

“Caliburnus”

# *Elements of a Nation in Pre-Tudor*

## *England:*

Nation-building with Romance, Print, and *Le Morte*

*Darthur*

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## Introduction

The place of King Arthur in the English literary landscape and folklore is unquestionable. Despite centuries long arguments about his historical origins, and whether he even had historical origins to begin with, he is seen as a de facto English figure. And a quite popular one at that. This is evident in the wide variety of contemporary movies, tv shows, comic books, even video games. The nineteenth century also saw an influx of the Arthuriana, such as the works of the Pre-Raphaelites or Tennyson. It is hard to imagine then, that there was even a time in which he was not a ubiquitous figure. Yet, as Cooper writes, Arthur's presence in the modern literary scene witnessed from the nineteenth century and onward is "more a matter of revival than survival" (*English Romance in Time* 23).

It may be even harder to imagine that there was a time in which the majority of the stories of the exploits of King Arthur, be it 'historical' or literary, were not written in English. They were mostly written in Latin or French. Therefore, a significant number of early Arthurian material had to be 'englished'; translated and transformed. While the number of English verse romances steadily grew over the Middle English period, continental French prose romances about the Matter of Britain would still outweigh the native literature. It is not until the mid - fifteenth century that English prose romance truly enters the literary field. Despite its late arrival, the impact of Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte Darthur* would be lasting.

*Le Morte Darthur* is a significant book in many ways. It truly is the first and the most comprehensive English prose romance about King Arthur and his knights of the round table. Though it does use French sources, it also features elements of older English verses. When England's first printer, William Caxton, prepared his edition of the book in 1485, he helped re-establish the Arthuriana into the literary canon. This is the version that later ages would come to rely on during the revivals. However, William Caxton did not simply provide new reading material for the masses; his edition of *Le Morte Darthur* helped shape an emerging English national identity in the early Tudor era.

The question of whether notions such as national identity or consciousness can even be discussed in an early modern or an even earlier context is a heavily debated one. This paper does not aim to settle this debate once and for all nor does it claim that a recognizable English national consciousness appeared in pre-Tudor society. Instead, it purposes to highlight that elements or fragments of a national identity have appeared prior to the early modern era. Furthermore, that these elements through a series of interlacing processes would join together in the late fifteenth century and provide a basis for a recognized "Englishness". This paper

specifically aims to showcase that through three major elements that are often cited in relation to modern ideas of a ‘nation’ and thus, their nation-building qualities: the desire for shared history; the desire for a unified language; the desire for a shared economic unit (and within that, stable governing body). Shrank has argued that Tudor society already exhibited signs of such being (6-7). Alas, analyzing how these elements existed individually prior to the era is worthwhile and necessary in understanding how they eventually come together and why.

A couple notions that need to be established. First of all, that the desire for a shared history can be experienced through the genre of romance, especially the Matter of Britain cycle. Second of all, how language and its interlacing relationship with translation, vernacular literature, and print possesses nation-building qualities. Third of all, how the circumstances of the publication of the English prose romance *Le Morte Darthur* helped voice the desire, and in some ways provide a fantastical solution, for a stable political unit.

## Chapter 1 – Nation-building and Medieval English Romance

The Medieval English period, usually dated between the twelfth and fifteenth centuries, was an era of great cultural, historical, and linguistic changes. Its literature features a variety of different genres, such as devotional writings and hagiographies, chronicles, lyrics, ballads, fables and beast stories just to name a few, but one genre specifically stands out and is often thought to be a staple to the period: the romance.

