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Fiction and History in English Arthurian Manuscripts

Abstract: This article argues that the way in which late medieval historical chronicles known as the Prose *Brut* developed in English in the fifteenth century was key to both how Arthurian tradition changed to accommodate the political agendas of the Wars of the Roses in England and the shaping of readership of Arthurian romance among all the social classes. Originating in Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia regum Britanniae*, the 'Brut' chronicles were added to by numerous named and anonymous writers, and became the best-selling secular narrative in the vernacular in fifteenth-century England. With more than 200 extant manuscripts and 13 printed editions between 1480 and 1527, the *Middle English Prose Brut* (*MEPB*), as it is known among specialists, was likely the most widely commissioned Arthurian narrative late English audiences would be aware of, more so than the 25 extant manuscripts that contain English Arthurian romance, mostly associated with London, and even if we also consider the numerous manuscripts of French romance in circulation in England at the time. What this tells us is that Arthur's figure would have been by far better known from historical writing, so widely spread to be ubiquitous in the town as in the countryside, judging by the quality, distribution, and social class background of owners and readers of chronicle manuscripts, than from Arthurian romances alone. I argue that the chronicles that included the story of Arthur, such as his rise and fall, his deposition at the hands of one of his own blood, were deemed useful tools to develop politically-inflected thinking around contemporary events taking place in the fifteenth century, by the upper and middle classes, who played important roles in events of national importance. If one knew about Arthur in fifteenth-century England, it would have been from a history book, not from a courtly or even what we now call a popular romance. *MEPB* speaks to us as Arthurian specialists not *necessarily* about new stories of Arthur, but rather about continuity,

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as well as acceptance of the role played by the writing of change into the seemingly unchanged story of time.

Résumé: Cet article soutient que la manière dont les chroniques connues sous le nom de *Prose Brut* se sont développées au XVe siècle a été déterminante à la fois pour l'évolution de la tradition arthurienne, qui s'est adaptée aux agendas politiques des guerres des Deux-Roses en Angleterre, et pour la formation du lectorat des romans arthuriens dans toutes les classes sociales. Issues de l'*Historia regum Britanniae* de Geoffroy de Monmouth, ces " Bruts " ont été enrichis par de nombreux auteurs, nommés ou anonymes, et sont devenus le récit profane en langue vernaculaire le plus diffusé dans l'Angleterre du XVe siècle. Avec plus de 200 manuscrits conservés et 13 éditions imprimées entre 1480 et 1527, le *Middle English Prose Brut* (*MEPB*), fut probablement le récit arthurien le plus largement commandité et connu par le public anglais de la fin du Moyen Âge – bien plus que les 25 manuscrits conservés contenant des romans arthuriens en anglais (principalement liés à Londres), et même si l'on prend aussi en compte les nombreux manuscrits de romans français en circulation en Angleterre à cette époque.

Cela nous indique que, plus que par les seuls romans arthuriens, la personnage d'Arthur était bien plus connu à travers la tradition historiographique, si largement diffusée qu'elle en devenait omniprésente, aussi bien en ville qu'à la campagne, si l'on en juge par la qualité, la répartition et le profil social des propriétaires et lecteurs de ces manuscrits de chroniques. Les chroniques contenant l'histoire d'Arthur, son ascension, sa chute, et sa déposition par l'un des siens, étaient perçues comme des outils utiles pour développer une réflexion à connotation politique sur les événements contemporains du XVe siècle, en particulier par les classes supérieures et moyennes, qui jouaient un rôle actif dans les affaires d'importance nationale. Si l'on connaissait Arthur dans l'Angleterre du XVe siècle, c'était à travers un livre d'histoire, et non un roman courtois ni même ce que nous appelons aujourd'hui un roman " populaire ". Le *MEPB* nous parle, à nous spécialistes du monde arthurien, non pas de nouvelles histoires d'Arthur, mais de continuité, ainsi que de l'acceptation du rôle que joue l'écriture dans l'introduction du changement au sein d'un récit en apparence immuable du temps.

Zusammenfassung: Dieser Artikel argumentiert, dass die Entwicklung der als *Prose Brut* bekannten spätmittelalterlichen Chroniken im 15. Jahrhundert, aufzeigt, wie sich die Artustradition in England veränderte, um den politischen Agenden der Rosenkriege Rechnung zu tragen, und wie sich die Leserschaft der Artusromane über alle sozialen Schichten hinweg herausbildete. Die "Brut"-Chroniken, die ihren Ursprung in Geoffrey of Monmouths *Historia regum Britanniae* haben, wurden von zahlreichen namentlich bekannten und anonymen Autoren ergänzt und zur meistverkauften profanen Erzählung in der Volkssprache des 15. Jahrhunderts in England.

Mit über 200 erhaltenen Handschriften und 13 gedruckten Ausgaben zwischen 1480 und 1527 war der *Middle English Prose Brut* (*MEPB*), wie er unter Fachleuten genannt wird, wahrscheinlich die am weitesten verbreitete Artuserzählung, die dem englischen Publikum dieser Zeit bekannt war – deutlich mehr als die 25 erhaltenen Handschriften englischer Artusromane, die größtenteils mit London assoziiert sind, und selbst wenn man auch die zahlreichen französischen Romanhandschriften mitberücksichtigt, die damals in England im Umlauf waren. Dies zeigt uns, dass die Figur Artus, weit mehr als durch die Artusromane allein, vor allem durch die historiographische Tradition bekannt war, die sowohl in der Stadt als auch auf dem Land allgegenwärtig war, wie die Verbreitung und die soziale Herkunft der Besitzer und Leser der Chronikhandschriften belegt.

Es wird hier die These vertreten, dass die Chroniken, die die Geschichte Artus' – seinen Aufstieg und Fall, seine Absetzung durch einen Verwandten – erzählten, von den oberen und mittleren Gesellschaftsschichten, die eine wichtige Rolle in national bedeutsamen Ereignissen spielten, als nützliche Instrumente angesehen wurden, um eine politisch geprägte Reflexion über zeitgenössische Ereignisse des 15. Jahrhunderts zu entwickeln.

Wenn man im England des 15. Jahrhunderts von Artus wusste, dann war das durch ein Geschichtsbuch – nicht durch einen höfischen oder gar das, was wir heute als populären Roman bezeichnen würden. Der *MEPB* spricht uns als Arthur-Fachleute nicht unbedingt durch neue Geschichten über Artus an, sondern vielmehr durch Kontinuität und durch die Akzeptanz der Funktion, die das Schreiben über Wandel in die scheinbar unveränderliche Geschichte der Zeit spielt.

Keywords: Fiction, History, English Arthurian manuscripts, Middle English Prose Brut, Arthur's death.

The end of Arthur's life can be said to mark, also, his beginning as a fictional and pseudo-historical figure – and the beginning of all studies in the field. It is the tragedy of his demise at the hands of his nephew (in the chronicles), in other traditions bastard son (in the romances) Mordred that has fascinated audiences from the medieval to the modern era.

Yet the presentation of Arthur's end is not uniform across narrative traditions or across time. Opening a late fifteenth-century Middle English prose manuscript a very different version of Arthur's death than that usually found in Arthurian romances on both sides of the English Channel in the Middle Ages presents itself:

> Kynge Arthure had but a litle compeny left a lyue and he saide vnto them: 'Selle youre lyves or ye dy. And I wille selle myne dere ynough. Might I sley the yonder *traitoure* that hath done me so moch wo hit were to me honoure and worshippe to be slayne.'

