority that can be traced back to Troy. In the *Morte*-poet's illustration of Arthur's attempt to besiege his Roman heritage and create an empire that surpasses that of Rome, the poem reads as a cautionary tale, as much about the ethics of kingship and Arthurian propaganda as about the nature of warfare and imperialism.

As I have been suggesting in previous chapters, the skepticism about such a transfer of empire is inherent to the alliterative poetry that follows the example of Guido delle Colonne's *Historia destructionis Troiae*. Yet, the *Morte* is unique in its ability to maintain contradictory viewpoints about war and empire by virtue of its intertextual treatment of source material and slippery imperial signifiers. These signs emerge as heraldic symbols that justify Britain's heritage, which is consistently expressed throughout the poem as originating in Troy. Thus, the characteristic figures of the destroyed city of Troy, the conflicted Priam, and the defeated Hector emerge to highlight Britain's ancestral losses and perpetuate the “plague of great destruction” that has afflicted the Trojans, the Romans, and now the Britons. Instead of legitimizing Britain’s claims to global sovereignty, the *Morte*-poet presents Britain’s Trojan ancestry as a curse and a mode of succession that must be terminated.

Arthur is the natural symbol of sovereignty in the poem by virtue of his intention to reverse the track of the *translatio imperii* and reclaim his Roman heritage. The origin of empire ironically becomes the coveted object of Arthur, who seeks to establish a dominion larger and more powerful than
that of the Romans by obliterating his imperial predecessor, thereby expressing a paradoxical desire of Britain to be and not to be Rome. This attempted reclamation of an imperial origin not only inspires self-destruction, but also signifies a recurrent inability to obliterate a spirit of tyranny that runs throughout the poem. The label of “tyrannus” is transferred explicitly from the Roman emperor Lucius and his legions (271, 824) to the Giant of St. Michael’s Mount (842, 878, 991) and implicitly to Arthur himself. Just as the Giant’s tyranny “tourmentez” (842) people and causes the old widow to mourn the death of the Duchess of Brittany by “wryngande hir handez” (950), Arthur’s destruction of Tuscany “tormentez þe pople” (3153) and transforms wives into widows who “wryngene theire handis” (3155). Instead of preserving the dignitas of the king, it is as if the greed of the tyrant never dies—when a tyrant is killed, his avaricious spirit fills a new body in the manner of the Virgilian transmigration of souls. As soon as Arthur kills the Giant of St. Michael’s Mount, he becomes the Giant—as soon as he defeats the Roman emperor Lucius, he becomes a British “emperor.” Rather than promulgate such translations of empire, this poem denounces assertions of authority as translations of tyranny. Translatio imperii becomes translatio tyrannidis.

I want to suggest that the poem achieves this macabre message of tyrannus non moritur primarily through an unstable system of chivalric machinery: the art of heraldry. Alliterative romance is replete with heraldic assertions of nobility, but the Morte Arthure is unique in its necrologic interpretation of such chivalric devices. Rather than simply commemorate the deeds of ancestors and confirm the noble blood of the bearers, the heraldic signs of this poem operate as visual necrologies, or lists of the dead. Just as monks would use a liturgical record of the dead in a morning office, knights ritually present the arms of the noble kinsmen who died in battle. Whereas the appropriate heraldic symbol regularly secures the chivalric status of its bearer, such signs in the Morte remind onlookers of the death and destruction left in their wake. Consider the following episode after Arthur’s victory at Soissons. Arthur commands his heralds, who are normally responsible for recording the details of battle, to act as morticians by embalming the corpses and enclosing them in “kystys” [chests] (2302), which are decorated with “theire baners abowne, theire bagis therevndyre” [their banners above, their badges below] (2303). In this scene, the art of heraldry becomes the art of death,

7. I am influenced by D. Vance Smith’s reading of this scene in Arts of Possession: The Middle English Household Imaginary (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 198. For more on the role of heralds, see Anthony Richard Wagner, Heralds and Heraldry in the Middle Ages: An Inquiry into the Growth of the Armorial Function of Heralds (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1939), 33ff; The Chandos Herald, Vie du Prince Noir, in The Life and Campaigns of the
a striking equivalency that memorializes the dead as it celebrates the living. By transforming heralds into undertakers, the badges and banners become visual reminders of the deaths that accompany all heraldic assertions, from battle standards to coats of arms. Rather than serve as signifiers of the stable system of knighthood and nobility, heraldic devices in this poem emphasize the threat that martial violence poses for the security of chivalric and sovereign identity.  

This heraldic signification of death renders such devices indecipherable to their witnesses—they no longer serve as reliable symbols of noble lineage. In the description of Gawain’s death, the sight of his heraldic markers that would legitimize his royal blood rise to the fore: “His baners brayden down, betyn of gowlles / His brande and his brade schelde al blody beronen” [His banners struck down, adorned with red / His blade and his broad shield run over completely with blood] (3945). Instead of broadcasting his nobility, his banners and shield signify his death, with his body beaten to the ground and his arms obscured by blood. Without his heraldic symbols to demonstrate his gentility, Arthur consecrates Gawain’s blood himself (3991) in a desperate attempt to endow his kinsmen’s blood with what Christine Chism calls “the material transcendence of a relic.” Such scenes do not suggest, as D. Vance Smith argues, that the “proximity to death” of heraldic gestures renders their signification “impossible.” Instead, such devices signify the death that is the necessary consequence of heraldic assertions. The profusion of Gawain’s blood, the corporeal manifestation of his nobility, obscures his martial identity and supersedes the heraldic law that would justify his ancestry.

More than any other figure, the image of the dragon, which appears in various forms, embodies the poem’s system of heraldic signification. It is through a reading of the dragon that the Morte-poet’s perspective on war has a particularly alliterative flavor, since the Morte-poet draws both the language used to describe the dragon and what I call its “pedagogic” function from the late fourteenth-century alliterative poem, The Siege of Jerusalem. The dragon, which is associated with both King Arthur and the Roman Emperor Lucius, is representative of a program of slippery signification throughout the poem, which complicates attempts to fix such signs to their referents. The result of


this programmatic slippage is a thoroughgoing critique of heraldic assertions of nobility. The Morte-poet attaches multiple meanings to recurring heraldic devices to attenuate martial fervor, obscure distinctions between the conquerors and the conquered, and emphasize the collateral damage of war. By juxtaposing signs of empire with scenes of violence, the relationship between assertions of sovereignty and the indiscriminate extermination of life becomes inseparable.

THE TRAGIC TRADITION

Critics have long acknowledged the poem’s ambivalence about war, but most have read its critiques of militaristic overreaching solely in contrast to the poem’s primary sources, namely Geoffrey of Monmouth’s Historia regum Britanniae and its vernacular translations.11 Even though most critics acknowledge the pessimism of the poem, they read the Morte’s unique features as departures and amplifications of Galfridian historiography, rather than the product of alternative influences, such as the Guido-tradition.

Scholars have therefore interpreted the Morte’s conflicted representations of violence in three ways.12 The first reading considers the Morte to be essentially pacifistic and/or anti-imperialistic. William Matthews and John Finlayson have claimed that the poem critiques Arthur’s offensive military tactics and imperial ambition, while Karl Heinz Göller even goes so far as to claim that “there can be no doubt that the poet is saying that every war

11. What many have characterized as the poem’s pacifism or ambivalence about empire-building has often been attributed to the poet’s own ingenious embellishment of the Galfridian tale. As Maureen Fries has put it, the Morte Arthure is “indisputably Galfridian” in its direct use not only of Geoffrey’s Historia, but also of the later translations by Wace in 1155, Layamon at the end of the twelfth century, and Robert Manning circa 1338. See “The Poem in the Tradition of Arthurian Literature,” in The “Alliterative Morte Arthure”: A Reassessment of the Poem, ed. Karl Heinz Göller, Arthurian Studies 2 (Woodbridge, Eng.: D. S. Brewer, 1981), 30–43, at 34. For a concise explanation of these chronicle sources, see Hamel, Morte Arthure, 34–38. See also Patricia DeMarco, “An Arthur for the Ricardian Age: Crown Nobility, and the Alliterative Morte Arthure,” Speculum 80. 2 (2005): 464–93. In this article on the poem’s representations of the conflict between king and noble, DeMarco rehearses the predominant scholarly perception of the relationship between the Morte and the Galfridian material: “The Morte Arthure departs from that tradition . . . both in its choice of subject matter and its method of handling the material. Amplifying what had been merely the crowning achievement of Arthur’s reign in the Galfridian account, the Morte focuses on Britain’s war against the Romans, and . . . produces a lavishly detailed portrait of military life distinguished by its extensive historical topicality and its unparalleled realism” (464).

12. For a brief synopsis of the readings, see pages 466–67 of DeMarco’s “An Arthur for the Ricardian Age.”
is unjust.” In a recent pursuit of this argument, Randy Schiff has suggested that the anti-imperialistic sentiment of the poem—and of two other northern alliterative poems, the *Awyntyrs off Arthure* and *Golagros and Gawan*—emerges from the Anglo-Scottish marches, a “zone that continually bore the brunt of clashing empires.” The second reading responds to the arguments made by Matthews and Finlayson: Juliet Vale, Elizabeth Porter, and Rebecca Beal downplay the tragedy of war in the poem and instead focus on the *Morte*-poet’s efforts to laud Arthur’s heroism, his status as the symbol of British civilization, and his ethical military policies. Vale, at the opposite extreme of readers like Göller, even suggests, “Arthur is very far from the cruel and covetous tyrant that he has been held to be.” The more recent third reading, however, follows the trend to deconstruct these competing messages about war, and examine the ambivalence they create. These scholars have recognized the fact that this poem cannot be broken down into set dichotomies or read as justifying one martial discourse over the other. Working from Larry Benson’s older claim that the poem unscrupulously maintains contradictory viewpoints, more recent critics such as Lee Patterson, Patricia Clare Ingham, Christine Chism, and Geraldine Heng have focused on the fine line between the poem’s legitimizing power and


its expressions of loss to make larger arguments about its relationship to the progression of history, insular colonialism, and chivalric communities.17 Patterson has been particularly influential in this regard, suggesting that the tragedy of Arthur’s demise was integral to its appeal to monarchs: “If kings wanted national heroes to exemplify and authorize their own heroism, they seem also to have wanted them, paradoxically, to have come to tragic ends.”18 According to Patterson, the Morte maintains a dialectic between glory and destruction through “historical recurrence,” fulfilling the imperial desire for death and its redemption.19 By deferring the tendency to read the poem as either triumphalist or anti-imperialistic, these readings seek to explain the social work that the poem performs through its ambivalent representations of sovereignty, war, and feudal relationships.