The medieval romance as a genre is much more elusive than one would think, as its categorization and definition is often a subject of debate. The genre's name might also be cause for confusion. While romantic or courtly love can appear in these stories, its origin is rooted in far more expansive background. "The term 'romance' used today (...) derives from the Old French expression 'mettre en romanz', which means to translate into the vernacular French" (Krueger 1). Suffice to say, this would include a wide range of stories that would mingle together with other genres and narratives, blurring the clear lines of a singular definition (2-3). That is not to say that attempts at categorization have not happened. One of the most often quoted, and most efficient idea is of 'selective resemblance' from Helen Cooper. She suggests that there are typical characteristics of romance that accumulate to a resemblance, the same way a person would resemble their family through their outward genetic features (*The English Romance in Time* 9). This allows for a variety of narratives to be considered romances. Indeed, "medieval romances survive in a rich spectrum of narratives whose themes and issues intersect with virtually every aspect of medieval social and cultural life" (Krueger 2). Within that lies the medieval romance's popularity and reason for its longevity as well, as it presents issues "about personal and social identity, love and honor, good and evil" (Krueger 5). Despite the genre being often thought and devalued as 'popular fiction', contemporary readers "valued the [romance] more for its immediate topicality than for its escapism" (Cooper, *Romance After 1400* 1). It was as new and relevant, as it was tried and familiar (1). One such topicality upheld by the romance during the Middle Ages, especially the Late Middle Ages, would be the questions surrounding Englishness. Ashton goes as far as to claim that "romance is a genre about nation and nation building" specifically (13). These notions, even more so than the parameters of the romance, are heavily debated.

The discussion surrounding national identity is often dominated by Benedict Anderson's impactful work *Imagined Communities* and is often cited for his definition of nation as: "an imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign" (17). His explanation of the 'imagined sovereign' reveals that he believes that nation as a "concept

was born in an age in which Enlightenment and Revolution were destroying the legitimacy of the divinely ordained, hierarchical dynastic realm” (18-19). In other words, claiming that “not only nationalism, but also the nation itself was a product of modernity” (Ruddick 7). Recent scholarship, both medievalist and early-modernist, have challenged this Andersonian view to varying degrees. One such argument and criticism towards the idea, is that analysis of the Middle Ages “reveals pre-Enlightenment structures of communal thinking that strikingly correlate with the forms of modern nationhood” (Lavezzo vii). In other words, despite popular insistence to the contrary, certain aspects of the medieval society can, in fact, fit into the modernist framework set up by Anderson. As Krueger puts it:

Historians of later medieval England can (...) point to the role of a strong centralizing monarch; the comparatively early development of a national system of bureaucracy, consultative politics and public finance; a strong concept of an autonomous English church under royal control; and the considerable extent of commercialization and regional integration in the English economy as evidence that the medieval kingdom of England included many features of a ‘modern’ nation-state, albeit in embryonic form (11).

Regardless, the incessant demand for shared history and language during the period is also, according to Shrank, often “erroneously viewed as a sole preserve of modernity” (2-3). In fact, both of these notions are closely connected to medieval literature and the aforementioned genre of romance.

Indeed, “the value of romance literature for uncovering perceptions of English nationhood (...) had been recognized for some time” (Ruddick 17). The late 12<sup>th</sup> century categorization of romance into three separate groups, the Matter of Rome, Matter of France, and Matter of Britain respectively, already imply a “coherent unity”, according to Ashton (13). The romances belonging to the cycle of the Matter of Britain are the stories centered around King Arthur and his knights of the round table. As it has been discussed, the romance genre featured a variety of different themes and due to its fluidity, a manner of diverse narratives; it is much bigger pool of stories than merely the Arthuriana. Yet, “their tremendous popularity – in a wide range of linguistic registers, cultural settings, and aesthetic modes – established them as a major force” (Krueger 2-3). Arthur, deriving his ancestry from the supposed founder of England, Brutus (according to the chronicle *Brut*, and later adapted into romance by Wace), is a character that was always deeply ingrained within the idea of nation-building, and ultimately becomes “an emblem of Englishness” (Turville-Petre 342). Regardless of the fictitious origins

of such 'Englishness', it is undeniable that "it became a crucial element in the self-fashioning of a national identity" (343).