> And a none he drewe Colborne his good swerde. And smote on eu*ery* side and made hym wey inough tille that he come to the fals *traitoure* Mordrede. Arthure smote hym vppon the helme. And anothir stroke Arthure gaue hym in the neck that he kut a soundre his hauberke and his coler and smote of his hede. (Cambridge University Library, MS Ll. 2.14, fol. 32r)[1]

The version of Arthur's death in this passage presents a more satisfying image for the modern mind's eye than any other: Arthur chopping off Mordred's head would be just retribution for one of the most famous fictional (and for medieval audiences, also historical) traitors of the Middle Ages. The passage has the allure of Arthurian prose romance, yet it combines it with the typical tone of a historiographical account, from dramatic emphasis in a battle leader's speech ('I will sell my life dear enough') to the fall of the sword on Mordred's helmet. The detail in the action shows a seasoned observer of combat, since the drop of the sword is carefully said to cut 'asunder' the hauberk and collar, with the angle cinematic, as well as plausible. Moreover, earlier in the same extract Mordred is said to have taken the English crown at Guenevere's instigation:

> And whan kynge Arthure was redy there come tithynges vnto hym that Mordrede vnto whome Arthure had geven alle his power of alle Britayne had cronede hym selfe *kynge thrugh the councelle of the Quene Gaynor*. And when kynge Arthure herde that tythynges hit is not to aske whedre he had sorowe ynough and wist not in the worlde whate were best to done other to holde his iorney to [R]ome or to come home to Englond ageynst his sustre son Mordrede. (Cambridge University Library, MS Ll. 2.14, fol. 31v; my emphasis)

In these passages, particularly in the first, even more emphasis is placed on Mordred wanting to be king by the underlining of the word 'traitoure' in red ink. Underlining proper names (names and places) appears in Middle English manuscripts of both literary and historical texts, but with a great degree of variation. Most importantly to this discussion, full rubrication of each and every proper name and place is evident in spectacular fashion in the only extant manuscript copy of the late fifteenth-century Middle English prose romance, Thomas Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*, London, British Library, Additional MS 59678, nowadays known under the label 'the Winchester Malory'.[2] The underlining of the word 'kynge' in the passage cited above, as

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1 All transcriptions from manuscripts cited in this article are mine; I maintain the spelling of the original and silently expanded, where necessary.

2 For a digital facsimile of the Winchester Malory manuscript, see http://www.maloryproject.com/winchester_viewer.php (consulted 8 November 2024); for the authoritative edition of the text of *Le Morte Darthur*, which collates the Winchester manuscript and William Caxton's first edition, see Sir Thomas Malory, *Le Morte Darthur*, ed. by P. J. C. Field, 2 vols (D. S. Brewer, 2013). Malory's text is cited from the latter by page and line number. K. S. Whetter has made the most recent case for a

well as that of 'traitoure' is therefore akin to the underlining of proper names and places in late medieval Middle English chronicles; alongside the usual underlining of proper names in late medieval English Prose *Brut* chronicles shows, without a doubt, the particular emphasis this copyist or the compiler placed on the political act described here.[3]

My agenda in this article, following from this unusual episode describing Arthur's death, is to consider that the existence of Arthurian literary worlds, multiple as they are, and converging around a character who originated in sixth-century Wales, would not have been possible without the merging of history and fiction in all sorts of ways, from ways of writing to ways of thinking about time, the passage of time, that is, handling time, as I call it elsewhere, in the codices containing chronicles,[4] and enjoying time, as one might call the 'time of romance'.[5] This article focuses on creativity and ingenuity in the drawing of the figure of Arthur, in the space between pseudo-historical character, for the English audiences in the late medieval period, and legendary or romance hero for the rest of the European world. It will focus closely on the chronicle tradition known as the Prose *Brut*, where Arthur appears in various guises, largely, as I will argue, in tune with the sensibilities of English audiences who saw political developments in their own contemporary period as a reflection of events in the past. The elements that contributed to Arthur's popularity in the chronicles were related, in the anonymous authors' retellings, to moments of remembering and misremembering – in other words, to the way in which passages of legendary history were used for edification in the

reading of Malory's manuscript in the context of book production in the fifteenth century: see his *The Manuscript and Meaning of Malory's* Morte Darthur (D. S. Brewer, 2017). For a comprehensive discussion of the context for Arthurian manuscript and early print production of romances (not chronicles) in late medieval England, see Takako Kato, 'Manuscript and Print: Discontinuity and Continuity in the Transmission of Arthurian Tales', in *La tradition arthurienne tardive en Angleterre et en Écosse: du Moyen Âge au début de l'Époque Moderne*, ed. by Christine Ferlampin-Acher (Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2020), pp. 1015–47.

3 It is common in Middle English chronicle manuscripts for proper names (people and places) to be underlined in red. This is usually a method to draw attention to key facts in the historical narrative. However, very few Middle English chronicle manuscripts I am aware of to date present rubricated proper names throughout – as the Winchester manuscript of Malory's *Le Morte Darthur* does. I return to the issue of underlining the word 'traitor' in this episode in my discussion of another Middle English Prose *Brut* manuscript below and in my ongoing project focused on the Middle English *Brut* Chronicle.

4 See my 'Holding History in Your Hands: the Middle English *Brut* Manuscripts and their Readers', in *The Open Book: Essays on Manuscript and Early Printed Books in Honour of Martha W. Driver*, ed. by Michael Kuckinsky, Niamh Patwell, and Carrie Griffin (Brepols, forthcoming).

5 I take the latter phrase from Ad Putter's now classic study 'Finding Time for Romance: Mediaeval Arthurian Literary History', *Medium Ævum*, 63.1 (1994), 1–16.

present moment. An incursion into the ways in which Arthur was presented in this chronicle tradition is helpful in elucidating his role in both historical and romance accounts, which engaged with one another but which may treat King Arthur very differently. For this reason this article will be structured in two main sections: 'Finding Arthur', which focuses on King Arthur in Middle English Prose *Brut* manuscripts and delves deeper into the types of engagement readers might have had with Arthur at the intersection between fiction and history in late medieval England; and 'Updating Arthur', in which I discuss evidence that shows how the narrative of Arthur's reign was likely used to reflect on contemporary late medieval political events in the Middle English Prose *Brut*.[6]

The first two quotations at the start of this piece come from a late fifteenth-century manuscript copy of the Middle English Prose *Brut* chronicle (Cambridge University Library, MS Ll. 2.14), itself a late medieval prose text that incorporated, and added to, the original narrative found in Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia regum Britanniae* (*c.* 1135). As scholars know well, Geoffrey's account was continued, adapted, and transformed by generations of writers and compilers to suit the tastes as well as cultural and political agendas of subsequent eras. The passage above is taken from one such very late medieval continuation, and includes exceptionally striking details – not found in Geoffrey's narrative or that of most of his followers. Importantly, the direction of the blow is from Arthur to Mordred, and Mordred, surprisingly if we compare the passage with any existing romances in either verse or prose, dies first, head presumably rolling off on the battlefield. No mention is made of Mordred's blow to Arthur, or Arthur's own death, nor of the aftermath of Arthur's passing.[7] Geoffrey of Monmouth does not describe the moment, of course, and in the romance tradition in Middle English the most commonly-encountered version of the episode entails the iconic moment Mordred gives Arthur the fatal wound, while Arthur had thrust his spear through Mordred's body:

> 'Now tyde me dethe, tyde me lyff,' seyde the kyng, 'now I se hym yonder alone, he shall never ascape myne hondes!' For at a bettir avayle shall I never have hym.'
> 'God spyede you well!' seyde Sir Bedyvere.
> Than the kynge gate his speare in bothe hys hondis, and ran towarde Sir Mordred, crying and saying, 'Traytoure, now ys thy dethe-day com!'