My reading of the poem is deeply indebted to the anti-imperialistic claims of Matthews, Finlayson, and Göller, but it also resonates with the recent focus on the Morte-poet’s nuanced treatment of war. My interpretation, however, departs from the primary focus on one major avenue of historiographic influence. Despite their best efforts to track down and acknowledge the sources for what Mary Hamel has characterized as the product of a “lifetime’s reading,” most of these critics restrict their readings of the Morte through its comparison to the Galfridian sources.20 Even James Simpson, who has meticulously tracked the extensive influence of the Guido-tradition, does not perceive the “clerical voice” throughout the Morte, which he claims is characteristic of Guido’s pessimism.21 For the majority of the poem, he contends that “there is no critique of war . . . On the contrary, the poem fairly bristles with militarist confidence and conviction. . . . The disposition of the clerical voice of this text, then, is different from that found in the Guido-tradition. There the reader is made aware of significant errors throughout the text, whose cumulative effect is to produce military disaster;

17. Larry Benson, “The Alliterative Morte Arthure and Medieval Tragedy,” Tennessee Studies in Literature 11 (1966): 75–89. See also Lee Patterson, “The Romance of History and the Alliterative Morte Arthure,” in Negotiating the Past: The Historical Understanding of Medieval Literature (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987), 197–230. Patterson’s suggestion that this poem is less about ethics than it is about “tragic submission to the iron law of historical recurrence” (217) has influenced historiestic readings such as those of Ingham, Sovereign Fantasies; Christine Chism, Alliterative Revivals; Geraldine Heng, Empire of Magic: Medieval Romance and the Politics of Cultural Fantasy (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003).
18. Patterson, Negotiating the Past, 230.
19. Ibid., 217.
20. Hamel, Morte Arthure, 34.
in the *Morte*, on the contrary, the force of the clerical voice is withheld for one powerful and decisive intervention.”22 Instead, he claims that the *Morte*-poet capitalizes on the weaknesses of the Galfridian material to transform the poem into a tragedy after the Italian campaign.23 More recently, Dorsey Armstrong has suggested that the poem tells two stories at once: “one narrative confers critique on Arthur and his actions, while the other points to potential positive outcomes that are, tragically, never realized.”24 Rather than argue that a “decisive intervention” emerges, she points to the moment late in the poem when Mordred wields Arthur’s sword Clarent, which confirms the allegation that his queen has betrayed him and signals readers to reflect upon the tragic course of the narrative. Armstrong describes this moment, suggesting that “a blinding light is cast on the events of the plot, which encourages the reader to reconsider and rethink how and why the narrative arrives at its ultimate conclusion.”25 Whereas Armstrong turns to the Galfridian chronicle tradition for the origin of this “blinding light,” I would suggest that the voice of skepticism comes primarily from the Guido-tradition. While I believe the *Morte*-poet’s use of the Guido-tradition to be less explicit than his alliterative predecessors, I want to suggest that Guido’s pessimism emerges not only in the “tragic” end of Arthur, but also in many episodes at the beginning of the poem, including the dream of the dragon and the bear. Guido’s influence is subtle—it does not emerge as a *deus ex machina* in the guise of Lady Fortune who transforms the poem from a militaristic romance to Aristotelian tragedy. Rather, Guido’s skepticism can be perceived throughout the narrative, from Arthur’s reproach of Cador’s bellicosity in the Giant’s Tower war council to Arthur’s violent death at the hands of Mordred. Guido’s voice once again assumes an alliterative form that is markedly critical of the English praise of Arthur’s Trojan heritage, producing a poem whose Galfridian architecture is covered by Guido’s dark façade. In the following sections, I demonstrate the way Guido’s coloring of the nar-

22. Simpson, *Reform and Cultural Revolution*, 107–110. He also does not share my perspective of the *Siege*-poet’s ambivalence about imperialism. In fact, he does not treat the poem as part of the alliterative “tragic” tradition at all. He defends his choice to exclude the poem this way: “One might have thought that it naturally belongs here, since it, too, treats the fall of a city. It resists my case for the generally anti-imperialistic and anti-propagandistic quality of ‘fall’ narratives of this period. . . . Finally, however, I think it confirms my case, by being the exception to the rule. It is a thoroughly objectionable work of fervid anti-Semitism, unlike almost anything else in the later medieval period in that respect” (116).

23. Ibid., 110.


25. Ibid., 84.
rative builds anti-imperialistic intensity through the figures of the heraldic dragon, King Arthur, and even Hector of Troy.

**DEATH WHERE THE DRAGON IS RAISED**

Perhaps more than any other aristocratic symbol, the heraldic dragon embodies the *Morte*-poet’s departure from Galfridian historiography. Just like Trojan ancestry, the sign of the dragon originates in the East, but in the eyes of the western world the dragon became the quintessential Roman imperial standard by the end of the second century C.E. By the fourth century, it became the chief military ensign and was used both in battles and imperial rituals. As Mary Hamel notes, the Roman dragon symbol is “a distinct oddity” in the *Morte* because, according to the philosophers who interpret Arthur’s first dream in the poem, the dragon represents Arthur, not the Romans.

The dragon þat þow dremyde of so dredfull to schewe,  
That come dryfande ouer þe deepe to drynchen thy pople,  
Sothely and certayne thy seluen it es,  
That thus saillez ouer þe see with thy sekyre knyghtez. (815–18)

[The dragon that you dreamed of so dreadful to behold, which came driving over the deep to drown your people, truly and certainly it is you, who thus sails over the sea with your trusty knights.]

The attribution of the dragon to Arthur is natural since it signifies the legacy inherited from his father, Uther Pendragon, who represents the golden dragon in the Galfridian sources. At this point in the poem, the *Morte*-poet clearly follows the genealogical association between the dragon and Arthur, but darkens this inheritance by claiming that Arthur will “drynchen” his people. Arthur’s capability to drown his people is confirmed at the end of the poem when he orders Mordred’s children to be thrown into “watysrs”


27. This verb could mean “destroy,” but in the context of the “deepe” and the “see,” it most likely means “drown,” the primary *MED* definition. The variant readings of the two extant manuscripts of *The Wars of Alexander* confirm this definition, at least for the alliterative poets. Whereas the Dublin manuscript, MS 213, olim MS.D.4.12, reads “þe folez & þe folke þat þe flode drynched” (3072), MS Ashmole 44 reads “þe fooles & þe folke þat þe flode drouned” (3199).
(4321), which indicates that this dream is to be interpreted as a sign not only of his imperial success, but also of the damage he will inflict on his kinsmen. Yet, the philosophers interpret the dream as validation that he and his knights will defeat the “tyrauntes þat tourmentez thy pople” [tyrans who torment your people] (824), that is, the Roman Lucius and his legions, and they make no attempt to explain how or why Arthur’s expedition against the Romans will lead to the destruction of his own people.  

This is the first of many clues in the text that we should not trust this optimistic interpretation of empire-building. 

In the earlier description of the dream itself, which the interpreters fail to address, the dragon wields such an infectious power that “Whaym þat he towchede he was tynt for euer” [Whomever he touched was lost forever] (770). Even the symbol of the dragon itself would have inspired fear among medieval readers, since it represented evil, heresy, and even the Anti-Christ. Instead of addressing these ominous overtones, however, the philosophers emphasize Arthur’s destined role as glorious conqueror of Rome. Even though readers might be tempted to trust these “sage philosophers” and view his march on Rome to be well intentioned and sanctioned by the Morte-poet, it becomes clear that the dragon also represents the collateral damage that is an unavoidable consequence of such imperial endeavors.

As the poem proceeds, the dragon transforms from a nightmarish figure to a military standard, rendering the dragon symbol a slippery imperial signifier. Furthermore, in translating the symbol of the dragon from the dream to the battlefield, the Morte-poet departs from Galfridian tradition. According to Geoffrey’s Historia, before his battle with Lucius, “Ipse quoque . . . aureum draconem infixit quem pro uexillo habebat” [He [Arthur] also set up the golden dragon, which he had for a standard] (123).  

Given his Pendragon legacy and the earlier dream that links Arthur specifically with the dragon, Geoffrey’s association is expected, but when the dragon-emblem appears for the first time in battle in the Morte it is unexpectedly associated with Lucius and his Roman army. The messengers from the Marshal of France announce Lucius’ invasion to Arthur, saying, “He drawes into 

28. For a discussion of this ambiguous symbol, see John Gardner, ed., The Alliterative Morte Arthure, The Owl and the Nightingale, and Five Other Middle English Poems (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1971), 254. Hamel finds it “odd that these ‘sage philosophers,’ subtle doctors of the seven liberal arts (808), do not explain how the Arthur-dragon is to drown his own people.” See Morte Arthure, 285.  


douce Fraunce, as Duchemen tellez, / Dresside with his dragouns, dredfull to scheewe” [He draws into sweet France, as Germans tell, dressed with his dragons, dreadful to behold] (1251–52). The dragon’s status as a Roman, not an Arthurian, emblem is reaffirmed later in the poem before the battle at Sessye, when Lucius and his army “Dresses vp dredfully the dragone of golde / With egles al ouer, enamelede of sable” [Raise up dreadfully the dragon of gold with eagles on every side, adorned with sable] (2026–27). Geoffrey’s account, on the other hand, associates Lucius and his Romans only with a golden eagle: “In medio etiam auream aquilam quam pro uexillo duxerat iussit firmiter poni” [In the middle he [Lucius] also ordered fixed firmly the golden eagle, which he had brought for a standard] (125). Instead of adhering to the example of his Galfridian source, Arthurian tradition, and even Edward III, who appropriated this Pendragon standard for his own marches and battles, the Morte-poet renders “auream aquilam” as a “dragone of golde” and “egles . . . enamelede of sable,” which transfers the golden feature of the eagles to the dragon, which had earlier been associated with Arthur in his dream.

This use and then later rejection of the Galfridian tradition are manifestations of the Morte-poet’s heraldic agenda. I support the view that the Morte-poet departs from his Galfridian source to borrow the language of another alliterative poem, the Siege of Jerusalem, in order to transfer the symbol of the dragon from Arthur to Lucius. It is admittedly difficult to make arguments about “borrowings” when dealing with formulaic poetry, but the Morte bears more than what John Finlayson claims are only “superficial resemblances” to its alliterative predecessors.31 Certainly, many of the verbal parallels between the poems can be attributed to a common word-hoard, but there are undeniable similarities that suggest the direct influence of alliterative poems such as the Destruction of Troy and the Siege of Jerusalem on the writing of the Morte.32 To date the poem to 1399–1402, Hamel

32. For a brief discussion of the nature of this “formula” problem, see Hamel, Morte Arthure, 46–47. The verbal parallels are so clear that George Neilson actually claims that the same poet composed these poems in “Huchown of the Awle Ryale, the Alliterative Poet (Glasgow: James MacLehose & Sons, 1902). J. P. Oakden argues for relationships of dependence in “The Alliterative School,” in Alliterative Poetry in Middle English (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1935), 85–111. In critical response to these claims, Thorlac Turville-Petre contends that “tracing verbal parallels between the alliterative poems is a profitless task” and “far from facilitating the tracing of relationships between the poems, the collocational style more often obscures the evidence and makes the process of investigation almost impossible.” See The Alliterative Revival (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1977), 5.29.
has convincingly argued for a compositional sequence that begins with the 
*Destruction's* reference to Geoffrey Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*, and then 
continues through the *Siege*-poet's use of the *Destruction* and the *Morte-
poet's* use of both alliterative poems. Hamel shies away from making a defini-
tive claim that the *Morte*-poet drew material directly from the *Destruction*, 
but she reveals the numerous correspondences to the *Siege*: these include 
the shaving of messengers, the vowing on the Vernicle, the description of 
Lucius' camp, the “arming of the hero,” and especially the distinctive use of 
the dragon-emblem. 33

The dragon, therefore, plays a significant role in the dating of the *Morte*. 
The *terminus ad quem* for the *Morte* has been largely accepted as 1402 ever 
since Larry Benson dated the poem based on the poet's idiosyncratic knowl-
dge of Italian geography and association of the dragon imagery on the Vis-
count of Rome's shield (2052–27) with the arms of Giangaleazzo Visconti (d. 
1402), who fell into ill-repute after his contribution to the defeat of crusad-
ers at Nicopolis in 1396. 34 The hostility expressed toward the Viscount in 
the poem, which Benson attributes to the late fourteenth-century English 
ennemy toward the Visconti family, combined with other historical allusions 
to Sir John Montague and Joan of Navarre indicate that this poem was com-
pleted no later than 1402. 35 Given the probability that the earliest of the eight 
copies of the *Siege* dates to the 1390s, the *Morte*-poet would have had the 
time necessary to consult it extensively. Ralph Hanna and David Lawton 
even suggest that the *Siege* may predate *Troilus and Criseyde*, a scenario that

He uses these correspondences to identify a common author and notes that the shaving topos 
also appears in *Ogier le Danois* and II Samuel 10:4. See also Finlayson, "Rhetorical 'Descripito' 
of Place in the Alliterative Morte Arthure," *Modern Philology* 61 (1963): 1–11; Derek Brewer, 
"The Arming of the Warrior in European Literature and Chaucer," in *Chaucerian Problems and 
Perspectives*, eds. Edward Vasta and Zacharias P. Thundy (Notre Dame: Notre Dame 
pilgrimages, see Jonathan Sumption, *Pilgrimage: An Image of Mediaeval Religion* (Totowa, NJ: 

34. Larry Benson, "The Date of the Alliterative Morte Arthure," in *Medieval Studies in Honor 
University Press, 1976), 19–40, at 27; George Neilson suggests that this coat of arms was a direct 
reference to the Visconti family and the Dukes of Milan in "The Viscount of Rome in 'Morte 
Arthure'," *Athenaeum* 3916 (1902): 652–53.