Despite the lack of general consensus between academics regarding both clear categorization of the romance genre and the clearly distinguishable date of birth to an English national identity, certain conclusions can still be drawn here. First of all, that romance, a fluid and diverse genre, had always contained elements of an English national identity, most prominently through the Matter of Britain cycle. Furthermore, that notions of nation and national identity, should be separated from the political nationalism of the nineteenth century. That is not to say they are unrelated of course, but that the dominant view surrounding their emergence is erroneous in thinking it was synchronous. 'Nation' predates 'nationalism'. In fact, as Shrank writes, "a strong sense of national identity is prerequisite to nationalism: it is not synonymous with it" (2). It simply could not exist without it. The romance alone however would simply not do as a nation-building force, it is a merely a fragment of it; necessary, but not enough. The late Middle Ages would see major socio-cultural changes and a new invention that would work in tandem with the romance to help it reach its potential, that is: the re-emergence of the English vernacular and the printing press.

## Chapter 2 – Nation-building in Translation and Print

Medieval English romances in the beginning were not originally written in English. The origin of the genre, as in stories in vernacular French, already suggests a key issue in the period: linguistic identity. The Medieval Ages, being as long and arduous as it was, saw a great deal of language change. That by itself would not be surprising, given how language continuously changes as a natural process. The changes in this period, however, were not just changes to the language, but also the changes to the *status* of the language, and thus influenced the identities of the linguistic communities in question. As such, “the issue of language is (...) central to the circulation and meaning of medieval texts, especially romances” (Ashton 17).

What needs to be established first and foremost is the complex relationship between England and France ensuing the Norman Conquest of 1066. In the following years English society and language use would change (Algeo 114). “Latin was the language of the Church, Norman French of the government, and English of the majority of the country’s population” (114). Consequently, by “the mid-twelfth century, when the (...) conventions of romance were being established, England and France largely formed a single cultural unit” (Cooper, *The English Romance in Time* 22). This French influence on the English language, culture, and political body would linger on for quite some time. A process of a change in attitude towards the English language is noticeable from the early thirteenth century onward, as England’s ties to France were slowly being severed in no small parts thanks to the events such as the losing of Normandy and the Hundred Years’ War (Algeo 114). The fourteenth century marks the “introduction of the [English] vernacular into the spaces of the classroom, the court, and Parliament” (Lavezzo xvii). For instance, “in 1362, it was ruled that oral pleadings in the king’s courts were to be in English rather than French and, in 1363, parliament was opened in English for the first time” (Ruddick 156). In other words, English was starting to regain its place amongst all levels of its society. Literature followed suit, and within the same century came an outpour of English language romances (Cooper, *The English Romance in Time* 30). By the time printing was introduced in the late fifteenth century, the English literary scene already featured innovative native poets like Chaucer or Lydgate, as well as a significant number of alliterative verses (Algeo 115). This re-establishment of the vernacular highlights another potential fragment of a medieval national identity: the importance and impact of a shared and unified national language.

For indeed, the rise of the vernacular in courtly circles, as well as “the increased use of English as a literary medium has (...) led some historians to identify the period as one of a

triumphant resurgence of the English language – and with it, English national identity” (Ruddick 156). The English language at this point in time, however, is far from being a cohesive unit. “What characterizes Middle English above all is diversity in writing the language” (Scase 14). Unlike in previous periods, “scribes were not trained to write English according to any set of conventions, or agreement about what was ‘correct’” (14). To complicate matters further, authors used their native dialects for writing, well until the late fifteenth century (Algeo 119). For this period five regional varieties may be differentiated: “northern, east Midlands, west Midlands, southeastern, and southwestern” (Scase 11). The process of standardization, as Shrank argues, is “a means to national unification”, and even more so “a strategy that can (...) be used to enhance a sense of identity amongst a group that already sees itself a national community” (3). It has been suggested that the first attempts at a certain level of language regularization were done so by the Court of Chancery, founded in the 1420s (Algeo 156). This standard adopted by the Chancery was Midland English, that is often referred to as “the ancestor of modern standard written English” (Scase 12). Being the dialect of the London area, this is perhaps somewhat unsurprising given the city’s relevance and the presence of such state institutions (Algeo 119). Yet a different group of people, one that saw this dialectal diversity as a hindrance not just to more efficient system of bureaucracy, but to commercial interest, would do a much more impactful job at helping standardize late Middle English vernacular: printers.