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6 My original plenary lecture consisted of four sections, but in this, much-shortened, version, I only have space for two.

7 Interestingly, in one such chronicle, Robert of Gloucester's *Metrical Chronicle* Arthur dies of his wounds, and this is reported in generic terms – of course, he cannot be said to die at Mordred's hands because he had already chopped off Mordred's head. See Robert of Gloucester, *The Metrical Chronicle,* ed. by William Aldis Wright, Rolls Series 86, 2 vols (Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1887).

> And whan Sir Mordred saw Kynge Arthur he ran untyll hym with hys swerde drawyn in hys honde; and there Kyng Arthur smote Sir Mordred undir the shylde, with a foyne of hys speare, thorowoute the body more than a fadom. And whan Sir Mordred felte that he had hys dethys wounded he threste hymselff with the myght that he had up to the burre of Kyng Arthurs speare, and ryght so he smote hys fadir, Kynge Arthure, with hys swerde holdynge in both hys hondys, uppon the syde of the hede, that the swerde perced the helmet and the tay of the brayne. And therewith Mordred daysshed downe starke dede to the erthe. (Malory, *Le Morte Darthur*, I.923.24–924.5)

So Mordred dies, losing his head only in the metaphorical, not literal, sense.

Malory's source for this section is the branch of the Old French Vulgate known as *La mort le roi Artu*, where, similarly, there is no doubt about the direction of the blow, with the added sensational detail of Mordred's wound showing a ray of sunshine through his body:

> Il tint une glaive gros et fort, et lesse corre tant comme il pot del cheval trere; et Mordrés, qui bien connoist que li rois ne bee fors a li ocirre, nel refusa pas, einz li adresce la teste del cheval, et li rois, qui li vient de toute sa force, le fiert si durement qu'il li ront les mailles del hauberk et li met par mi le cors le fer de son glaive; et l'estoire dit que aprés l'estordre del glaive passa par mi la plaie uns rais de soleill si apertement que Girflet le vit, dont cil del païs distrent que ce avoit esté sygnes de corrouz de Nostre Seigneur. Quant Mordrés se vit si navré, si pense bien qu'il est navrez a mort; si fiert le roi Artu si durement el hiaume que riens nel garantist qu'il ne li face sentir l'espee jusqu'au test, et del test abati il une piece; de celui cop fu li rois Artus si estourdis qu'il cheï jus del cheval a terre, et autresi fist Mordrés. Si sont andui si destroit qu'il n'i a celui qui ait pooir de relever, einz gist li uns delez l'autre.[8]
> [He grasped a thick and strong lance and spurred as fast as his horse could carry him; and Mordred, who saw that the king sought only to kill him, did not retreat, but instead turned toward him. The king, bearing down on him with all his force, struck him so hard that he ripped apart the links of Mordred's hauberk and thrust the steel of his lance through his body. And the story says that when the lance was withdrawn, a ray of sunlight shone through the wound, so clearly that Girflet saw it; and the people of that country say it was a sign of Our Lord's wrath. When Mordred saw the seriousness of the wound, he realised that it would be fatal; and he struck King Arthur so powerfully on the helmet that nothing could protect his head, and the sword cut away part of his skull. This blow so stunned King Arthur that he fell from his horse, just as Mordred did. They were both so seriously wounded that neither had the strength to rise, and they both lay there, one beside the other.]

The cinematic nature of the episode was clearly meant to provide the medieval reader with a memorable image that immortalised this so-called historical moment.

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8 *La mort le roi Artu: roman du XIIIe siècle*, ed. by Jean Frappier (Droz, 1997), p. 245. The modern translation is cited from *The Death of Arthur*, in *Lancelot-Grail: The Old French Arthurian Vulgate and Post-Vulgate in Translation*, ed. and trans. by Norris J. Lacy, 10 vols (D. S. Brewer, 2010), vol. 7, p. 126.

Fiction and history here work hand in hand to create a recognisable cultural monument to King Arthur, the final battle in which the traitor son kills his own father, that would be transmitted through the stories for centuries to come. With the *Mort Artu* being part of the early thirteenth-century Old French Vulgate prose romances, the legacy of the moment across European literatures, including through Malory in the English language, cannot be underestimated when considering the striking difference proposed by the anonymous compiler of the episode copied into Cambridge University Library, MS Ll. 2.14, cited above, which contains a version of the Middle English Prose *Brut*. By the middle of the fifteenth century in England the ubiquity of images presenting Arthur about to thrust his lance through Mordred's body would have likely been such that the moment needed no further mention. Arthur's end, as described by both French and English authors, would have received much interest, even judging by Malory's choices alone.

Indeed, the two passages extracted from the Middle English Prose *Brut* manuscript cited above do have a source, even if one that might be better described as buried in the vast verse chronicle by the thirteenth-century author known as Robert of Gloucester, a chronicle written in the mid to late thirteenth century (?1270s):

> To þe lutel folc þat he adde he spac atte laste
> Sulle we he sede vre lif dere ar we be ded
> & icholle sulle min dere ynou wanne þer nis oþer red
> Habbe ich aslawe þe false suike þe luþer traytour
> Hit worþ me þanne vor to deye gret ioye & honour.[9] (ll. 4568–72)

> [To the few folk that were there he spoke at last
> 'Sell we,' he said, 'our lives dearly, or we will be dead,
> And I shall sell mine dearly enough when there is no other way
> Had I slain this false traitor, this wicked traitor,
> It would be worth more and then I can die with great joy and honour.']

> Anne stroc he ȝef him mid wel stourdy mod
> & þoru hauberc & þoru is coler þat nere noþing souple
> He smot of is heued as liȝtliche as it were a scouple
> Þat was is laste chiualerye þat vaire endede ynou. (ll. 4576–80)

> [And then he stroke him with very fierce spirit
> Through hauberk and through mail-collar that were not at all soft,
> He smote his head off as lightly as if it were an ear of corn,
> That was his last act of chivalry, which ended well enough.]

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9 Robert of Gloucester, *Metrical Chronicle*, ed. by Wright, cited by page and line numbers in the text.

> A messager com fram þis lond & nywe tydinge sede
> Þat modred is neueu wam he bitok þis lond
> Hadde ynome þis kinedom clanliche in is hond
> & ycrouned him sulue king þoru þe quene rede (ll. 4503–05)
> [A messenger came from this land and told new tidings
> That Modred, his nephew, when he wan this land,
> Had seized the kingdom entirely into his hand
> And crowned himself king at the queen's advice.]