35. Benson suggests that the reference to "Mownntagus" (3773) as supporters of Mordred is 
a pointed attack on the Lollard Sir John Montague, who was lynched for his role in a conspiracy 
against Henry IV in 1400. See "The Date of the Alliterative Morte Arthure," 30–35; Hamel sup-
ports this dating by noting the unique reference to the victim of the giant of St. Michael's Mount 
as the "Duchess of Brittany" (864), a title held by Joan of Navarre, who would have relinquished 
would allow for nearly twenty years during which the *Morte*-poet could have drawn material from this alliterative predecessor.\textsuperscript{36}

In fact, I want to argue that this destabilization of the dragon as a marker of martial authority is a distinctly alliterative technique. The *Morte*-poet does more than simply draw on imagery from the *Siege*—he actualizes the heraldic potential of the *Siege*-dragon, a rhetorical move that complicates not simply the earlier Galfridian attribution of the dragon symbol of imperial power to Arthur, but all heraldic claims to nobility. On the textual level, the peregrination of the dragon from Britain to Rome in the *Morte* is evidence of a switch in source material, namely from Geoffrey’s *Historia* to the *Siege*. This is a provocative shift since the *Siege*-dragon appears as a redoubtable sign of the Roman Empire. When Vespasian and his Roman army leave Nero in Rome to exact Christian vengeance upon Jerusalem, they “Lauȝte leue at þat lord, leften his sygne, / A grete dragoun of gold” [took leave of that lord, lifting his insignia, a great dragon of gold] (283–84).\textsuperscript{37} And in the later description of the symbols set above Vespasian’s tent, the *Siege*-poet juxtaposes the eagle and dragon in a way strikingly similar to the description of Lucius’ standard at the battle of Sessye in the *Morte* (2026–27): “A gay egle of gold on gilde appul, / With grete dragouns grym, alle in gold” [a gay eagle of gold on a gilded apple, with terrifying dragons, all in gold] (326–27). Given the prevalence of verbal parallels between the two alliterative poems and their equivalent use of the dragon as a symbol of empire, it is evident that the *Morte*-poet looked to his source in the *Siege* for attribution of the dragon-standard to the Roman imperialists.\textsuperscript{38} More importantly, such a broad connotative use of the dragon to represent its destructive capacity places an emphasis on the effect of the signifier rather than the identification of the signified. In other words, whom the dragon represents matters less than the power it wields.

This indicates that the *Morte*-poet gained more than a symbol of the Roman Empire from the *Siege*—he also obtained a pedagogic perspective on visual assertions of sovereignty. The employment of such heraldic symbols as the dragon and eagle calls attention to the cautionary lesson for their observers. To understand this sensibility of imperial signification, we should turn to other references to the golden dragon in the *Siege* that demonstrate a pedagogy of terror consistent with the *Siege*-poet’s unapologetic representation of martial violence. The dragon-standard does not simply represent imperial

\textsuperscript{36} Ralph Hanna and David Lawton, eds., The Siege of Jerusalem, EETS OS 320 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), xxxv–xxxvii.

\textsuperscript{37} All citations from the poem refer to Hanna and Lawton’s edition.

\textsuperscript{38} For a discussion of the literary emergence of the dragon-standard, see Hamel, *Morte Arthure*, 46–52.
power, but actually broadcasts the destruction it will inflict from as far as four miles away. As Vespasian and his army approach the walls of Jerusalem,

A dragoun was dressed, drawyn alofte,
Wyde gapande of gold [be] go[llet] to s[che]we,
With arwes armed in þe mouþe, and also he hadde
A fauchyn vnder his feet with foure kene bladdys . . .
þe b[es]t[e] by [his] briȝtnesse burnes myȝt knowe
Foure myle þerfro, so þe feldes schonen.
+ On eche pomel were pyȝt penseles hyȝe
Of selke and sendel, with seluer ybetyn.
Hit glitered as gled-fure— ful of gold riche
Ouer al þe cite to se— as þe sonne bemys. (393–36, 415–20)

[A dragon of gold was prepared, raised high to behold the wide gaping gullet armed with arrows in the mouth, and also he had under his feet a falchion with four keen blades. . . . Men might recognize the monster by his brightness from four miles away, so much the fields shone. On each pommel were placed high pennons of silk and cendal, beaten with silver. As the sun beamed, it glittered like a glowing fire full of rich gold, visible above the whole city.]

Calling attention to the gaping mouth of the dragon, the Siege-poet reveals knowledge of earlier models, such as that of western Roman emperor Otho IV, who at the battle of Bouvines in 1214 displayed a cloth standard that would enlarge when the wind would blow through its open jaws.39 By constructing the standard this way, the dragon swells to a formidable size as it is carted toward the enemy during a march or siege. The detail of the description of the emblem as well as phrases such as “burnes myȝt knowe / Foure myle þerfro” and “Ouer al þe cite to se” indicate that this dragon is designed to be seen from afar and inspire fear in those who witness its approach. Within the context of an impending siege, the wide-open mouth signifies a subjugation of its victims, in which the restriction of the city’s food supply will effect a shift of its inhabitants from eaters to the eaten—this becomes disturbingly literalized in the example of Maria and the eating of her son (1081–88). With the aid of sun-reflecting shields, the Roman army presents a dragon whose golden gaping mouth represents their greedy desire to pillage the city for its legendary riches and exterminate its inhabitants.

The implication that the raising of the dragon leads to the consumption of human flesh is supported by manuscript evidence. Recent editors Ralph Hanna and David Lawton emend the line that begins with “Wyde gapande of gold” as “[þe] go[llet] to s[che]we,” a reading that amplifies the description of the dragon’s mouth, because they suspect that the line is a corruption of the original that followed the example of its French source in *La Vengeance de Nostre-Seigneur.* However, previous editors E. Kölbling and Mabel Day read the b-line as “gomes to swelwe” [to swallow men] since this is how it appears in the majority of the manuscripts, which instead identifies the dragon’s food of choice and method of human destruction. The juxtaposition of the gold mouth with the act of swallowing is also supported thematically later in the poem, when the Jewish inhabitants of the city resort to eating their gold in order to hide it from the Roman invaders (1165–68).

Read this way, the sign of the dragon communicates more than just impending defeat—it broadcasts comprehensive corporeal annihilation. The raising of this standard is then a sign of its bearers’ intent to fight to the death in the same way that Henry III used the dragon-emblem in 1257 to express his imperial resolve in defeating the Welsh. Vespasian’s dragon then promises a similar unrelenting exterminium to the Jewish inhabitants of Jerusalem.

[On] a bal of brennande gold þe beste was [as]s[ised],
His taille trayled þeraboute þat tourne scholde he neuere
When he was lifte vpon lofte, þer þe lord werred
Bot ay lokande on þe londe, till þat + lauȝte were.
Þerby þe cite myȝt se no s[agh]tyng wolde rise
Ne no trete of no trewes, bot þe touȝ ȝelde. (401–6)

[The beast was placed on a sphere of burnished gold; his tail trailed around it so that he should never turn when he was lifted up high, ever looking on the land where the lord warred, until it would be taken. Thereby the city might see that no settlement would arise, neither treaty nor truce, unless the town would yield.]

Again, the emphasis on the display of the standard so that “þe cite myȝt se” indicates the pedagogic function of the sign, but here the message of the dragon is made explicit. As long as the emblem is raised, the Romans will fight to the death and refuse a truce unless the inhabitants plead for mercy and grant the city to their besiegers.43 This kind of symbolic overkill transgresses the rules of siegecraft and emphasizes the cruelty of those who bear this imperial signifier. The Siege-poet’s use of the dragon standard is particularly clever: by demonstrating its terrifying potential, he highlights the indiscriminate violence that is the necessary consequence of such assertions of the Roman Empire.

Whereas the association between the sign of the dragon and Roman imperial destruction is vivid in the Siege, this heraldic connection in the Morte seems to be an afterthought. I want to suggest that this is not the case, however. Whereas the dragon is earlier attributed to Arthur in its battle with the bear and remains consistent in the Galfridian sources, later in the poem when Arthur meets Lucius in battle, the dragon becomes a Roman signifier. Yet, in each appearance of the dragon, it retains its didactic power for its victims by highlighting the consequences of martial violence. In the dream, the Morte-poet embellishes his Galfridian sources to claim that the dragon will “drynchen” his own people, and when the dragon appears as a standard in battle, a succession of scenes of the bodily dismemberment of the contending warriors follows. This notion that militaristic aggression leads to an endless cycle of destruction resonates with premodern and modern theories of violence.44 In a sermon on the feast of St. Laurence, Augustine argues that violence against wrongdoers will beget violence against the righteous.45 Echoing this sentiment in her famous reflection On Violence, Hannah Arendt remarks, “The practice of violence, like all action, changes

43. As Hamel notes, such a presentation of this sign of doom “would be superfluous in the normal medieval siege, the laws of which ordinarily proclaimed no quarter to the inhabitants, ‘bot þe toun yelde.” See Morte Arthure, 49; M. H. Keen, The Laws of War in the Late Middle Ages (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1965), 120–21.
the world, but the most probable change is to a more violent world.” As a symbol of destruction in both poems, the dragon signifies the reproductive and arbitrary nature of violence, thwarting readings that would valorize any particular military campaign, British or Roman.

The Morte-poet's dependence upon the Siege is supported further by his use of the dragon's gaping mouth and its consumption of victims. This correspondence of the dragon signifier with violence reaches an interpretive climax in the perplexing ekphrasis of the aforementioned shield of the Viscount of Rome:

He driside in a derfe shelde   endenttyd with sable,  
With a dragone engowllede,   dрудful to schewe,  
Deuorande a dolphin    with dolefull lates,  
In seyne that oure souraygne    sulde be distroyede  
And all don of dawez    with dynttez of swerddez;  
For thare es noghte bot dede   thare the dragone es raissede. (2052–57)

[He dressed in a strong shield edged with sable, adorned with a dragon with gaping jaws, dreadful to behold, devouring a dolphin with a doleful expression, as a sign that our sovereign should be destroyed and that his days should be ended by dints of swords, for there is nothing but death where the dragon is raised.]