The fledgling English print industry of the late fifteenth century must have had a vested financial interest in a more standardized and unified orthography. As Blake notes, the trouble with printed books is they evidently all look the same and thus printers could not tailor their editions to the linguistic demands of every part of the country (286). Therefore, their buyer pool would be smaller than desired. They are after all, running a business in a new industry that at the time is far from being an established enterprise. Going bankrupt at any moment was real possibility, as has happened to many printers in the fifteenth century (4). One particular printer, however, has to be highlighted, not just for being incredibly successful as he remained in the industry for around twenty years and printed over a hundred editions, but also for the fact that he printed the first English language book as well as being the first one to open a print workshop in England: William Caxton (4). Caxton is a significant figure of the period in a myriad of ways and understanding how he operated can shed some light on his lasting influence on the fifteenth century English literary scene, and by extension, English national identity. Whilst an innovator of sorts, he was also conscious of the socio-economic changes around him and adjusted his publishing policy accordingly (Blake 12). He set up his workshop in Westminster adjacent to

the royal court, so his business was in the juncture of both courtly politics and trade, quite literally (Blake 69). He engaged in a level of standardization and modernization in his publications. In fact, it has been suggested that Caxton himself may have used documents from the aforementioned Chancery as a linguistic model (Scase 21). On the issue of dialects, it may be interesting to note an instance wherein in the prologue of the book *Histories of Troy* he claims to be originally from Kent (Blake 24). Given the biographical information known to us, however limited it may be, that is most likely untrue (24). Blake further argues that here Caxton is evoking a “writer’s humility formula by which he throws his attainments into the worst possible light in order that the reader’s indulgence could be won over” (24). Blake also notes that scholars have suggested, based on other literary examples of the fifteenth century, that the expression may be proverbial, signifying that someone is a non-standard speaker of English (24). If that is true, it would also imply that the range of dialects in the country by the end of the century was a widely recognized societal phenomenon. Though possible, not yet proven (24). Additionally, Caxton “attempted to print works written in what he considered to be the courtly style and when a book was not written in that style, he altered it to make it conform” (Blake 133). This altering, or modernization, in his case was less about spelling conventions and more about word-usage. For example, Caxton mentions in his prologue to *Eneydos*, that there had been “gentlemen who have taken objection to his translations” due to the language he had used, claiming that they would prefer him to write in ‘olde and homely terms’ (Blake 123). Then Caxton “goes on to say that he read an old book which he found difficult to understand because of its ‘rude and brood’ English” (123). A clear indication that he aims to move away from expressions and words he deems outdated. Or as Blake puts it Caxton believes that “English has progressed beyond that state” of such “old and homely terms” (123). The ‘old and homely’ vocabulary must have contained words of Norse or Anglo-Saxon origin, as there is a clear pattern of Caxton substituting these expressions specifically with modern words borrowed mostly from Latin and French (Blake 125). Similarly, it is rather noticeable how Caxton avoided printing what he calls “old books” and while he “never discusses the matter in detail”, Blake argues that he most likely meant the works written in alliterative style (124-125). Such was possibly the case with the poem *Piers Plowman* as well, which is often brought up in relation to Caxton never printing it despite its evident recurrence during the fifteenth century (Blake 127). Assuming Caxton was familiar, which is very likely, he probably neglected its publication because it was a bygone of “the older poetic tradition” (127). It has been alluded to in passing, but Caxton’s roles far exceed those of printer and publisher; he played a significant role as a translator as well. Though he was not alone in that.