Almost entirely neglected by most modern scholars of Arthurian romance and even of chronicles, this unusual ending that Gloucester writes for Arthur has been traced by Richard Moll back to Henry of Huntington's *Epistola ad Warinum*, where the episode is reported very briefly, however. Moll was not aware of the Cambridge manuscript in which this prosification of the account was inserted into a Middle English Prose *Brut*.[10]

Indeed, modern scholars who may only turn to the modern editions of such chronicles, or content themselves with the standard forerunner of all chronicle writing about Arthur, Geoffrey's *Historia*, would miss out a key cultural phenomenon: the persistence of interest in Arthur and the efforts clearly expended by numerous anonymous scribes in compiling his story from many sources, rather than copying slavishly the older chronicle text in front of them. When this passage from Gloucester's *Chronicle* was turned into prose and copied into a late fifteenth-century manuscript of the Middle English Prose *Brut* chronicle, the incendiary political context of the Wars of the Roses (1440s–85) would have provided a parallel for the words about Mordred following Guenevere's advice to take the crown for himself and contemporary events. They could suggest a precedent for the deposition of a king – in other words, political dynamite at a time when anxieties over the English crown were running at an all-time high. Couching this narrative moment in lan-

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10 In his excellent study of chronicles written before Malory's time, Richard Moll points out that both Peter of Langtoft and Robert of Gloucester 'turned to Henry of Huntington to elaborate their accounts of Arthur's death': see *Before Malory: Reading Arthur in Late Medieval England* (University of Toronto Press, 2003), p. 28. However, Huntington does not elaborate much apart from in his *Epistola ad Warinum*, a work less widely available than any of the *Brut* chronicles. For further context, Moll's investigation of the fascinating interpolations that appear in late medieval (mid to late fifteenth-century) manuscripts of Robert of Gloucester's *Metrical Chronicle* (that is, other than in Middle English Prose *Brut* manuscripts) demonstrates that the continuous interest (and an avid thirst for additional details) in Arthur's story throughout the Middle Ages did not abate in the turmoil of the Wars of the Roses, and is relevant to my discussion here.

Much modern critical work has also been indebted to Robert Huntington Fletcher, *The Arthurian Material in the Chronicles Especially Those of Great Britain and France (1906)*, ed. by Roger Sherman Loomis, 2nd ed. (Burt Franklin, 1966).

guage that reads as a lesson from Britain's legendary past to the fifteenth-century present would not be surprising during the period now known as the birth of the machine of political propaganda in England, to which this manuscript is dated. This cameo image of Arthur leading his army against Mordred, with Arthur then chopping off Mordred's head may also have sounded, to fifteenth-century readers, like just what one would hope a strong English king would do in the fifteenth century. Yet not a single extant version of either chronicle or romance produced after Robert of Gloucester's chronicle had the audacity to make this change or even suggest it.[11]

What is fiction and what is history in such modified accounts of Arthur's death? A medieval reader would likely call it history, a modern scholar quite rightly think it romance. Did the distinction work the same way in these late historical chronicles? The distinction between verse and prose accounts of Arthur, moving as it did from verse seen to represent the medium of fiction and prose the respectable medium for history, does not apply here.[12] To investigate this crossover between what we now call history and fiction versus their intermingling in medieval writing we need to examine the framework within which medieval historiography was written.

Finding Arthur

In the vast corpus of texts treating the topic of Arthur's rise and fall in the British Isles by far the most numerous are historical narratives composed many centuries after the historical Arthur may have lived, and far removed from the concerns of historical accuracy in the sense we understand it today. Chronicles that incorporate Arthur's reign ultimately derived from Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia regum Britanniae*, written *c.* 1135, and a best-seller across Europe, which survives in at least 200 manuscripts.[13] The *Historia* does not give a detailed account of Arthur's death

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11 Interestingly, Robert of Gloucester's *Chronicle* was interpolated into the narrative of another copy of the Middle English Prose *Brut* dating from the fifteenth century, London, British Library, Sloane MS 2027, which may have been in the possession of one of Malory's gaolers, William Brandon. See Raluca L. Radulescu, 'Gentry Readers of the *Brut* and Genealogical Material', *Trivium*, 36 (2006), 189–202.

12 Julia Marvin puts this succinctly in her survey of the transition between histories written in verse (usually the genre of fiction) and those written in prose (the medium for historical writing) in her 'The English *Brut* Tradition', in *A Companion to Arthurian Literature*, ed. Helen Fulton (Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), pp. 221–34.

13 For a review of the extant manuscripts and their dissemination, see Julia Crick, Historia Regum Britannie *of Geoffrey of Monmouth IV: Dissemination and Reception in the Later Middle Ages* (Boydell & Brewer, 1981).

at Mordred's hands – this was still to be written by the anonymous author of the Old French Vulgate *Mort Artu* (cited above), in the thirteenth century. Nonetheless, Geoffrey's work inaugurated a new era in chronicle writing in Britain which included Arthur's reign, sufficiently appealing to become the source for Wace, who translated it into Anglo Norman French and added romance elements such as the institution of the Round Table, then into Middle English by Layamon. To better understand the genealogy and development of historical writing including Arthur's reign out of Geoffrey's *Historia* the following chronological table is useful:

Table 1. The Brut chronicles in England: a complex tradition

Geoffrey of Monmouth, *Historia regum Britanniae* (c. 1135)
>> Wace, *Roman de Brut*, c. 1155
>> Layamon, *Brut* (alliterative verse), c. 1200
>>> English chroniclers (incl. Robert of Gloucester, Castleford, etc.) (thirteenth to fourteenth century)
Anglo-Norman *Brut* (Oldest Version) (*ANPB*)[14] – continues Geoffrey's *Historia* to 1272 and then to 1333
– 51–53 MSS
– Long and Short Versions
Latin *Brut*, translated from *ANPB* at the turn of the fifteenth century[15]
Middle English Prose *Brut* (*MEPB*)[16] – first translated from the *ANPB*, but continued, in Middle English, in several stages, to 1461
– **200+ MSS** (my emphasis)
– 13 early printed editions (1480–1527)
– Extant in 4 versions (cf. Matheson, *The Prose* Brut): 'Common', 'Extended', 'Abbreviated', 'Peculiar'

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14 The standard edition of *ANPB* is *The Oldest Anglo-Norman Prose* Brut *Chronicle: An Edition and Translation*, ed. and trans. by Julia Marvin (Boydell Press, 2006); over 53 manuscripts survive.
15 The only classification of the Prose *Brut* is Lister M. Matheson, *The Prose* Brut: *The Development of a Middle English Chronicle*, Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies 180 (Medieval & Renaissance Texts & Studies, 1998). More than 250 manuscripts have now been identified, with many that are not covered in Matheson now added to the list. The Latin *Brut* is still not edited.
16 The standard edition of *MEPB* is *The Brut, or Chronicles of England*, ed. by F. W. D. Brie, 2 vols, EETS OS 131 and 136 (1906–08).

This chronology shows how chronicles derived from Geoffrey's *Historia* did not stop being expanded and added to with Wace, Layamon, or even those named authors of the thirteenth and fourteenth century we now know about (Castleford, Gloucester). It remained a live narrative project in the hands of not only professional historians (monks and scholars, or courtiers, and later heralds), who composed the first long Anglo-Norman Prose *Brut* (*ANPB*) and the author or authors of the Latin translation of the latter, but also numerous anonymous writers. Many were amateur compilers from the late fourteenth and fifteenth century who first translated *ANPB* into Middle English, and then added to the narrative, also altering parts of the legendary history pertaining to King Arthur's reign.