It is important to mention here that Hamel emends Robert Thornton's scribal “engowschede” to “engowllede” (2053), which originates from the heraldic vocabulary of engoulé de geule, meaning “with gaping jaws.” As Hoyt

47. See Morte Arthure, 49, 316. For more on engoulé de geule see Gérard Brault, Early Blazon: Heraldic Terminology in the Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries with Special Reference to Arthurian Heraldry (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), 178–79. Benson and Krishna in their editions do not emend engowschede, which the OED defines as “stout, fleshy.” The OED claims that engowschede derives from the Old French engoussé, but, as Hamel notes, forms of this word appear in rare instances. Frédéric Godefroy in his Dictionnaire de l’ancienne langue française, 10 vols. (Paris: F. Vieweg, 1880–1902) cites two occurrences of the word. For the mid-fifteenth century instance, see “engoussé,” III, 176. For the next occurrence, see “engoursé,” III, 176. This second instance comes from a modern nineteenth-century edition of fables from the Middle Ages, which defines this word as “gros, gras, bien portant.” Adolf Tobler and Erhard von Lomätsch in their Altfranzösisches Wörterbuch (Wiesbaden: F. Steiner, 1956) contest this gloss and suggest engonser or engonssier. Since none of these glosses are relevant in describing the dragon in a heraldic manner, the MED suggests encowschede, a relative of the heraldic couchant, which means “lying down with head erect.” But since no heraldic description includes the notions of both vorant and couchant as in “deuorande a dolphin,” Hamel substitutes engowllede because it matches the prototype of the dragon from Siege, which describes it as “wyde gapande . . . gomes.
Duggan has argued, the alliterating pattern of aa/ax was the rule of alliterative verse, which calls Hamel’s emendation of “engowschede” into question. However, as Duggan admits, Robert Thornton’s texts of The Siege of Jerusalem and The Parlement of the Thre Ages demonstrate that he was “an unusually careful copyist” and “content to copy irregularly alliterating lines,” which suggests that he reproduced in his Morte an irregularity found in his exemplar.\(^{48}\) Certainly his exemplar could have been corrupt, as Judith A. Jefferson and Ad Putter speculate, but Hamel’s emendation is supported further by the fact that it retains the en- prefix that accords with the aural context of the word, which is riddled with en- modifiers: “enuyous” (2047), “enuerounde” (2051), “and “endenttyd” (2052).\(^{49}\) The authority of Hamel’s emendation of Thornton is confirmed by the fact that the image of the dragon devouring a dolphin thematically evokes the Siege’s dragon, which is described as having a gaping mouth that consumes humans. Whereas the open mouth of the dragon surely originates in a tradition of dragon-standards whose gaping jaws caught the wind and inflated their bodies, it is only in the Siege and the Morte that these dragons are described as possessing the capability to swallow their foes.

The switch from the human to dolphin victim is a curious change that reaffirms the Morte-poet’s continual employment of subtle connotations, but this alteration also serves to critique the nature of sovereignty and obscure distinctions between the conquerors and the conquered in war. The enigmatic ekphrasis of the shield is reminiscent of Aeneas’ confusion in deciphering the famous shield he receives in Virgil’s Aeneid, an episode that has sparked considerable critical comment.\(^{50}\) The Morte-poet provides a

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\(^{50}\) Interpretations of the scene divided twentieth-century critics into two camps: those who read the shield as an example of Augustan triumphalism and those of the so-called “Harvard School” who identify the darker symbols that connote a more pessimistic view of Roman imperium. Whereas critics such as Philip Hardie read the shield as a justification and prophecy of the Roman imperial universe, the Harvard School Virgilians interpret the shield, and the epic as a whole, as representative of the costs of empire both for victor and victim. For an example of the optimistic reading of the future of the Roman Empire in the Aeneid, see Philip Hardie, *Virgil’s Aeneid: Cosmos and Imperium* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), 336–76. For the pessimistic perspective of the Harvard School, see S. J. Harrison, “Some Views of the Aeneid in the Twentieth Century,” in *Oxford Readings in Virgil’s Aeneid*, ed. S. J. Harrison (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 1–20; Adam Parry, “The Two Voices of Virgil’s Aeneid,” *Arion* 2 (1963): 66–80; Wendell Clausen, “An Interpretation of the Aeneid,” *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 68
similarly complex *ekphrasis* of the imperial implications of the dragon on the Viscount's shield that incorporates both antithetical martial ethics and specific historical references. To understand the hermeneutic possibilities of this dragon symbol, we should examine the Viscount's shield within its historical context. In his attempt to date the poem, Benson reveals the poet's extraordinary knowledge of Italian geography. For confirmation, he turns to the chronicle of Adam of Usk, who was intimately familiar with Italian affairs in his exile in Rome. In his chronicle, Adam describes the traditional Visconti shield as one that depicts a snake devouring a man, which suggests that the *Morte*-poet's illustration of the Viscount of Rome's shield points to the Visconti family in Italy. In response to this possibility, Karl Lippe contends, "Although one can argue that 'snake' and 'dragon' are used indiscriminately, various reasons for such alterations can be suggested: either the author did not know the historically correct arms, he wanted to avoid an allusion which he felt was too pointed, or he wanted to ensure a particular interpretation, as is the case here. In this instance the charge functions as a symbol which means 'that our sovereign was to be destroyed.'" The dolphin in particular was commonly known in the fourteenth century as a heraldic sign of the Dauphin, the inheritor of the kingdom of France. By depicting the dolphin's death at the jaws of the dragon and interpreting this scene in the following line as a “seyne that oure soueraygne sulde be distroyede,” the shield, representing the dragon as a symbol of imperial destruction and the dolphin as a symbol of the victims of empire, then serves as a warning about the consequences of such assertions of sovereignty over France.

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53. Ibid., 100–101. Hamel even goes so far as to suggest that the Viscount's shield points to Edward III, who famously desired the French throne. Is this then the sole reason for the *Morte*-poet's decision to shift the dragon signifier from the Britons to the Romans? Hamel believes this to be the case because "[t]here would have been no particular reason for rejecting his chronicle [i.e. Galfridian] sources in favor of The Siege of Jerusalem," especially while Edward III was in power, since at the battle of Crecy in 1346 he bore the dragon-standard as a symbol of English kingship for the last time before the Tudors took it up a century later (53). She further suggests that the *Morte*-poet may have felt compelled to make a late revision to his poem in 1401 when Owen Glendower, possibly motivated by the Galfridian account, appropriated the sign of the dragon for his emblem. According to this logic, the fact that a rebel to English sovereignty had adopted the dragon for his own would have compelled the *Morte*-poet to turn to his source in the *Siege*, which attributed the dragon to the Romans. She concludes by claiming that this late revision "creates a certain ambiguity that further revision might have clarified." See *Morte Arthure*, 53–54. Ingham disputes Hamel's claim that the dragon-standard "fell into disuse" since there
Numerous interpretive possibilities defy attempts to fix a clear referent for the dragon, and when we consider the multiple uses of the dragon as a night terror, battle standard, and shield symbol, we can conclude that maintaining continuity and clarity was not a value of the Morte-poet by any stretch of the imagination. In fact, there are other compelling aspects of the Siege and its historiographic perspective that would have provided more than enough reason to reject the Galfridian sources. A literary device of the Siege that the Morte-poet clearly found attractive was the didactic representation of violence through symbols of destruction such as the dragon. In the Siege, the graphic descriptions of dismemberment, mutilation, and cannibalism obscure differences between the Jews and Romans, the besiegers and the besieged, so much so, that even the bodies of the prominent Roman leader Sir Sabyn and Emperor Vitellius end up in ditches (1202–4) and contaminated water (948) that serve as the final resting places for their Jewish victims. The Siege-poet’s thematic use of death as the great equalizer and graphic descriptions of the casualties of war as a means to terrify his audience affords him a corporeal space on which he can inscribe a warning about the inextricability of violence from imperialism. In the same way, the Morte-poet complicates binary oppositions such as Britain/Rome and sovereign/subject through graphic scenes of corporeal violence and signifying play.

For example, if we return to the description of the Viscount of Rome’s shield, we find an unsettling message for the one occupying the position of “sovereign.” The poet glosses the heraldic symbol, asserting that the dragon eating the dolphin is a sign that “oure soueraygne” should be destroyed. The immediate context gives no clue to whom “oure” refers, which licenses this signifier to attach to several possibilities at once. If we read it as self-reflexive, the sovereign could refer to Lucius; but if we read it in the pedagogic manner of a battle-standard, the symbol is a warning to Arthur. And if we read on, we find a conclusion that confounds a strong interpretation either way: “For thare es noghte bot dede thare the dragone es raissede.” In other words, the identification of the actual “soueraygne” is not relevant—rather it is the assertion of sovereignty that causes destruction. Since both Arthur and Lucius in different episodes throughout the poem represent the dragon, then neither can expect anything other than “death where the dragon is raised.” And to complicate the matter further, the dragon immediately performs as promised by presaging the violent death of the one who had most recently

was a continuous Welsh textual tradition that supported the Galfridian account of the dragon as a symbol that “was actively used by those contesting, rather than proclaiming, Plantagenet rule.” See Sovereign Fantasies, 97–98.
raised the symbol: the Viscount of Rome. Sir Valiant fulfills his vow from the beginning of the poem by piercing the Viscount with a lance

Abowne þe spayre a spanne  emange þe schortte rybbyss,
  That the splent and the spleen  on the spere lengez.
The blode sprente owtte and spredde  as þe horse spryngez,
  And he sproulez full spakely,  bot spekes he no more. (2060–63)

[a span above the waist between the short ribs so that the armor plate and the spleen hung on the spear. The blood spurts out and spreads as the horse springs, and he sprawls out swiftly, but he speaks no more.]

The forensic detail and description of the course of the lance through the short ribs and the spleen highlights the specifics of the Viscount’s destruction and the emphasis on the remains of the spleen lingering on the lance, the spraying blood, and convulsing body intensifies the pedagogic function of the act. On a literal level, the Welsh king Sir Valiant has avenged the wrongs of an old enemy, but the juxtaposition of the sign of the dragon and the extended account of the Viscount’s death, which surpasses even that of Lucius (2252–4), reveal the all-encompassing destruction that results from such assertions of sovereignty.

And if we explore the many historical valences of the “Viscount” in the fourteenth century, we can corroborate such a focus on comprehensive and indiscriminate violence. The attribution of the “dolphin” to the “Viscount” confounds historical identifications and reaffirms the Morte-poet’s predilection for signifying play. As noted above, the “soueraygne” as “dolphin” could refer to the future King of France, but if we examine further the significance of the textual reference to the “Viscount,” this sovereign could be the actual King of France, who was the father-in-law of Giangaleazzo Visconti, Sire of Milan. A “Viscount of Rome” did not exist in the fourteenth century, but the title, which was used throughout the Holy Roman Empire, was made famous by the Visconti family, whose name originated in the office of vice comes of the emperor.54 Since Giangaleazzo was also the son-in-law of the King of France, the dolphin on the Viscount’s shield gestures toward Giangaleazzo’s familial connections to French royalty.55 For the Morte-poet, such a

54. Benson, “The Date of the Alliterative Morte Arthure,” 26. According to the OED, the first English use is by John Trevisa in 1387, and the second is in Morte around 1400.
55. Neilson was the first to contend that the “Viscount” in the poem actually referred to the Visconti family, which explained the change in his name from “Viscount of Romé” (326) to “Viscount of Valence” (2047). According to Neilson, Valence actually refers to Vallenza, which was
dual identification of the “dolphin” is evidence of his historical awareness and insistence on the unreliability and self-destructive nature of such imperial signifiers. After all, if the Viscount of Rome refers to Giangaleazzo and the dolphin on his shield depicts his father-in-law, the macabre description of the Viscount of Rome’s death fulfills what his shield predicts: “es noghte bot dede thare the dragone es raissede.” The dolphin, the Viscount of Rome, Giangaleazzo, and the King of France are left dead in the dragon’s wake.