The roles of printer and translator in early print culture are hardly separable. In the words of Coldiron: “to study translation and printing together is to understand at once two crucial, synergistic processes by which cultural meanings are produced and spread” (4). Translations, or ‘englishings’ have been around prior to the emergence of the print industry. In fact, “English literary life in the Middle Ages thrived on translation, and there had been a great spate of translation from French since at least the early fourteenth century” (Blake 16). A good majority of Caxton’s prints were French translations (Coldiron 6). The first book ever printed in English, and by Caxton, was originally in French as well, though it was not printed in England (1). According to Coldiron, “early English print culture was something like a francophone subculture” wherein the French speaking individuals would create books through manners of translation and printing (5). The previously mentioned ‘courtly style’ and linguistic innovations were also modeled after French trends (Blake 129). Blake further argues that Caxton most likely preferred translations and that he was not alone with that as “his prejudice was shared by many members of the court” (Blake 129). It has been argued, that in some ways, the great influence French trends and styles have had on fifteenth century English literary taste was in large due to the still presiding impact of the Norman Conquest (Chism 58). These newly arising translations into vernacular English, or “englishings” meant much more than the act of rendering a text from one language to another (Coldiron 1). It is in fact “a crucial characteristic of early modern English literary culture: a constitutive foreignness established in translation, transformed by a new technology, and perpetuated in reprints” (1). It might seem paradoxical that in the “century better known for nation-formation, most of the first English printed books were ‘englished’”, but to the English language that had to reascend to its vernacular position, translation may be seen as a solution to a problem (1). Following the Norman colonization, “printing and translation were instrumental in responding to a persistent sense that English letters lagged behind those of the continent” (Coldiron 2). English being seen as having a lower literary status is evidenced by paratexts of different translators’ and printers’ going even as far as the mid-sixteenth century (Coldiron 9-10). This sort of inferiority complex was remedied through inward-directed translations (Coldiron 10-11). Meaning that “most translators in sixteenth-century England did not make printed translations from English into other languages; nearly all, beginning with Caxton, brought in foreign texts with the stated aim of enriching English language and literature” (Coldiron 11). Coldiron notes that this “dominant, appropriative direction of translations, this englishing impulse” would only get stronger by and during the Tudor-age (11).

Caxton's success as a printer partially lied in his ability to recognize and adapt to market demands and fashion (Blake 109). His contribution to the late fifteenth century literary scene by publishing English language books, translated or otherwise, in a standardized and modernized form also marks his contribution to the re-emergence of the English vernacular, and with that the solidification of another element of nation-building: shared and unified language. Alas, perhaps his most significant contribution came to fruition at the tail-end of a nation-wide crisis: The Wars of the Roses. That is when, amidst a civil war, the fragments of national identity found in romance, translation, print and standardization come together in the editing and publishing of Thomas Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*.

### Chapter 3 – Nation-building in *Le Morte Darthur*

While the Medieval English literary scene was slowly being enriched with the verses of Chaucer, Gower, and Lydgate, English prose fell behind. That is especially true when it comes to romance. English literature, while following the trends of French style did not immediately follow their change in form (Cooper, *English Romance in Time* 33). “Verse remained the medium for romance in England until the (...) mid-fifteenth century” (33). That is when Sir Thomas Malory compiles the first comprehensive and one of the most significant, if not the most significant romance only and all about King Arthur and his knights of the round table. This compilation includes translations of French romances, translated by Malory himself and is based on a multitude of sources. The exact number and name of all of them are unknown still, but they certainly include:

the English alliterative *Morte Arthur* and the stanzaic *Le Morte Arthur*, the French *Merlin* and its *Suite de Merlin* sequel; some version of the *Prose Launcelot* and the equally massive *Prose Tristan* (first two books); and the *Queste del Sain Graal* and *La Morte le Roi Artu*. (Wallace 231)

The circumstances of this compilation, that would later be known as *Le Morte Darthur*, are peculiar. When Malory finishes his work between 1469 and 1470, England is being ravaged by a civil war, and Malory himself is a ‘knyght presoner’ of it.

Following the loss of Gascony in 1453, and with that the end of the Hundred Years’ War, the English Crown would come to face the sparking of an internal conflict (Griffiths 231). The Lancastrian government was discredited by embittered soldiers and “Henry VI faced the consequences of defeat” (231). The situation worsened by the king’s quickly degrading mental health meant an opportunity for his cousin, Richard of York, to gain more influence (Griffiths 233). “York was twice appointed protector of the realm during the king’s incapacity (1454-4, 1455-6)” but his adversity with the queen Margaret of Anjou escalated to the point where a series of battles would ensue ultimately ending with York seizing power in 1460 (Griffiths 233). In 1461, following the death of York, now Richard II, his son Edward took the Crown (233).