The numbers in which the chronicle narrative of Arthur's reign survived throughout the Middle Ages in England are overwhelming, and speak to a boom in readership and hence consumption of the story of Arthur (which takes up a considerable portion of the text) in Middle English.[17] The ubiquity of the 'historical Arthur' of the chronicles attested to by not only the number of manuscripts in which *MEPB* survives (over 200), but also nuances or changes to Arthur's narrative that appear therein, presents a competing view of Arthur in Britain – competing, that is, for modern scholars, since medieval readers and writers did not seem to share a concern for the boundaries of the fantasy Arthur of medieval romance that was in vogue across languages and territories. For the English-speaking audiences of the later Middle Ages, the Arthur of the chronicle tradition was a strong contender for the attention of both the upper classes, familiar with the sophistication of French romance, and the middle classes, like Thomas Malory, whose familiarity with both the lesser forms of English romance and the chronicle tradition has been long established.[18] For the vast majority of the extant manuscript copies of the *MEPB* the presentational evidence shows them to be not deluxe objects, but rather

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17 The path towards further explorations of the narrative phenomenon that is the Middle English Prose *Brut* is still nowhere near accomplished. With the exception of the larger-scale project 'Imagining History' (2006–11, Queen's University, Belfast), which described fewer than a third of the extant manuscripts of the *MEPB* and Matheson's classification from 1998 cited above, a few PhD theses (editions of discrete portions of the *MEPB* or of one manuscript), and articles by a handful of scholars (e. g., William Marx, Elizabeth Bryan, Tamar Drukker, and myself) the bulk of this corpus remains virtually unexplored, and poorly known by scholars of Arthurian romance. In my ongoing project, *The Middle English Prose* Brut: *Cultural Object and Agent of Change*, I explore the whole corpus of extant manuscripts and select early editions to demonstrate the significance of this extensive prose text in the shaping of culture and political vocabularies in late medieval England.
18 See Raluca L. Radulescu, *Gentry Context for Malory's* Morte Darthur (D. S. Brewer, 2003) for an exploration of the political and historical reading Malory's contemporaries would have been familiar with; and, among others, in relation to Malory's minor sources, more specifically, Ralph Norris, *Malory's Library: The Sources of the* Morte Darthur (D. S. Brewer, 2008).

predominantly family-owned books that were used, not just displayed as objects of pride for their owners. In other words, these are much smaller, less decorated (if ever) codices,[19] visibly owned in the lower social strata, not the highest echelons of the aristocracy and royalty.[20] As I have discussed elsewhere, members of the gentry and the bourgeois were the prime audience for this text, quite evidently also when first printed by William Caxton in 1480, just as Thomas Malory's *Morte Darthur* was also marketed by Caxton to 'divers gentlemen'. Changes to historical accounts did continue to be made, too. At the other end of the Middle Ages, in England again, John Hardyng wrote a chronicle in verse in which he not only inserted the Grail Quest, but made Galahad the initiator of an order of the Grail, had him die and be buried in Glastonbury.[21] It is important, therefore, to consider not only how much of anything written about Arthur might have been read as either history or fiction, or both, but also how much would one learn about Arthur, and where from in late medieval England.

Creativity was part and parcel of both historical and literary productions, and indeed Arthur featured prominently in chronicles, which were produced and disseminated in higher numbers than any other extant Arthurian romances in medieval England. As Edward Donald Kennedy reminds us in his recent contribution to the forthcoming *Cambridge History of Arthurian Literature and Culture*:

> The 'lowly' chronicles, as a friend once jokingly referred to them, were far more influential than well-known works like the Alliterative *Morte Arthure* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, which survive in only one manuscript each; the chronicles were largely responsible for Arthur's reputation in Britain.[22]

Indeed, as Julia Boffey and Carol Meale, scholars of English medieval manuscripts, also remarked long ago, only twenty-five manuscripts that contain English Arthurian literary texts survive; 'interestingly, out of them [of the twenty-five] eleven are

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19 I discuss the material format and size of the corpus of *MEPB* in Radulescu, 'Holding History in Your Hands' (forthcoming). (Brepols, 2026).

20 See Radulescu, 'Gentry Readers of the *Brut*'.

21 For a full edition of John Hardyng's first version of the chronicle, see *John Hardyng's Chronicle Edited from British Library MS Lansdowne 204*, ed. by James Simpson and Sarah Peverley (Medieval Institute Publications, 2015), vol. 1.

22 Edward Donald Kennedy, 'Arthur in Latin, Anglo-Norman and English Chronicles prior to 1500', in *Cambridge History of Arthurian Literature and Culture*, ed. by Raluca Radulescu and Andrew Lynch, 2 vols (Cambridge University Press, forthcoming). For a more detailed survey of *ANPB* and *MEPB*, see Julia Marvin and Raluca Radulescu, 'Arthur in the Prose *Brut*', also in the aforementioned forthcoming volume.

known either to have been copied or to have been in circulation in the city'.[23] In other words, not only do we have few, relatively speaking, literary texts in Middle English containing the Arthurian story produced in England, but out of those that survive, nearly half are concentrated in the capital and hence near the court. What this tells us is that Arthur's figure would have been by far better known from historical writing, so widely spread to be ubiquitous in the town as in the countryside, judging by the quality, distribution, and social class background of owners and readers of chronicle manuscripts, than from Arthurian romances alone.

One might ask what purpose Arthur's reign might serve at the other end of the Middle Ages in England – and hence why a prosification of Robert of Gloucester's chronicle, particularly underlining Mordred's act of treachery, proclaiming himself king, and the way in which Arthur chopped his head off, would be needed? The answer to this is easy. It is clear, from the evidence not only of the significant number of vernacular chronicles surviving from the period, but also from the changes to Arthur's narrative discussed above, that historical writing was deemed useful by a broader readership than merely those involved in courtly politics or the monk-scholars employed to record historical events. I argue that the chronicles that included the story of Arthur, such as his rise and fall, his deposition at the hands of one of his own blood, were deemed useful tools to develop politically-inflected thinking around contemporary events taking place in the fifteenth century, by the upper and middle classes, who played important roles in events of national importance.[24]

Indeed, when the anonymous compilers pondered on the sources they used, and mixed and matched the narratives they picked up, they were clearly alert to the possibilities posed by the material to shape contemporary understanding of recent events, and that must have been quite appealing. To this extent I agree with John Thompson's overview of the post-medieval appeal of the Middle English chronicles:

> [the Middle English Prose *Brut* chronicles'] significance, [in terms of the cultural mapping exercise that is the purpose of his essay] does not simply rely on the number and nature of their extant copies or their historical value as accurate documentary sources. Instead it

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23 Julia Boffey and Carol M. Meale, 'Selecting the Text: Rawlinson c. 86 and Some Other Books for London Readers', in *Regionalism in Late Medieval Manuscripts and Texts*, ed. by Felicity Riddy (D. S. Brewer, 1991), pp. 143–69 (at p. 161).

24 I explored this in Radulescu, *Gentry Context*, Chapter 2. The first *cri de cœur* in this respect among Arthurian scholars, and an inspiration for my own work, was Felicity Riddy's classic study, first presented at another International Arthurian Congress, 'Reading for England: Arthurian Literature and National Consciousness', *BBIAS*, 43 (1991), 314–32.

depends on the *meaningful and productive ways in which chronicle versions can be said to have expanded the imagined range and scope of the British history.*[25]

Thompson speaks of the overall capacity of the narrative of the Middle English Prose *Brut* in printed format to provide its medieval anonymous compilers ample opportunities to develop a repertoire for historical writing. However, Thompson dismisses, further in his chapter, the possibility that chronicle writing allowed for subtle nuancing; instead he considers that the medieval compilers of chronicles lacked a 'sophisticated awareness of the contradictory historiographical impulses surrounding the English foundation myth they were charged with perpetuating'. While the original 'contradictory historiographical impulses' that led to the writing of 'the English foundation myth' may have been lost on fifteenth-century compilers of vernacular chronicles, the evidence I present in this article demonstrates that they nonetheless grasped the opportunity to interpret the events of Arthur's reign from the perspective of their own fifteenth-century political experiences.