Such references to historical figures are compelling, but the poem eludes any definite identifications. As the above analysis demonstrates, such arguments are ultimately circuitous and not provable, which indicates that the Morte-poet is not interested in condemning or praising particular sovereigns. For instance, if we follow the Visconti lead even further, we can reaffirm the Morte-poet’s fetish for contradiction. Even though the Viscontis may have been held in high regard in the 1360s, when the English court was in the midst of marriage negotiations between their prince and a daughter of Galeazzo II, by the end of the fourteenth century, the Viscontis had fallen out of English favor. Giangaleazzo murdered his uncle Bernabó in 1385, an act which English writers, including Geoffrey Chaucer, emphatically condemned. The Monk of the Canterbury Tales records the deed this way:

Thy brother sone, that was thy double allye,
For he thy nevew was and sone-in-lawe,
Withinne his prisoun made thee to dye. (2403–5)

His familial treason soon became a martial treason of the kind that caused him to be seen as an Aeneas or Antenor who betrayed Troy. Froissart asserts that in 1396 Giangaleazzo played a significant role in the defeat of the Christian army at Nicopolis because he had informed his allies, the Turks, of the approach of the crusaders. Perplexed that Giangaleazzo “quéroit amour et

under Visconti control, and therefore Giangaleazzo Visconti was both the “Viscount of Rome” because he filled the office of vice comes for the Emperor and the “Viscount of Valence” because he was the lord of Vallenza. See “The Viscount of Rome in the Morte Arthure,” 652–53. George B. Parks contests this connection because he assumes that Morte was composed in the 1360s, noting that it would have been too early for a reference to Vallenza because it did not come under Visconti control until 1382. He further suggests that the reference “would hardly be tactful for the poet to refer to a contemporary ruling family as miscreants and rightfully slain by one of Arthur’s knights.” See “King Arthur and the Roads to Rome,” Journal of English and Germanic Philology 45 (1946): 164–70, at 165. Benson notes that if we assume an early composition of the Morte, the reference to the Viscount’s domain of “Viterbe to Venyse” (2025) would have also been anachronistic since it was not until 1399 that the Viscontis acquired Pisa and expanded their territory south to Viterbo, but if we date the poem to 1400, this identification presents no problems. See “The Date of the Alliterative Morte Arthure,” 27.
alliance à un roi mescréant” [would seek love or alliance with a miscreant king], Froissart suggests that he “Et tint l’opinion et erreur de son père, car ils disoient et maintenoient que jà ne adoreroient ni crerзоient (croiroient) en Dieu qu’ils pussent” [held the opinion and error of his father, declaring and maintaining that they should neither worship nor believe in God]. His treason had heretical implications that would have incited the ire of the small number of crusaders who had survived the massacre at Nicopolis. Even though Adam of Usk held the Visconti leadership in high regard, Benson suggests that Giangaleazzo’s perfidy would have likely inspired the Morte-poet’s dismemberment of the Viscount: “Our poet, whose attitude towards Lucius’ pagan allies indicates that he shared the crusading zeal that led to the disaster at Nicopolis, very likely shared Froissart’s opinion of the Visconti.” While it is appropriate to posit the Morte as well as the Siege as contributors to late fourteenth-century crusade polemic, the Viscount’s violent death is too symbolically complex to characterize as a fantasized act of Christian vengeance. As Benson admits, the negative perspective of the Viscontis was far from universal and it is not evident that the Morte-poet made any connection between the Sire of Milan and the Visconti. To account for this ambiguity, Benson suggests that the Morte-poet may have been “simply confused.” While Benson’s hypothesis is a possibility, the symbolic portability of the dragon, the evocative gloss of “oure soueraygne,” and the dissonant use of violence to portray the Viscount’s death combine to reveal a pattern of obscurity that denies clear distinctions between conquerors and victims and highlights the death incurred in such assertions of sovereignty. This “confusion” is then a fusing of historiographic voices embodied by the sign of the dragon: the dragon is both Roman and Briton, sovereign and victim, glorious and cruel.

THE BEARDED WIDOW

While the use of the heraldic symbol of the dragon publishes the exterior identity of empire, the Morte-poet’s treatment of Arthur provides readers with a conflicted figure who reflects the dangers of imperial self-fashioning. The Morte-poet’s characterization of Arthur as both tyrannical king and victimized widow defies the more nationalist and iconographic discourses that frequently accompany invocations of Britain’s greatest king. In fact, the

58. Ibid., 29.
Morte-poet’s use of violence and signifying play to blur imperial identities is never more apparent than it is in the figure of Arthur. His campaign against Rome calls Britain’s Roman and Trojan origins into question in a way consistent with the poem’s shifting signifiers. As Gayle Margherita suggests, “The problem of origins . . . is inextricable from the problem of signification.” The Morte-poet presents an inverted perspective on his alliterative predecessor’s translation of the figure Troy, whereby the besieged Trojans in the Destruction of Troy, who become the conquering Romans in the Siege of Jerusalem, now come under attack by their imperial descendants, the Britons. This enacts the Roman imperial signifier’s displacement of the Trojan origin, causing Rome once again to move to the forefront of British concern. Since this imperial impulse leads to the personal and political downfall of Arthur and his court, the translation of Troy is exceedingly self-conscious; the poem acknowledges that an assumption of Roman imperial values means the assumption of the defeated Troy.

This attack of Arthur’s inheritance becomes actualized through his defeat of the uncivilized, such as the Giant of Mount St. Michael. The Giant, whom Arthur’s philosophers had identified as the bear that would be destroyed by the dragon (825), is fashioned as a barbarous tyrant, who not only rapes and kills the Duchess of Brittany (978–80), but also demands a tribute of beards (1010–4) and feasts on Christian children (1025–8). When he confronts the Giant, it is in reaction to the act of cannibalism that Arthur most ardently expresses his “civilized” disgust:

Caffe of creatours all, thow cursede wriche,
Because that thow killide has þise cresmede childyre
Thow has marters made and broghte oute of lyfe
Þat here are brochede on bente and brittenede with thi handez,
I sall merke þe thy mede, as þou has myche serfede,
Thurghe myghte of Seynt Mighell þat þis monte ȝemes. (1064–69)

[Slave of all creatures, you cursed wretch, because you killed these baptized children and made martyrs and brought out of life those who are skewered here on the field and crushed with your hands, I shall deliver your reward, which you have much deserved, through the might of Saint Michel who reigns over this mount.]

After characterizing the killing and consumption of baptized children as an act of martyrdom, Arthur launches into an invective filled with the language of Christian vengeance. By claiming that he “sall merke þe thy mede,” Arthur claims that he will mete out providential justice in the manner of a crusade. The phrasing of his threat is especially reminiscent of the language in the *Siege* used by Vespasian and the Romans in their justification of the obliteration of the Jews (297–300) and use of the Vernicle (261–64), a relic that appears again in the opening Arthurian council in the *Morte* (309, 348, 386) as a holy object which confirms their vows of Roman conquest. In the second of these instances, Arthur is designated a “conqueror” who proudly proclaims both the nature and course of his imperial project:

> Thereto I make mine avow devoutly to Crist
> And to the holy vernacle, virtuous and noble;
> I shall at Lamass take leve to lenge at my large
> In Lorraine or Lumbardy, whether me leve thinkes;
> Merk unto Meloine and mine down the walles
> Both of Petersand and of Pis and of the Pount Tremble;
> In the Vale of Viterbo vitail my knights,
> Sujourn there six weekes and solace myselven,
> Send prikers to the pris town and plant there my sege
> But if they proffer me the pees by process of time. (347–56)

[To that I make my vow devoutly to Christ and to the holy vernicle, virtuous and noble; I shall on Lammas take leave to live at large in Lorain or Lombardy, wherever I wish; march into Milan and take down the walls of Petra Santa, Pisa, and Pontremoli; in the Vale of Viterbo I will victual my knights, sojourn there six weeks and refresh myself, send horsemen to the prized town, and plant there my siege if they fail to offer me peace in time.]

The combination of his expression of crusading rhetoric, swearing on a holy object, and his articulation of the course of his conquest (a series of sieges in France and Italy) creates an equivalency between the language of crusade and the language of empire. It is through the use of this same kind of crusading polemic that Arthur justifies his attack on the Giant as more than an assertion of imperial glory—it is a fulfillment of God’s will.

However, once the battle begins, the violence complicates simple oppositions of civilized/barbarian and Christian/Pagan. If we examine the language used to describe Arthur’s battle with the Giant, we find it difficult to distin-
guish the combatants in a way reminiscent of Beowulf’s grappling scuffle with Grendel:

Wrothely þai wrythyn and wrystill togedezr,
Welters and walowes ouer within þase buskez,
Tumbellez and turnes faste and terez þaire wedez;
Vntenderly fro þe toppe þai tiltin togedezr,
Whilom Arthure ouer and oþer-while vndyre,
Fro þe heghe of þe hyll vnto þe harde roche;
They feyne neuer are they fall at þe flode merkes. (1141–47)

[Angrily they writhe and wrestle together, welter and thrash out through the thornbush, swiftly tumble and turn and tear their clothes; roughly from the crest they struggle together, sometimes Arthur on top and other times under, from the height of the hill to the hard rock; they never cease until they fall to the seashore.]

Rather than delineate the specific attacks of each aggressor, the Morte-poet conflates their fates, referring to their tumbling as something they do “toged-erz” and summarizing the action with the indefinite “Whilom” to describe their rolling on the ground as equal foes.

The Morte-poet’s creation of combative equivalency in this scene differs markedly from his Galfridian sources, particular that of Laȝamon, whose battle includes no grappling or hand-to-hand combat. However, the description of the fight seems to be derived from Laȝamon’s version of the wrestling contest between Duke Corineus and the largest of Britain’s aborigines, the Giant Gogmagog. The battle is also performed for eyewitnesses and is described in a manner that obscures distinctions between each combatant.

Oft heo luten adun alse heo wolden liggen,
ofte heo up lupan alse heo fleon wolden.
Laðliche læches heo leiteden mid eȝan;
al was heora gristbatinge al swa wilde bares eȝe.
Whil heo weoren blake and ladliche iburste,
whil heo weoren ræde and hehliche wenden,
heora eiþer wilnada oðer to wælden
mid wijeleden, mid wrenchen, mid wunderliche strengðen. (944–49)\(^60\)

[Often they fell as if they would lie down, often they leaped up as if they would fly. They flashed loathly looks with their eyes; they gnashed their teeth like enraged wild boars. Awhile they were blackened and horribly bruised, awhile they were reddened and highly enraged. Each of them tried to conquer the other with trickery, strategy, or wondrous strength.]

Like the *Morte*-poet’s consistent use of “þai” in describing the grappling, Laȝamon uses “heo” to illustrate their bending and leaping and to conflate them into one fighter who gnashes his teeth like an angry boar—an animalistic quality that is also used to describe the Giant of St. Michael’s Mount. Not only is the structural use of “whil” consistent with the *Morte*’s “Whilom,” but also in each fight the winner has his ribs broken, a detail which strengthens the likelihood that the *Morte*-poet drew upon this scene in his own version of Arthur’s fight with the Giant. This relationship of dependence causes Chism to conclude, “By echoing the combat of Corineus and Gogmagog, the poet insularizes the Giant, allowing Arthur to redramatize the original conquest of Britain, the ferocious and enjoyable expulsion of its original inhabitants by a captain at least as outsized and appallingly vigorous as they.”

Chism astutely observes the “civilizing” effect of the *Morte*-poet’s use of this aboriginal extraction, but in characterizing the scene’s tone as “enjoyable,” she effaces its potency as an assertion of sovereignty belied by its proximity to scenes of martial violence.