Thus “the period of dynastic war that is popularly known as the Wars of the Roses” had officially begun (233). The conflict between Edward IV and Henry VI continued until the Battle of Tewkesbury in 1471, where Henry and his wife were captured, and their heir was killed (Griffiths 234). Soon after Henry VI died in captivity as well, most likely murdered in the Tower of London, and with that “the main Lancastrian royal line was extinct” (234). Edward’s reign was spent in relative stability. His foreign military campaigns were unsuccessful but the state of commerce in the mainland was adequate (Griffiths 234-235). Regardless, the continuous mistreatment of minorities, like the Welsh, as well as the overt reliance on his magnate circle would show consequences immediately in the wake of his death (235). Edward’s brother, Richard of Gloucester would usurp the throne, and become known as Richard III in 1483. “Richard III’s actions and methods led to a revival of dynastic warfare”, as his usurpation involved imprisoning the twelve-year-old heir apparent Edward V and his younger brother, and most likely murdering them, setting their place in history as ‘The Princes in the Tower’, as well as an “unprincipled declaration that Edward IV and his sons were bastards” (Griffiths 236). In 1485, the number of involved parties would expand with “the landing from France (...) of Henry Tudor, though his claim to the throne through his mother, representing the Beaufort line of Edward III’s son, John, was tenuous” (Griffiths 236). Nevertheless, Henry Tudor kills Richard III in the Battle of Bosworth Field on 22 August 1485, becoming Henry VII, the first king of England from the House Tudor. He then marries Elizabeth of York to symbolically unify the ‘roses’ and brings an end to a series of civil wars plaguing the nation for over twenty years (236). With that came an age of relative peace and prosperity and most importantly: stability.

The year 1485 does not only mark the end of the gruesome civil war, but also the publication of the printed *Le Morte Darthur*, complete with an original prologue, by William Caxton. It can be assumed that the book satisfied market demand as Caxton’s assistant,

“Wynkin de Worde reprinted the work only thirteen years after initial publication and again in 1519” (Parins 3). Different editions of print followed for over 400 years (Parins 40-45). All reprints of the 1485 version since Caxton’s first edition was “the only means by which *Le Morte Darthur* was known” up until the early twentieth century (Matthews 69). A new version of the text was found in 1934, today often referred to as the Winchester Manuscript, and with it came a shocking revelation that there are significant differences between that and of Caxton’s text (Parins 30-31).

What should be established first however, is the relationship between the two editions. The Winchester Manuscript is not Malory’s own, but a scribal copy of it. That said, it was most likely not the copytext used by Caxton; if it were, the manuscript would not have been that well-preserved at certain parts (Blake 202). The two versions can still be compared as there is evidence that the Winchester Manuscript during a period “was in Caxton’s workshop because it contains offsets of Caxton’s type on some folios” (Blake 17). Additionally, it has been suggested that the Winchester Manuscript “and Caxton’s copytext were closely related copies of the same original” (17). Therefore, the Winchester Manuscript should be considered the closest version there is to Malory’s original and it should be acknowledged that Caxton was most likely aware of the contents of the manuscript and did in fact heavily edit the text.

Structurally speaking, the two works are completely different. Many have argued that the Winchester Manuscript is supposed to be seen as a collection of eight separate romances given the markings of the original *explicits* (Parins 31). Moreover, Caxton “divided the work into twenty-one books, each of which is further subdivided into chapters” (Blake 202). Blake argues that this was mostly due to Caxton’s consideration of the separate tales as being one complete work, and this was Caxton’s way of unifying it (202). Caxton’s version keeps most of the *explicits* and *incipits* but modifies them. Interestingly enough, however, “all reference to Sir Thomas Malory is omitted from all but the last *explicit*” (Matthews 81). This omission

could very well imply that highlighting Malory's name more than necessary would have been a risk, commercially or otherwise. Given Caxton's history in the industry it is likely he would have recognized a liability that a name potentially carries. The point is enunciated by what modern scholars seem to have gathered about Thomas Malory's potential identity. While there are arguments for both a Yorkist and a Lancaster Malory, the most widely accepted theory is that he was Sir Thomas Malory of Newbold Revel (Parins 35). It would also explain why he was referred to as 'knyght presoner' in the Winchester Manuscript as he had been "accused of various offences including robbery and mayhem on church property, attempted murder, and rape", however, it should be noted that given the political climate the charges may have been drummed up due to his affiliation with either House (Parins 36). It is possible then, according to Blake, that "Caxton knew Malory's life had been disreputable (...) and felt that to linger over it would detract from the chivalric tone of the book" (Blake 207). Regardless, omitting Malory's name is not the only change to the manuscript.