John Trevisa, the translator of the famous fourteenth-century text *Polychronicon*, by Ranulph Higden, into English, said 'al men neodeth to knawe the cronykes'.[26] In another, still relevant, context Matthew Fisher has reminded us that the other well-known English chronicler, Robert Mannyng, also a member of the Gilbertine order, and author of the more famous *Handlyng Synne*, a confessional manual translated from an Anglo-Norman French source, claimed, in his chronicle from the settling of the island by Brutus to Edward I's death in 1307, that the book is 'not for the lerid bot for the lewed' (not for the learned, but for the unlearned).[27] Fisher extrapolates from this, as well as the aims of that other literary giant, Geoffrey Chaucer, that writing for the 'lewed' (the unlearned) would have been part of a 'larger rhetoric of accessibility'. Indeed, I would argue that such an intention was still very much valid and, one might add, much more democratically spread, in the fifteenth century, the period that saw a boom in the copying of the Middle English *Brut* chronicles.

Against the complexity of the relationships between and among vernacular chronicles in England in the later medieval period (not to mention in Scotland and Wales), the anonymous *MEPB*, originally translated from the *ANPB*, is therefore by far the most widespread prose narrative in English in medieval England – in fact,

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25 See John J. Thompson, 'Re-imagining History through the English Prose *Brut* Tradition', in *L'*Historia regum *Britannie et les 'Bruts' en Europe*, ed. by Hélène Tétrel and Géraldine Veysseyre, 2 vols (Classiques Garnier, 2015), vol. 1, pp. 345–63 (at p. 353).

26 Cited in Thompson, 'Re-imagining History', p. 352.

27 See Matthew Fisher, 'Vernacular Historiography', in *Medieval Historical Writing: Britain and Ireland, 500–1500*, ed. by Jennifer Jahner, Emily Steiner, and Elizabeth M. Tyler (Cambridge University Press, 2019), pp. 339–55 (at p. 341; citing *Mannyng's Chronicle*, I. 6).

it is the best-selling secular narrative in medieval England, surpassing, in extant numbers (over 200 manuscripts), all other narratives of Arthur in the vernacular. If one knew about Arthur in fifteenth-century England, it would have been from a history book, not from a courtly or even what we now call a popular romance. *MEPB* speaks to us as Arthurian specialists not *necessarily* about new stories of Arthur, but rather about continuity, as well as acceptance of the role played by the writing of change into the seemingly unchanged story of time. While the story of Arthur may have been perceived as immutable in terms of the broad outline and, historically speaking, a lesson to learn from (alongside values to emulate), the medium of prose (versus that of verse, that dominated the Arthurian romances of the previous century in England and were traditionally seen as the medium for fiction) may have been just the kind of avenue through which one might try one's hand at altering the way time is said to have passed, the story of time, so to speak.

The 'Brut' as the best-selling tradition of writing focused on history of the land and its inhabitants in medieval Britain provided opportunities to reflect on and engage with personal and collective experiences of time – and, at over 200 extant manuscripts, it did so on a grand scale. This is a Galfridian narrative that goes beyond history or literature by incorporating legends, miracles, prophecy, myth, and more. The material formats in which it survives indicate the variety of social classes, genders, and age groups that both had access to it and commissioned it.[28] Its ownership and circulation further contributed, in a long-lasting way, to the development of the English language, English literary style, historiography and book history in ways that can no longer be ignored – but also to understanding the history of the moment through its reflection in the Arthurian past. This body of writing would have been an ideal vehicle to debate historical lessons in kingship and governance, treason and loyalty, as in the brief example from the Cambridge manuscript cited above.

How did, therefore, readers of the *MEPB* encounter Arthur? I wrote elsewhere about the numerous formats in which the narrative is found, and the irregular presentations the text received. Suffice to add that most extant copies of *MEPB* do not include headings for the chronicle, running heads, nor mention what genre the text belongs to in the opening lines.[29] How did medieval readers even know where to locate Arthur's exploits in the text, or, even more broadly, that the *Brut* would contain a narrative about Arthur? While to us the term 'Brut' is better known in association with the much earlier works by Wace (*Roman de Brut*) and Layamon (*Brut*), using this as a title would have helped correlate the link between *MEPB* and

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28 See Radulescu, 'Gentry Readers of the *Brut*'.
29 See Radulescu, 'Holding History in Your Hands' (forthcoming).

other *Brut* chronicles. As Elizabeth Bryan reminds us, the term 'Brut' was useless as a title because it indicated neither an author, nor the language or content of the text it might be appended to.[30] However, the title did indicate, for avid consumers of Arthurian romance, a narrative derived from Geoffrey's *Historia*, which would have naturally included the story of Arthur.

A discussion of Arthur's presence in the *MEPB* requires, therefore, a context. Among the most important features that the narrative of *MEPB* presented to medieval readers as it does to modern scholars today is its length and variety of content. Classified by Lister Matheson in 1998 in the four categories listed above (see Table 1), the Common Version, the Abbreviated Version, the Extended Version, and the Peculiar Versions, *MEPB* might appear to the uninitiated modern scholar as a corpus with a fixed core. This would be presumed to reside in what Matheson called the Common Version, translated from the *ANPB* and hence also presumed to be unchanged in the part describing Arthur's reign, which is ultimately derived from Geoffrey's *Historia*. In reality, the Common Version, which accounts for *c.* 96 manuscripts, that is nearly half of the extant corpus, presents as many interesting developments, including in the part about King Arthur's reign, as the other versions, which together account for the rest of the extant corpus (more than 106 manuscripts). In fact, the portion dedicated to Arthur seems to have elicited some interesting changes or even slight touches in presentation and labelling, possibly due to its positioning so evidently between romance and chronicle. In the extant manuscripts of *MEPB* the underlining of proper names and running heads across the top of folios often guided the reader to Arthur's reign, as much as annotation in the margins of the *Brut* corresponding to the first settling of the land by Brutus and the foundation of the main cities. This Arthur of history was, therefore, a king to be read about with serious intent, judging by the diversity of forms of intervention found in the extant corpus of *MEPB*. To judge just from a few examples, this Arthur was 'for everyone', rarely, if ever, present in deluxe copies, but rather encountered in the books owned by the middle classes, often incomplete, with spaces left for initials and chapter headings that were never completed.[31] In these and most copies of *MEPB* finding and reading about Arthur would have been a challenge if his reign were not signalled, sometimes in unusual ways – predominantly in fifteenth-century copies. In what follows I turn to how Arthur's reign was 'updated'

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30 Elizabeth Bryan, 'Matthew Parker and the Middle English Prose *Brut*', in *The Prose Brut and Other Late Medieval Chronicles: Books Have Their Histories: Essays in Honour of Lister M. Matheson*, ed. by Jaclyn Rajsic, Erik Kooper, and Dominique Hoche (York Medieval Press, 2016), pp. 165–80 (at p. 169).

31 I discuss this in Radulescu, 'Holding History in Your Hands' (forthcoming).

in fifteenth-century copies of *MEPB*, quite clearly in order to fit in or respond to contemporary political concerns entertained by its reading audiences.

Updating Arthur

In the past scholars assumed changes to Arthur's narrative in the *MEPB* to be rarely found and subtle. A first example was discussed by Felicity Riddy from London, Lambeth Palace, MS 306, which contains a version of *MEPB* that Matheson classified later under the label 'Peculiar', though it is largely an abbreviated, almost annals-style, account of the story. In this version of *MEPB* Arthur dies not at Mordred's hands, but possibly of old age, since he is said to have 'regned well and worthely xxvj yere', and 'where he is beryed the story make no mencion' (fols 6v–7r).[32] The compiler of this version seems to have avoided, carefully, both the mention of Arthur's death at Mordred's hands and Uther's poisoning. In what appears to be an evident comparison with the king at the time the chronicle was composed, the Lancastrian Henry VI, this compiler adds that the most recent king was 'put downe from the crowne by *all the comyns*', and not by the opposing faction, the Yorkists. In other words, the kings of legendary history do not die as a result of usurpation, and neither do those in the contemporary moment. The 'commons' can be blamed, if needed, for the deposition of the Lancastrian Henry VI, and there is, at least in this chronicle version, no reason to believe that history provides us with a precedent for usurpation of the kind Arthur's story would have otherwise provided in this chronicle. Yet, unavoidably, this chronicle's mention of Arthur living so long and reigning for so long undisturbed by internecine strife surely lives in the book of history as a veiled trigger for a perceptive audience's memory that kings can be and have been deposed, even if not for the most noble of causes.