The *Morte*-poet’s use of the Gogmagog episode is a strategic choice of source material because it precedes the invasion of Britain, which is described as an act of good-natured genocide. To the modern reader, such delight in the extermination of the native population is difficult to stomach—and apparently, the *Morte*-poet agreed, because he undercuts these scenes of fantasized violence both by blurring distinctions between conqueror/conquered and circumscribing the imperialism with a thematic critique that suppresses imperial enjoyment. To understand the subtlety of this interrogation, we ought to compare the *Morte*-poet’s perspective on corporeal violence with that of his Galfridian sources. After dismembering Gogmagog whereby “al þe feond tobarst” [the fiend completely burst] (962), Laȝamon callously comments on Corineus’ victory:

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And mid swilce ræde þas eotentes weoren deade.
Nu wes al þis lond iahned a Brutus hond.
Pa hæfde pa Troinische men overcomen heora teonen,
Pa weoren heo bliðe on heora breost-þonke. (966–69)
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[And with such counsel these giants were killed. Now all of this land was in Brutus’ hands. Thus had the Trojan men overcome their sufferings. They were overjoyed in their hearts.]

In this instance Corineus’ violent display makes the Trojans feel “bliðe,” a clear indication that they not only sanction the killing of the natives, but also enjoy the results of their extermination. The enthusiasm with which the narrative proceeds in its subsequent account of the settlement of Albion, a division of the new kingdoms, and the establishment of the New Troy (970–1018), suggests no discernible effect on the fates of the victims. This enjoyment of imperial violence is distinctively Galfridian in nature, especially when contextualized with Geoffrey’s earlier appraisal of Corineus’ martial prowess. In the midst of the battle with the Aquitanians, Corineus displays his expertise in wielding a battle axe and his adherence to the Trojan cause by successive acts of dismemberment: “Huic brachium cum manu amputat, illi scapulas a corpore separat. Alii caput ictu truncat, alteri crura dissecat. . . . Quod Brutus aspiciens motus amore uiri cucurit cum una turma ut ei auxilium subuectaret” [Of one he amputates the arm with the hand, of another he separates the shoulders from the body, of another he cuts off the head with one blow, of another he dissects the legs . . . Brutus, beholding this, moved with love of the man, hurried forward with a company to transport aid to him] (11). Through a volley of Latin verbs of mutilation (amputat, separat, truncat, dissecat), Geoffrey describes the grotesque fate of Corineus’ victims and provides the callous perspective of Brutus on these acts of violence. Brutus is “moved with love of the man” after witnessing Corineus’ ability to mutilate his foes, which reflects the sadistic sensibilities of Geoffrey’s invading Trojans. In fact, the Galfridian theorization of the origin of the British sovereignty is predicated upon such fantasized violence.

Such is the cruel logic of the *translatio imperii*, whereby native inhabitants of desirable land are callously extricated and replaced by a new gens, reaffirming the common conception of a natural cycle of destruction and rebirth that represented the historical progress from Troy to Rome to Britain. If we turn to Gerald of Wales’ account of the thirteenth-century English invasion of Wales in his *Descriptio Kambriae*, we find a similar articulation of such a transfer of power through the victimized voice of a Welsh soldier. In response to Henry II’s questioning of the Welsh resolve in the

face of an English invasion, the soldier claims that Wales will be subdued in the same way that the Welsh ancestors, the Trojans, had exterminated the natives upon their arrival to Britain. Yet, in defense of his kinsmen, the soldier adds, “Nec alia, ut arbitror, gens quam haec Kambrica, aliae lingua, in die districti examinis coram Judice supreme . . . pro hoc terrarum angulo respondebit” [I do not believe that on the Day of Direst Judgment in the presence of the Supreme Judge a race other than the Welsh, or any other language, will answer for this corner of the earth] (2.8,10). In the manner evocative of Nietzschean slave morality, the Welsh receive divine possession of the land through their earthly subjugation—secular history runs its recurrent course accumulating losses that are redeemed in the course of salvation history. As Jeffrey Jerome Cohen points out, the mixture of imperial indifference and eschatological optimism may reflect Gerald’s own hybrid nature as both Welsh and not Welsh. As the progeny of a mixed marriage between a Norman knight and Welsh woman, Gerald may be using the words of the Welsh soldier to reconcile “all of his identity ambivalence by crossbreeding Christian futurity (the Last Judgment) to secular history (the Welsh as bearers of Trojan imperium).” This hybrid mindset seeks solace in the after-life and perceives martial violence as integral to the translation of imperial power. Any traceable indifference and ambivalence about such assertions of sovereignty are overcome by a fetishized imperial thirst that can only be quenched by blood. Geoffrey’s giants are not permitted any nativistic expression of territorial possession—we do not hear their voice or any sympathy for their plight, because such complications would deconstruct a solid basis for any optimistic conception of a unified English nation. This attenuation of imperial ambivalence leads to national fantasies, which understood psychoanalytically become what Kathy Lavezzo calls “a technique of articulating impossible individual psychic desires, whether for wholeness and loving camaraderie or for a grand past punctuated by idealized heroes such as Arthur.”


65. See Kathy Lavezzo’s editorial introduction to Imagining a Medieval English Nation (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), xv.
In great contrast to this, the *Morte*-poet interrogates such national fantasies and its contiguous graphic accounts of dismemberment, sterilizing any enjoyment that might infect British readers eager to applaud the violence of their imperial predecessors. The detailed descriptions of corporeal destruction also abound in the *Morte*, but they are contextualized with thematic commentary that mollifies any delight in the defeat of enemies and accentuates the inherent horrors of imperialism and war. Any enthusiasm in the destruction of imperial victims is quickly redirected into other martial activities that reflect the unethical behavior of the conquerors. For instance, after the drawn out battle and decapitation of the Giant of St. Michael’s Mount, Arthur rejoices in his victory and then proceeds to instruct his knights to plunder the Giant’s treasure (1190), which a Templar knight had previously described as more extensive “[t]han in Troye was . . . þat tym þat it was wonn” [than was in Troy . . . the time that it was won] (887). This pillaging of the Giant’s goods then momentarily posits Arthur and his knights as crafty Greeks and confuses their identity as Trojan progeny. Instead of praising Arthur’s fulfillment of God’s will in defeating the heathen giant, Arthur’s knights become greedy imperialists, a thematic choice that undercuts their chivalric piety and identifies Arthur with the avaricious tyrant he has just destroyed.

The demise of the Giant is followed by the killing of another tyrant, Lucius, which leads first to plunder and excessive violence and later to the “barbarization” of Arthur and his knights. After Lucius’ death, Arthur’s knights slaughter thousands (2274) and “tuke whate them likes” [take what they liked] (2282) from the dead bodies that are strewn throughout the battlefield. Then, in an act designed to shame the surviving Romans, Arthur calls forth barbers to shave the two senators who will accompany the coffins back to Rome, which serve as the tribute previously demanded from the Britons (2330–45). This ritual humiliation of the conquered foe is not only an inherited *topos* from the *Siege* (376), but also a gesture that identifies Arthur with the Giant of St. Michael’s Mount, who had previously collected beards of subjugated kings as tribute. The old widow, who set the scene of the battle with the “tyraunnt” (991) Giant, even chastises Arthur, saying,

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Bot thowe hafe broghte þat berde,  bowne the no forthire,
For it es butelese bale   thowe biddez oghte ells. (1013–4)
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[Unless you have brought the beard, go no further. For it is a fruitless endeavor if you have brought anything else.]
To emphasize the barbarous nature of the Giant, she also juxtaposes his means of tribute with his food of choice, “seuen knaue childre / Choppid in a chargour of chalke-whytt syluer” [seven male children chopped in a charger of chalk-white silver] (1025–26). Despite his subsequent condemnation of the Giant’s cannibalism and tyranny, Arthur in his victory assumes the trappings of this “savage” by claiming his kirtle of beards and club (1191) and later asserts his sovereignty over the Romans in the same way, shaving the senators, thereby blurring any fine moral distinction between the Giant’s sacrifice and consumption of children and Arthur’s subjugation of Rome and extermination of Mordred’s line. Within the context of Arthur’s later enthusiastic imperialism in the poem, his extensive and equalized grappling with the Giant is not the typological assertion of the civilized over the barbarian and instead is an affirmation of the equivalency between the foes that will gradually come to tragic fruition. Even though Arthur does not literally engage in the cannibalism of the Giant, he is complicit in such horrific consumption.

The death of Gawain is the most moving example of the inseparability of sovereignty and corporeal violence in the poem because this scene is described as a moment of hyperbolic and symbolic loss. Through a series of asynchronous references, Arthur transforms into a weeping widow, not in any attempt to redeem or distinguish Gawain’s death from any previous victims of empire, but rather to emphasize the extent of the damage that has been incurred from Arthur’s campaign. As the following analysis of Arthur’s mourning of Gawain demonstrates, the poem reflects little concern with Arthur’s own “ambitions” and confounds meaningful distinctions between victims that would set up a hierarchy of corporeal value. In discovering the slain Gawain, Arthur begins his lament and then swoons over the bloodied body:

Than swetes the swete kynge and in a swoun fallis,
Swafres vp swifely, and swetly hym kisses
Til his burliche berde was blody berown,
Alls he had bestes birtenede and broghte owt of life. (3969–72)

[Then the stricken king sinks and falls into a swoon, staggers up swiftly, and kisses him sweetly until his burly beard is covered in blood, as if he had killed and slaughtered beasts.]

This touching embrace serves not only as a striking image that challenges exclusive categories of masculinity and femininity within Arthur’s chival-
ric community, but also as a powerful conflation of the identities of conqueror and victim. Arthur’s slathering of his beard with Gawain’s blood is especially discomfiting because it is both an intimate act of compassion and a physical symbol of imperial self-destruction. This latter connotation is articulated through the image of the bloodied beard since the beard had previously been established as a sign of sovereignty by both the Giant of St. Michael’s Mount’s tributary exaction and Arthur’s humiliation of the Roman senators. Within this context, Arthur’s absorption of Gawain’s blood reflects the necessary losses that are incurred through assertions of imperial power.

Openly slathering Gawain’s blood on his beard does not call his masculinity into question, but rather adds a marker to a symbol of empire, the sovereign’s beard, which more accurately reflects the cruel nature of empire building and establishes the sovereign as one of the victims of imperial desires. Arthur’s identification with such victims reaches a climax when he begins to grieve like a widow. In fact, the scene subtly connects Gawain’s bloodied body to Arthur and the other victims of imperial violence, such as the duchess of Brittany, the christened children, and Mordred’s progeny. Within this context, Arthur’s excessive mourning identifies him with the old widow who mourns over the corpse of the duchess, “wryngande hir handez” [wringing her hands] (950). His knights also recognize this transformation in their king and castigate him as one who had been emasculated emotionally in the same manner that the Giant had been physically:

It es no wirchipe iwysse, to wryng thyn hondes;
To wepe als a woman it es no witt holden.
Be knyghtly of contenaunce, als a kyng scholde. (3977–79)

[It is surely not honorable to wring your hands; it is not proper to weep as a woman. Be knightly of countenance, is a king should.]