The biggest revisions happened to Book Five, or 'The Roman War' segment. This book specifically is "based upon the English alliterative work *Morte Arthure*" (Blake 130). Caxton heavily re-wrote parts of Book Five and replaced Old English words with 'modern' French ones, e.g.: "*ascended (yode up), damaunded (asked), lamentacion (sorowyng)*" (Blake 131). Caxton's preference towards such French loanwords and literary style is evident in how "the remaining books, which are for the most part based on French sources, are generally only modified rather than rewritten" (Blake 131). Alas, rewriting the more alliterative old style into something more along the lines of court fashion was not the only change made to this chapter specifically. There is another change that is, while a subtle one, is highly relevant to the topic at hand. As a comparison take Vinaver's edition of the Winchester Manuscript which, while not a straight transcript of the original, it is still the most readily available version to the public and should still be able to illustrate the point:

Than hym semed there com oute of the Oryent a grimly beare, all blak, in a clowde, and his pawys were as byg as a poste. (...) `Than the dredfull dragon dressyd hym ayenste hym´ and come in the wynde lyke a faucon, and freyshely strykis the beare. And agayne the greasly beare kuttis with his grysly tuskes (...) (143)

This passage in Caxton’s edition is as follows:

After hym semed there came oute of thoryent / a grymly bore al blak in a clowde / and his pawes as bygge as a post (...) Thenne the dredeful dragon auauunced hym and cam in the wynde lyke a fawcon gyuyngre grete strokes on the bore / and the bore hytte hym ageyne with his grysly tuskes (...) (book 5 capitulum iiij)

The spelling of both “beare” and “bore” are consistent throughout the chapter in both editions. There is no conceivable in-text reason behind changing the animal that must fight the dragon; it has no effect or relevance to the overarching story. Yet, this change was clearly made in Caxton’s version. It would not make sense as an attempt at modernization. For one, the alliteration stays, despite Caxton’s clear incentive to move away from that style. Secondly, according to the OED, both words derive from Old English, and even share an origin in being West Germanic. While “bore” was a potential way to spell “bear” in the fifteenth century, it would have been uncommon for the dialect Caxton chose to print in. Moreover, the *Alliterative Morte Arthure*, which is seen as one of the definitive sources for Malory, also identifies the animal as a bear, or “bere” specifically (line 774). The reason behind the change therefore might be found in the historical and political context of the time the edition was printed in (Field 37). The dragon is, naturally, a representative of King Arthur, while the bear that ends up defeated is Emperor Lucius or perhaps simply the cluster of Arthur’s foes. Regardless, in Caxton’s edition this enemy is now represented by a boar. Consequently, the reigning king at the time was Richard III whose personal device or badge featured a boar (37). Meanwhile Richards’s enemy who defeated him in the Battle of Bosworth Field was Henry Tudor, crowned as Henry

VII, whose badge was adorned by a dragon (37). To the modern reader this might seem insignificant, or even coincidental, but to the contemporary society, reading about how a dragon vanquished a boar must have been a clear political allusion (37). Except William Caxton completed printing his edition on 31 July 1485, which is three weeks prior to the Battle of Bosworth Field; he simply could not have known the outcome.