Elsewhere in the *MEPB*, however, Arthur's reign is actually updated to incorporate the most recent, topical vocabulary, which is now used to emphasise the similarity between the lessons of history and the contemporary moment. In Harvard, Houghton Library, English MS 530, as I show elsewhere, the anonymous compiler clearly used new legal language in the phrasing of Mordred's usurpation, and did

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32 A transcription is also available in *Three Fifteenth-Century Chronicles, with Memoranda by John Stowe*, ed. by James Gairdner (Camden Society, 1880), p. 11. Jaclyn Rajsic and I explore this manuscript version in more detail in the co-written chapter 'King Arthur in the Late Middle English *Brut* Chronicles and Genealogies', in *La tradition arthurienne tardive en Angleterre et en Écosse: du Moyen Âge au début de l'Époque Moderne,* ed. Christine Ferlampin-Acher (Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2020), pp. 1057–82.

so deliberately.[33] In this much changed copy of the 'Common Version' of the *MEPB* Mordred is accused of having imagined and planned the king's death, which, by fifteenth-century standards, signals specific language enshrined in the law since the middle of the previous century for the crime of high treason. Such wording would function as evidence of the planning of a crime even if actual evidence might be as flimsy as a verbal accusation from an enemy of the incriminated person. Accusations of planning or imagining the king's death became increasingly common during the Wars of the Roses, evidently due to increased anxiety over the fate of the Lancastrian dynasty and the potential for plotting against the person of the king. Interestingly, the accusations reoccur elsewhere in the chronicle, at points associated with fifteenth-century events, which demonstrates that the scribe-compiler of this version of *MEPB* was thinking carefully through the parts of legendary history in his exemplar, and interpreted Mordred's actions in the light of what fifteenth-century readers would have understood high treason to involve.

Updating Arthur's narrative with elements pertaining to fifteenth-century politically-sensitive topics demonstrates not only the anonymous compilers' intentions, to create a parallel, but also the avid interest they expected their readers to show in Arthur's 'history' – its identification as an attractive, or at least interesting, lesson from the legendary past that could bear on the political present. In this context, we may better grasp the transformations of late medieval English Arthurian romance in Thomas Malory's hands as an effort at nuancing the details of Arthur's demise politically. Malory, a politically-involved member of the English gentry who participated in the Wars of the Roses, and was the recipient of so many of the propaganda messages put forward by the Lancastrian and Yorkist factions, undoubtedly presents to his gentry readers an Arthurian story that is politically-inflected as much as the chronicles he was inspired by. This Arthur is 'updated' to provide a tool for the interpretation of contemporary fifteenth-century kingship and politics.[34]

These examples show that the blurring of boundaries between history and fiction in English writing of the late medieval period was complete, yet adjusting Arthur to fit the expectations of fifteenth-century English readers took other forms as well. As an exemplary king, Arthur could attract a variety of political interpretations, depending on the political moment of the chronicle's copying during

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33 I discuss this at length in relation to the political nuancing of the Arthurian story in Malory's Morte Darthur in Raluca L. Radulescu, 'What We Leave Behind: Literary Legacy in Malory's Characterisation', in Medieval and Arthurian Studies in Memory of Fiona Tolhurst, ed. by Dorsey Armstrong and Kevin S. Whetter (D. S. Brewer, 2025), pp. 88–110.
34 See my Gentry Context, chapter 2.

the fifteenth century. In Trinity College Dublin, MS 498, which contains a late fif-teenth-century Peculiar Version of the *MEPB*, continued to 1460, Arthur is intro-duced in a very brief paragraph:

> How Arthur the son of Ut*er* regnyd kynge of all Brutayne and of his w*or*thynes and famous dedys Arthur whan Uter dyed was of age xv yere. He was crownyd at Wynchest*er*. *In the yere of grace cccc. Iiijˣˣ.xix he bare in his banner an Image of owre lady*. In hasty tyme aftyr his coronacion he began to werre fyrst on Goddis enemyes. And so at the last he droffe Colgryn to the North and scomfy3t hym longe tyme in Yorke. (Trinity College Dublin, MS 489, fol. 80v; my emphasis)

To my knowledge a pictorial representation of Arthur carrying the image of the Blessed Virgin Mary on his banner is not encountered elsewhere in the late medie-val English chronicle tradition. Although the image is clearly taken from Geoffrey's *Historia*, as with other types of interpolations in the story of Arthur, it demonstrates the interest taken by the scribe-compiler in searching further sources, possibly both Geoffrey's *Historia* and Nennius's *Historia Brittonum* – or the more recent chronicle of Peter of Langtoft, which appears in one fourteenth-century manuscript accom-panied by individual illustrations for each king. Indeed, in London, British Library, MS Royal 20 A ii, a copy of Langtoft's chronicle, Arthur is depicted standing, dressed in full armour (typical of the fourteenth century), with a shield covered with the image of the Virgin holding Jesus in her arms (fol. 4r). Arthurian heraldry, whether Arthur's shield or shields belonging to his knights, is relatively rare in insular man-uscripts (unlike Continental ones, particularly French ones).[35] The detail of Arthur's shield in the fifteenth-century Dublin manuscript suggests that Arthur is both made recognisable for those readers with a scholarly interest in other chronicles that mention his shield, sword, and other insignia, and that his reign still attracted atten-tion, *tout court*, within the vast body of prose the *MEPB* presented to the scribes.

A final piece of evidence for the *MEPB*'s account of Arthur's reign eliciting responses from fifteenth-century compilers was found by Matheson in London, Lambeth Palace, MS 84, a Peculiar Version.[36] Matheson transcribed four main pas-sages that were added to the chronicle, which include brief notices of the deaths of Longinus and Joseph of Arimathea, who is said to be buried at Glastonbury; a

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35 For a discussion, see Raluca L. Radulescu, 'Arthurianism in Medieval Society and Politics', in *Cambridge History of Arthurian Literature and Culture*, ed. by Raluca Radulescu and Andrew Lynch, 2 vols (Cambridge University Press, forthcoming). For a discussion of the representation of Arthur's shield, see Elizabeth Bryan, 'Picturing Arthur in English History: Text and Image in the Middle English Prose *Brut*', *Arthuriana*, 23.4 (2013), 38–71.
36 For an edition and discussion of these, see Lister M. Matheson, 'The Arthurian Stories in Lam-beth Palace MS 84', *Arthurian Literature*, 26 (1998), 70–91.

long account of the birth and childhood of Merlin, including his journey to King Vortiger's court; the story of an exploit of King Arthur, in which Arthur destroys a pack of marauding wildcats that is terrorising the countryside of Cornwall; some minor alterations to the account of the end of Arthur, wherein Avalon is called 'the Ile of Aples', and the British hope of Arthur's return is recorded, although in the next chapter it is specifically stated that Arthur died and was buried at Glastonbury in 546 A.D., after a reign of twenty-eight years. In this version of the *MEPB* the compiler felt the need to blend what we would now call the fictional elements of Arthur's story, some evidently derived from the *Estoire del Saint Graal*,[37] Welsh lore, and Arthur's historical end, yet mythical return.