In beseeching Arthur to stop wringing his hands like a woman, they challenge his masculinity and desperately ask him to reassume his patriarchal position as king. Yet, as similar scenes in alliterative romance demonstrate, I would argue that this critique of gender should not to be read as “[w]omen

66. It should be noted that the Morte is not unique in this respect because, as E. Jane Burns has shown, “masculinity and femininity are not impermeable or mutually exclusive categories” within chivalric culture. See “Refashioning Courtly Love: Lancelot as Ladies’ Man or Lady/Man?” in Constructing Medieval Sexuality, eds. Karma Lochrie, Peggy McCracken, and James A. Schultz (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 111–34, at 127.
weep excessively, while kings bear their grief with ‘knightly’ demeanor.”67 In fact, such episodes of immoderate male chivalric mourning are ubiquitous in the Destruction; for example, Paris weeps so abundantly at the news of the deaths of his brothers that tears burst out through the holes of his helmet (10661–62).68 Such scenes of grief do not demean masculine knightly identity, but rather blur the line between conqueror and victim and transform victimization into further self-destruction. Rather than maintain a passive posture after this loss, Arthur vows vengeance and returns to battle with a renewed vigor that comes to a climax in his battle with Mordred. After suffering the mortal wound from Mordred, Arthur laments:

I may helpless one hethe  house be myn one,
  Alls a wafull wedowe  þat wanttes hir beryn;
I may werye and wepe  and wrynge myn handys,
For wytt and my wirchipe  awaye es for euer! (4284–87)

[I may be helpless in my house on the heath, like a woeful widow who wants her husband; I may worry and weep and wring my hands, for truly my honor is lost for ever!]

Confirming his identity as a widow, he expresses the traumatic loss of his brotherhood of knights in the manner that a woman might desire the companionship of her dead husband. By openly wringing his hands, he displays his candid acceptance of the role his knights had criticized him for assuming in bewailing the loss of Gawain and engages in the same ritual of mourning that he observed the foster mother of the duchess of Brittany perform with such poignancy before his battle with Giant of St. Michael’s Mount.

Despite his willingness to identify himself with his victims, Arthur’s widowing is not a moment of tragic pathos and recognition of his imperial overreaching. Ingham suggests that Arthur’s assumption of the widowed identity

67. Ingham, Sovereign Fantasies, 103. She suggests that the knights’ insistence on modest mourning is also evident in the figure of Theseus in Chaucer’s Knight’s Tale. See her article “Homosociality and Creative Masculinity in the Knight’s Tale,” in Masculinities in Chaucer: Approaches to Maleness in the Canterbury Tales and Troilus and Criseye, ed. Peter G. Beidler (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1998), 23–35. In opposition to this viewpoint, Ruth Mazo Karras contends, “Even if Arthur’s grief is seen as excessive, however, it is not so unusual, and it in no way disqualifies him as a king or leader; the audience is not necessarily meant to agree that he has behaved effeminately.” See From Boys to Men: Formations of Masculinity in Late Medieval Europe (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), 66.

redeems his earlier tyranny in his savage Italian campaign, but there is little indication in the poem that such redemption is possible. In fact, as Ingham also notes, his reaffirmation in the end of the poem of his widowed state both amplifies the castigation of his knights over the body of Gawain, and recalls his earlier deeds of destruction in Tuscany, when his cruelty as conqueror reaches a climax.  

Into Tuskane he tournez, when þus wele tymede,  
Take townnes full tyte with towrres full heghe;  
Walles he welte down, wondyd knyghtez,  
Towrres he turnes and turmentez þe pople;  
Wroghte wedewes full wlonke, wrotherayle synges,  
Ofte wery and wepe and wryngen theire handis,  
And all he wastys with werre thare he awaye rydez—  
Thaire welthes and theire wonny[n]ges wandrethe he wrogthe! (3150–57)

[Into Tuscany he turns, and thus he fares well, rapidly takes towns with high towers; he tears down walls, wounds knights, topples towers and torment their inhabitants, makes widows sing with misery, often to curse and weep and wring their hands, and wherever he rides he wastes with war—he turns their wealth and their winnings into sorrow!]

Through the reapplication and layering of alliterative tags, the Morte-poet subtly juxtaposes the identities of the bear and Giant of St. Michael who “turmentez þe pople” (824, 842) with the multiple widows throughout the poem who “wryngen theire handis” (950, 3977). Arthur dynamically assumes the respective positions of the tormenting tyrant and the weeping widow throughout the poem to blur distinctions of imperial identities and defy any discrete moment of Aristotelian peripeteia. Critics have largely accepted Arthur’s destruction of Tuscany as the turning point in the poem, in which Arthur makes the transition from honorable warrior to cruel conqueror, but as the language indicates, the Morte-poet challenges his readers to make retrospective connections between seemingly irreconcilable characterizations throughout the poem. The expense of war and imperialism is made manifest not only at the end of the poem when Arthur unabashedly behaves like a tyrant. It is evident throughout the poem through slippery signification, graphic violence, extensive scenes of mourning, and identity crises. Arthur is just as much tyrant and widow as he is king.

69. Ingham, Sovereign Fantasies, 105.
HERALDIC HISTORIOGRAPHY

From beards to hands to blood, these bodily markers become chivalric devices that contribute to the Morte-poet’s heraldic rewriting of British history. In highlighting the sacrifice of the innocent, these corporeal signs join the symbol of the dragon within the Morte-poet’s heraldic program of translating tyranny. This heraldic hermeneutic consequently evacuates the authority of coats of arms and recitations of lineage in scenes of battle. As the maculation of Gawain’s arms makes clear, heraldic symbols fail to legitimize the nobility of their bearers. This interpretive obscurity defies what Smith has noted as the basic function of heraldry, which was to distinguish aristocratic households, a practice that originated in ancient Troy. According to a household treatise in Cambridge University Library MS Dd.10.52, heraldic symbols began to flourish because “ther was so huge a multitude of people that oon might not be knowe from a nothir.”\(^\text{70}\) If knights could trace their lineage back to Troy through one of these original symbols, their noble heritage could be reasonably assured. A number of contemporary alliterative poems remind their aristocratic readers of this ancient origin, including Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, Wynmere and Wastoure, St. Erkenwald, and especially The Destruction of Troy. The Morte is no exception. Trojan lineage is invoked in multiple ways throughout the poem, from the heraldic assertions of Sir Priamus and Sir Clegis to the dream of the Nine Worthies and the epilogue to Arthur’s death. Yet, in each case, the Morte-poet reinterprets these heraldic devices, transforming them into signs of death and destruction rather than certificates of nobility and authority.

Gawain’s death is the climax of the poem’s concern with corporeal violence and the translation of empire. Through its subtle combination of these themes, this episode reflects upon a previous scene that has garnered extensive critical attention: Arthur’s dream of the Wheel of Fortune and the Nine Worthies. In particular, Arthur’s repeated reference to Gawain as “sakles” or “innocent” (3986, 3989–92) echoes the words of the philosopher who interprets the dream: “Thow has schedde myche blode and schalkes distroyede, / Sakeles, in cirquytrie, in sere kynges landis [Through pride you have shed much blood and killed innocent people in many kings’ lands] (3398–89). Given his explicit condemnation of Arthur’s shedding of blood and killing of people, it is no mere accident that this is the only other instance of the form of “sakles” in the poem. However, this reference to Gawain as “sakles” does

\(^{70}\) I rely on Smith’s reading of this household treatise, Cambridge University Library, MS Dd.10.52, fol. I, in Arts of Possession, 63.
not exonerate Gawain from his complicity in the deaths of the innocent. In fact, if we turn to a later alliterative romance, the *Awyntyrs off Arthure*, we see that Gawain cannot negate his culpability in what Matthews calls “the sin of imperial war.” The ghost that reproves King Arthur for his tyranny speaks this indictment directly to Gawain, who shares Arthur’s fate of death on the battlefield after Fortune's Wheel turns (261–99). Within the martial logic of these alliterative romances, the victims of imperial violence are explicitly equalized—no one is accorded special status.

To understand the destructive impetus of what I call the *Morte*-poet’s “heraldic historiography,” we should turn first to the dream of the Wheel of Fortune and Nine Worthies, an episode that establishes Arthur’s imperial lineage. We hear the accounts of not only other doomed conquerors such as Alexander and Julius Caesar, but also Hector of Troy, the glorious ancestor of Arthur. The basic message is the same: those who create empires will suffer from the imperial cycle of violence. Conquerors will experience the fate of the conquered. Hector holds special significance because of his central role in the contemporary alliterative romance, the *Destruction*, a text that emphasizes his death as much as his life. It is then no surprise to readers of

73. As Patterson suggests, Fortune’s wheel “expresses a historiography of recurrence,” whereby Alexander’s example is incessantly repeated in figures both pagan and Christian in a way that does not privilege one victim of imperial desire over another. See Negotiating the Past, 225.
74. While the Galfridian treatment of Trojan historiography upholds Hector as a great king and virtuous warrior, the Hector who takes center stage in this romance is a corpse that Priam desperately attempts to keep living for Trojan eyewitnesses through a complex method of preservation that incessantly pours balm into his head (8726–32). This macabre machinery ultimately fails to preserve Troy, a result which fashions Hector instead as the ultimate casualty of war and symbol of the destruction that will plague Trojan progeny. Hamel observes that Hector’s self-description in the *Morte* departs from the popular tradition of viewing him as a chivalrous knight. Instead, Hector identifies himself as a courtly lover: “On that see hafe I sitten als souerayne and lorde, / And ladys me louede to lappe in theyre armes” [On that seat have I sat as sovereign and lord, and ladies loved to twine me in their arms] (3291–92). The *Morte*-poet likely drew this description from a misreading of the *Destruction*’s illustration of Priam’s sons, in which Hector is lauded for both his martial prowess and his popularity among “ledys”: “Was neuer red in no Romance of Renke vpon erthe / So well louty with all ledys þat in his lond dwelt” [There was never read in any romance of a man upon the earth, so well loved by all the people that dwelt in his land] (3897–98). Since “ledys” is a translation of Guido’s “regnicolis” (86) or “dwellers in his kingdom,” it is probable that Clerk did not have “ladies” in mind. See Guido de Columnis, *Historia Destructionis Troiae*, ed. Nathaniel Edward Griffin (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Mediaeval Academy of America, 1936). The reference to “Romance” may have led the *Morte*-poet to misconstrue the context as courtly and substitute the “a” for “e” in “ledys,” a common misreading of a cursive hand. Since no other illustration of Hector as a womanizer exists, this error in reading suggests that all of the formulaic parallels between the battle scenes of each poem may not solely originate in a common word hoard and may be evidence of a relationship
alliterative romance that Hector is one of the nine who laments his fall: “And nowe my lordchippes are loste and laide foreuer!” [And now my lordships are lost and laid low forever!] (3293). Even though this comment parallels that of the other eight conquerors, his status would have been of particular interest for an English reading audience, who considered him an historical ancestor. In fact, his position on the wheel encourages readers to view this scene within the context of his previous appearances in the poem, in which he is invoked as a proof of nobility.

For early fifteenth-century readers, an invocation of Trojan heritage was a compelling assertion of gentility, but the Morte-poet uses it as a marker of doom. The most striking of these instances occurs during the foraging expedition, often characterized as a romance subplot, in which Gawain meets a foreign knight named Priamus. A fierce battle ensues and Gawain emerges victorious, but not without suffering a grave wound. In the conventional heraldic manner, the strange warrior identifies his noble lineage through his father, who he asserts “es of Alexandire blode, ouerlynge of kynges, / The vncle of his ayele sir Ector of Troye” [is of Alexander’s blood, overlord of kings, the uncle of his heir, Sir Hector of Troy] (2603–4). This claim establishes a common bloodline between the combatants and highlights the reflexive nature of the figure of Hector and the name “Priamus”—it is only natural that his name evokes Hector’s father Priam. By expressing his lineage in a way that a Priam is a successor of Hector rather than vice versa, the reader is invited to reverse the future-driven track of genealogy and delve into the classical past. As a representative of the ancient Trojan world, Priamus’ alterity remains intact, allowing him to speak a lesson that could have been expressed by none other than Hector himself:

of dependence. A separate oral tradition may have fostered the image of a licentious Hector, but given the Morte-poet’s tendency to utilize multiple sources at once, particularly in this scene where he combines the trope of the Nine Worthies with the Boethian Wheel of Fortune, it is more likely that he drew from the Destruction extensively to illustrate the horrors of war and capitalize upon the didactic power of the image of Britain’s glorious ancestor. See Hamel, Morte Arthure, 51–52. For more on the Morte-poet’s unique use of Fortuna and the Nine Worthies, see Anke Janssen, “The Dream of the Wheel of Fortune,” in The Alliterative Morte Arthure: A Reassessment of the Poem, 140–52; Finlayson, Morte Arthure, 13.