It is tempting to assume then, that William Caxton was in support of a Tudor king. While it is certainly possible, it cannot be claimed without reasonable doubt. As P. J. C. Field points out, it is feasible to think the change, rather than being made out of love for Henry Tudor, was made out of spite towards Richard III for having Anthony Woodville (2<sup>nd</sup> Earl Rivers) executed in 1483 (37). Woodville was, potentially, a former patron of Caxton, who may have funded even three or four separate publications of his (Blake 178). Regardless of Caxton's true intentions, which we may never know, he still made a conscious decision during the editing process and deemed it was worth the risk. It is highly doubtful the book was meant to be prophetic in any way. Alas, the Tudor-dynasty would come to rely on its popular imagery to help legitimize their rule for generations to come. The nation-building quality of *Le Morte Darthur* only partially lies in its allusions to the contemporary socio-political context. It is merely an element of it. The way it truly serves the emergence of an English national identity in the late fifteenth century, is by melting the fragments together: the genre of romance; translation and print; and the desired image of a King who will return to his nation in the hour of need to bring forth stability and peace.

## Conclusion

The publication of *Le Morte Darthur* played a crucial part in reintroducing King Arthur and the knights of the round table into English lore. The Tudor-dynasty, naturally, saw an opportunity in that. While the end of the Wars of the Roses was most probably a widely anticipated event, the legitimacy of the new heir and lineage was still in question. Henry VII would name his first-born son Arthur, possibly to exploit the idea of the ‘once and future king’ returning (Cooper, *English Romance in Time* 347). Henry would also capitalize on his Welsh ancestry to draw connections between the Tudor line and King Arthur (347). The incorporation of the romance elements into his reign never took priority per se, “but the propaganda gradually worked towards a consolidation of the new regime, until by the time of Elizabeth the whole Tudor myth was entrenched” (347). This is evident by the painting of the Winchester Round Table (believed to have belonged to King Arthur) on the order of Henry VIII. The Tudor Rose adorned in the middle is not very subtle, but the suggested likeness of Henry’s face juxtaposed to that of Arthur’s is profound (Whitman 35-6). Ironically, it would also be Henry’s VIII reign, when the romance had to go into hiding.

The Reformation Period did not take kindly to romance. Often deemed to contain Catholic ideologies they were not welcomed amongst Protestant circles, which paired together with Henry VIII’s growing and drastic control over the print industry should have spelled absolute doom for the genre (Cooper, *English Romance in Time* 35). While it certainly had an effect on new material being written and published, older romances managed to retain their popularity (36). Clearly, it would have been hard to break away from such well-known and well-liked conventions. Elizabethan authors, like Spenser, could not ignore these literary traditions and close connection either, as they were “part of what made England English” (Hodges 211). And thus, elements of the Arthurian lore and the insistence of a connection between him and the Tudor dynasty would still remain in works such as *The Faerie Queene*, but they would appear in a more Protestant context. Alas, the longevity of the romance, no matter how popular and adaptable it was, could not last forever. Cooper argues that the end of the native romances by the late sixteenth century was not due to the Reformation efforts, but rather the genre of satire, and romance being the main subject of it. (*English Romance in Time* 39).

It is not until the nineteenth century, amidst political nationalism, that the romance tradition, and with that The Matter of Britain specifically, is revived. As it has been established, people kept reading romances, but the literary scene had been lacking new material since the

early years of Protestant England. The Victorian era certainly tried to remedy that. The nineteenth century came with its own set of troubles, and medievalism served as a “site of cultural reassurance” (Brooks and Bryden 252). That is the age of Tennyson with *Idylls of the King*. It is the context in which the Pre-Raphaelites worked. This revival of the Arthuriana is impactful in its own right, and one could argue that current pop-culture more readily uses nineteenth-century sources rather than drawing from the classics. However, even this revival would not have been possible without the work both Tennyson and the Pre-Raphaelites uncontestably relied upon: *Le Morte Darthur*.

In many ways, *Le Morte Darthur* is a perfect encapsulation of the elements of a Pre-Tudor nation-building process. The vernacular language in the form of print helped with the efforts to standardize and modernize English. The use of prose romance invoked the desire for a shared history. The genre, due its popularity and topicality, was also the most appropriate form in which a book amidst a turbulent civil war could have been published. Concisely, William Caxton’s 1485 edition of *Le Morte Darthur* and its long-lasting multifaceted impact helped shape English national identity and to define what “Englishness” means, even today.

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