In short, Arthur's reign stirred interest from late medieval audiences as much as it had done in the early years after Geoffrey's *Historia* was written. It is clear that Arthur's fate, and that of his kingdom, preoccupied late medieval English audiences, particularly from the point of view of succession and controversy over rightful inheritance. The nuances added in manuscript versions of the *MEPB* reflect this. A dramatic change that Matheson only observed in a few manuscripts and ascribed to a need to abbreviate the narrative, concerns four chapters after Arthur's end and his passing of the crown to Constantine, which are excised in some copies of the text.[38] According to Matheson, these chapters form the yardstick by which he classified the different versions of *MEPB*. Matheson classified the manuscripts in which these four chapters at the end of Arthur's reign were missing as a subgroup of what he called the Abbreviated Version of *MEPB*. Ten years ago Edward Donald Kennedy identified this issue in a newly-discovered fifteenth-century copy of *MEPB*, the 'Dartmouth College *Brut*' (formerly Beeleigh Abbey), and suggested that the excision could indicate a reluctance, on the part of the scribe/compiler, to describe murders in cathedrals – as one of Mordred's sons is, according to the narrative derived, ultimately from the *Historia*, killed in a cathedral, where he was taking refuge from Constantine, Arthur's designated successor. Kennedy further assigned this interpretation to reminding audiences of the murder of Bishop Thomas Beckett which would justify God's punishment of the Welsh.

Whichever way we read this, the interest manifested by compilers of the *MEPB* in including or excluding these key chapters in Arthur's reign suggests that this

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37 This turn to the Old French Vulgate cycle is also attested by the early fifteenth-century verse translation of the *Estoire del Saint Graal* and the *Estoire de Merlin* for the London skinners by a member of the skinners' guild, Henry Lovelich. For a study of this unique translation, see Raluca L. Radulescu, *Romance and Its Contexts in Late Medieval England: Politics, Piety and Penitence* (D. S. Brewer, 2013), Chapter 3.

38 See Edward Donald Kennedy, '"History Repeats Itself": the Dartmouth *Brut* and Fifteenth-century Historiography', *Digital Philology: A Journal of Medieval Cultures*, 3.2 (2014), 196–214.

section of the chronicle was read more carefully than previously believed, and with more care and interest in what perhaps can be considered more than the general relevance of Arthur's rise and fall as a mirror for princes for fifteenth-century English kings and their subjects. Even more interestingly, what stands out in this situation is not just that four chapters usually occurring after Arthur's death were omitted in copies of the Abbreviated Version, but that the gap was then 'patched up' with the inclusion of a chapter derived from Geoffrey's *Historia* as follows:

> [Constantine] drove that one of them vnto London and that othre vnto Wynchestir and thei entred the townes. in this same tyme deide Dannyell the Byshop of Bangoure a Religious man and in this same tyme was the Bisshop of Gloucestre made Archebysshop of Caunterbury. And after this Constantine sewed thes Mordrede sonnes. And beseged hym ate Wynchestre and toke it and entred the toune and this Mordred fledde into the churche called Amphibale and ate the highe altier he was take and slaine and that other fledde into an hows of ffreres and at the laste was take and slaine and this Constantine regned iiij yere and was slaine of Conan and his fellyship and buried at Stonehegge besyde Uter Pendragonnis. (London, British Library, MS Royal 18 A IX, fols. 36v–37r)[39]

The story here complements, rather effectively, the story of Arthur's succession, in a way that I believe fits even better with fifteenth-century debates over the rightful king of England. Closer scrutiny of the details reveals that the mention of the church of St Amphibalus in this passage recalls the story of Constans the monk, brother to Uther Pendragon and Aurilambros, and uncle to Arthur. Constans was tricked by Vortiger into abandoning his vows, importantly taken in the church of St Amphibalus, which led to his becoming a puppet king so that Vortiger would rule in his stead. The scribe-compilers of this paragraph quite likely wanted to signal the return of sin and corruption in the land after Arthur's death. However, although Geoffrey goes as far as to attribute the demise of the Welsh to God's punishment of Constantine's crime, in this version of the *MEPB* this condemnation of the Welsh is not included, which seems to suggest that a link (that of a king who was too pious to rule but was persuaded to continue, leaving others in charge of the kingdom – like the Lancastrian Henry VI) to the historical present of the fifteenth century was more important than the fate of the Welsh.

Not noticed before, in British Library, MS Royal 18 A. IX, rubrication used for the capitulum marks and some letters on the page and chapter titles, is also used to underline the proper names Arthur, Mordred, Sandwich, as well as the word 'traitoure', written next to Mordred (in a way that is reminiscent of the first manuscript

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39 Matheson, in his classification, assigns this passage to the Abbreviated Version (see *The Prose Brut*, p. 211). He also includes a transcription of the passage from San Marino, Huntington Library, MS HM 131 (p. 213).

discussed in this article, Cambridge University Library, MS Ll. 2.14 above). Moreover, the word 'traitoure' is written starting with a capital, which, although not usually indicative of anything other than inconsistency in capitalisation in the usage of Middle English, seems to be deliberate here (fol. 36).[40] In full circle, if we look at the passage with which this article started, my newly-discovered evidence of Arthur's treatment in the *MEPB* indicates that aspects of his usurpation were particularly relevant to the fifteenth-century scribes who copied these chronicles – and clearly, also, their intended audiences.

All such evidence demonstrates that the adjustment of the text, now linking the death of one of Mordred's sons to the church where Constans took his vows to be a religious man, was intentional. This revised version of the story of Constans would function as a parallel to developments in the life of the contemporary fifteenth-century king, the Lancastrian Henry VI, said to have been so pious that he was completely uninterested in political affairs – allowing others to rule in his name. Detractors of Henry VI's uncle, Humphrey Duke of Gloucester, who was protector of the realm during Henry VI's minority, claimed exactly that, which, in the eyes of contemporary readers of *MEPB* would make him the Vortiger of contemporary politics – with Henry VI his puppet king equivalent to Constans. During Henry VI's minority public pressure exerted on Humphrey escalated to unprecedented levels, further fuelled by the vicious allegations of high treason – specifically imagining and planning the young king's death – levelled against Humphrey's wife, Eleanor Cobham. In the highly-charged political period of Henry VI's minority Eleanor was quickly transformed, in the popular imagination, and through both rumours and then the allegations of treason, into a witch who was trying to get her husband the throne of England.[41] Her historical trial and case remain, to the present day, a reminder of the power of words to change the course of history. The modified portion of the *MEPB* that we now see emerges across all versions of the chronicle in fifteenth-century copies emphasises Mordred's status as a traitor *and* the association between the precedent set by Constans, the weak, pious king, Arthur's compromised succession, and controversies surrounding Henry VI's rule.

In conclusion, the widespread interest in Arthur's narrative among English-speaking audiences demonstrated in this article also points to the position of this type of writing, be it in romance or historical form, on the cultural stage in

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40 This material is derived from my direct examination of all the manuscripts cited here.

41 The classic study of this case remains Ralph A. Griffiths, 'The Trial of Eleanor Cobham: An Episode in the Fall of Duke Humphrey of Gloucester', *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library*, 51.2 (1969), 381–99.

England on the cusp between the Middle Ages and pre-modernity. The Arthur of romance and history captivated audiences from all social backgrounds. Furthermore, the uses of Arthur's story for propaganda purposes, as encountered later in the Tudor period, and prefigured in the genealogical chronicles, which themselves contained versions of the Prose *Brut*, attest to the endurance, rather than waning, of Arthurian tradition at this key junction in history.