I was so hawtayne of herte whills I at home lengede,  
I helde nane my hippe-heghte vndire heuen ryche;  
Fortho was I sente hedire with seuen score knyghttez  
To asaye of this were, be sente of my fadire.  
And I am for cyrqwitrye schamely supprisede,  
And be aw[n]tire of armes owtrayede fore euere. (2612–17)

[I was so haughty of heart while I lingered at home, I held none as tall as my hip under rich heaven; forth was I sent hither with seventy knights to experience this war, by assent of my father. And I am for pride shamefully captured, and by adventure of arms disgraced forever.]

His pride and insistence on performing chivalric deeds has led to his shame and grievous wound at the hands of an unknown knight. This speech serves as a cautionary tale about such a desire for the possession of “price cetees” (2609), “tresour,” and “londes” (2610), but unfortunately its message does not translate into Gawain’s chivalric sensibility. Instead he chooses to test Priamus’ nobility by calling himself a “knafe” (2621) of Arthur’s entourage, a statement that inspires Priamus’ exclamation of disbelief:

Giffe his knaves be syche, his knyghttez are noble!  
There is no kynge vndire Criste may kempe with hym on;  
He will be Alexander ayre, that all þe erthe lowttede,  
Abillere þan euer was sir Ector of Troye! (2632–35)

[If his knaves be such, his knights are noble! There is no king under Christ who may battle with him; he will be Alexander’s heir, to whom all the world bowed, abler than ever was Sir Hector of Troy!]

Once again he invokes the figure of Hector, but this time, to establish the imperial inheritance of Arthur and assert martial kinship between him and the Round Table. Priamus juxtaposes “knaves” with “knyghttez” and “kynge,” a triangular syntax that grammatically lessens the degrees of difference between each. Since the accepted hierarchy of the Round Table and fealty between knights and lords defy such an image of equality, Priamus calls Gawain’s bluff, but the trick reminds the reader of the signifying slippage that has occurred throughout the poem—Gawain maintains the oppositional identities of enemy/kinsman and knave/knight just as the dragon is both British/Roman and Arthur is both tyrant/victim.
Priamus’ articulation of his heritage establishes common blood and martial intentions with Gawain, an intimacy that is paradoxically obscured and intensified by their mutual wounding. In addition to an emphasis on the violence of this act, the illustration evinces a fetish for armorial bearings and details the destruction of the shoulder piece that is decorated with his coat of arms. Priamus’ sword not only damages this genealogical sign, but also cuts into the vein that spurs blood that further obscures it: “his vesturis ryche / With the valyant blood was verrede all ouer” [his rich clothes were spotted all over with the valiant blood] (2572–73). This blow causes Gawain’s bodily fluid to efface the symbol of his noble Trojan heritage and equalize him with his wounded foe, whose liver could be observed “with þe lyghte of þe sonne” [with the light of the sun] (2561) after receiving a similar slash from Gawain’s sword. For both knights, their mutilated bodies now become the main concern—their armor and their lineage have failed them. Their subsequent conversation in which they discover shared kinship with Hector leads to a revival scene, whereby Priamus assumes the role of his namesake and uses a magical fluid to resurrect their wounded bodies (2686–716). No sooner than Gawain and Priamus are revived, they are propelled into another battle in which they fight on the same side (2990, 2997). This marital violence crescendos throughout Arthur’s assault on Metz and Como until it reaches a climax in Tuscany, the moment when Arthur achieves the height of his tyranny. The revivals of Gawain and Priamus reinvigorate the British host, but they employ their new power to pillage towns, tear down city walls, “turmentez þe pople,” and cause widows to wring their hands in anguish (3151–55), language that invokes the destructive power of the dragon. Such actions suggest that these Trojan signifiers beget further violence more than they establish nobility.

In fact, the recitation of lineage as a marker of virtue and prowess rings hollow in this poem from beginning to end. For instance, early in the poem when Sir Clegis confronts the King of Syria in battle, the King refuses to engage in battle until Clegis presents his right to bear arms. Insulted, Clegis responds angrily:

I trowe it be for cowardys thow carpes thes wordez!
Myn armez are of ancestreye enueryde with lordez
And has in banere bene borne sen sir Brut tyme,
At the cité of Troye, þat tyme was ensegede,
Ofte seen in asawtte with certayne knyghttz,
For þe Brute broghte vs and all oure bolde elders
To Bretayne þe braddere within chippe-burdez. (1693–99)
[I believe it is for cowardice you say these words! My arms of ancestry are acknowledged by lords and have been borne in banners since Sir Brutus’ time, at the city of Troy, that time it was besieged, often seen in assault by certain knights, from which Brutus brought us and all our bold elders to Great Britain aboard ships.]

And despite his eloquent account of his ancestry back to Troy, the origin of such heraldry, his justification of nobility falls on deaf ears. The King of Syria retorts, “saye what þe lykez” [say what you like] (1700) and resolves to fight Clegis’ forces in mass rather than engage him in a tournament-style battle. Within the historical context of the Scrope Grosvenor trial of 1386 in which such contestations for arms were commonplace, the King of Syria’s response demonstrates skepticism of such imperial self-fashionings and claims to Trojan origins. Troy has clearly lost the legitimizing power that provides the structure of Galfridian historiography and approves the creation of British sovereignty out of the ashes of Rome. Trojan blood is no longer an unquestionable marker of virtue—rather it is a shameful inheritance.

From the enigmatic sign of the dragon to the assertions of Trojan heritage, the heraldic claims to nobility and sovereignty in the poem are consistently reconceived as markers of death. Even though the translatio imperii ultimately fails and Arthur’s pursuit of his Roman inheritance places him as one of many other fallen conquerors such as Julius Caesar, the invocation of lineage retains an influential signifying power. Arthur’s tyranny is enhanced through this heraldic recognition that his potential destruction of Rome becomes a metaphorical act of patricidal violence against his own bloodline. During one of the most moving moments in the poem, Arthur mourns Gawain’s death as a corporeal expression of the damage inflicted by the translatio imperii. This point is exemplified by the fact that at the same time that Arthur’s knights view him as a passively weeping widow, Arthur perceives himself as a complicit in the death of Gawain and his royal line. In response to their request that he cease his mourning, Arthur refuses and instead engages in a rhetorical dismemberment of his own body: “For

76. Chism further suggests that “[t]his unreliability of the signs that designate nobility infects the poem as a whole.” See Alliterative Revivals, 208–9. For extended discussion of the scene’s socioeconomic and chivalric implications, see Heng, Empire of Magic, 128–46. For the scene’s allusion to the Scrope-Grosvenor trial, see M. H. Keen, “Chaucer’s Knight, the English Aristocracy, and the Crusade,” in English Court and Culture in the Later Middle Ages, eds. V. J. Scattergood and J. W. Sherborne (London: Duckworth, 1983), 45–62.
blod’ said the bolde kynge ‘blynn sall I neuer, / Or my brayne to-briste or my breste oþer!’” [“For blood,” said the bold king, “cease shall I never, until my brain or my breast completely burst”] (3981–82). Arthur’s unrestrained mourning is his only vehicle to escape the bodily fragmentation, which he perceives as the consequence of his complicity in the violence that has slain his kinsman and innocent victims. The bloodied sovereign’s characterization of his kinsman’s blood as “ryall rede” (3990) articulates a devastating consequence of his death: the end of a royal line. Arthur combines the unsettling image of his bloodied beard with an imagined dismemberment of his body to express the damage his sovereign fantasies have incurred. Through this ritual of mourning, Arthur’s physical and political bodies coalesce into one indivisible entity—the destruction of one entails the destruction of the other. Such an image supports Agamben’s reading of the biopolitical nature of the sovereign body. In defiance of Kantorowicz’s distinction of the king’s two bodies, Agamben suggests that the private and public corpores of the king are inseparable.77 The sovereign body is envisioned as physically reacting to a disruption in the translatio imperii. For Arthur, Gawain’s death leaves his line to the progeny of his “other” nephew Mordred, the “Malebranche,” a genealogical consequence that exemplifies the fragmentation of Arthur’s political realm.

As the end of the poem confirms, Arthur’s identity as sovereign cannot be interpreted solely with a messianic hermeneutic. After Arthur orders the extermination of Mordred’s line, Arthur’s body is not translated to the Isle of Avalon—instead he is entombed in a sepulcher before the eyes of grieving witnesses (4332–41). No ethereal transfer of the body politic to future generations is implied or allowed—instead the poem ends with a hollow evocation of his Trojan ancestors (4342–46):

Thus endis Kyng Arthure, as auctors alleges,
That was of Ectores blude, the kynge son of Troye,
And of sir Pryamous the prynce, praysede in erthe:
Fro thethen broghte the Bretons all his bolde eldyrs
Into Bretayne the brode, as þe Bruytte tellys. (4342–46)

77.  Agamben, Homo Sacer, 184; Kantorowicz, The King’s Two Bodies. For a Lacanian reading of this scene, see Ingham, Sovereign Fantasies, 95. She argues that the imagined dismemberment of the body is “aggressive disintegration” and a means of refiguring “aggressive intentions.” See Jacques Lacan, Écrits: A Selection, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Norton, 1982), 4, 11. The Morte-poet may have even appropriated such a fusion of the state of the empire with the sovereign body from the Siege, in which the biopolitical connection is literalized in Titus’ “crippling” reaction to the news of his father Vespasian’s ascendance to the imperial throne (1027–33).
[Thus ends King Arthur, as authorities assert, who was of Hector’s blood, the son of the King of Troy, and of Sir Priam the prince, praised on earth. From thence the Britons brought all of his bold elders into Britain the broad, as the Brut tells.]

The juxtaposition of Arthur’s Trojan heritage with his burial encourages readers to view this heraldic expression of lineage more as a lamentable necrology than the establishment of a future line. A sense of wistful resignation permeates this scene since Arthur has ended his life not as a king to be praised, but as a tyrant who had become a victim of the imperial fantasy that “be Bruyte tellys” [the Brut tells] (4346). As is the case of many of the signifiers throughout this poem, the reference to the “Bruyte” is not to be understood simply as Geoffrey’s Historia. While it certainly reaffirms its Galfridian source, the tragic ending of the poem encourages readers to grapple with the many histories of Brutus and Troy that express doubt about imperial glory. As I have suggested, this ambivalence can be tracked both through invocations of Trojan origins and the heraldic violence that the Morte-poet recasts for chilling effect. As a conduit of antithetical historiographic discourses, the Morte demonstrates that assertions of sovereignty, while temporarily glorious, are inextricable from the violence that is inflicted upon victim and aggressor. Rather than delight in the destruction Arthur inflicts upon his Roman imperial predecessor, the Morte-poet presents to his British contemporaries a stark representation of empire. The Morte-poet justifies Guido’s fear. Good cannot emerge from the translation of Troy. Like Arthur’s body, it should remain dead and buried.