The Death of Arthur: A Critical/Creative Approach to Fourteenth-Century Alliterative Poetry

by

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Introduction

In December 2016, vandals spray painted “Saracen Go Home” and “Deus Vult” (the Crusader battle cry for “God willing”) on the walls of a Scottish mosque.

![Figure 1: "Mosque in Cumbernauld Sprayed with Racist Graffiti," BBC, 17 December 2016.](image)

The vandals’ message would be repugnant in any phrasing, but what does it mean that they chose to couch their xenophobia in such historically specific language?

In *Saracens*, John Tolan traces the eponymous term as it transformed from an ethnic marker used by medieval Europeans to designate people from the Middle East into a slur synonymous with “idolater” and the Crusader mission (xv, 126-127). Tolan recognizes the obvious incompatibility of idolatry with Muslim practice, but shows how the conflation was necessary for the medieval mind in order to cast the Crusades as “part of the age-old struggle” against “the idolatrous other” (109, 128).

However, the term “Saracen” faded from use as the Crusades ended and as words for “Muslim” and “Islam” appeared in Western European languages (xv). So what are we to make of the historical moments in which it reappears? And of our own moment, in which such language manifests physically on the walls of this Scottish mosque and ideologically in contemporary political discourse about the war on “radical Islamic terrorism”? Why do the Crusades, the last of which was waged in the fourteenth century, still hold such imaginative power?
In *Alliterative Revivals*, Christine Chism analyzes fourteenth-century English alliterative poetry in order to explore the way we use history. She identifies our condition as “citizens of the present” as dependent upon “our solicitation of the past,” thereby challenging the temporal distinctions we make between the two (Chism 1). Past becomes present as we use it to structure the way we perceive ourselves and others.

Chism alights on the so-called “alliterative revival” as a perfect case study because it traffics in nostalgia. The term refers to a body of English literature whose style, vocabulary, and subject matter harken back to a (nationalist and revisionist) Anglo-Saxon past. However, it should be noted that spotty manuscript records make it difficult to speak with certainty about an organized movement. If an influential artist pioneered the style, he left no trace; if it evolved over time, each precipitating step has disappeared. Allowing that the whole revival may be a “fluke of the record,” Chism argues that we can only extrapolate on the texts that remain (16). In her study of them, Chism foregrounds the “more blatantly interpretive questions”: what they share in subject, story world, authors, and audiences (19-20).

She identifies the authors as typically “clerics or functionaries associated with the households of provincial knights, gentry, or monastic establishments” rather than professional poets (30). The audience, therefore, could be “the traditional barony,” geographically (and, she suggests, ideologically) removed from the royal courts (30). What unites the texts thematically are their “embodied and spectacular performance of history” (2). They reanimate the past through its figures and events to explore and critique contemporary issues. They construct binaries but force both sides to co-exist, often in one physical body, thus revealing their interdependencies (for example, nature and civilization in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*’s Green Knight). These texts revel in
spectacle, consumption, and the extreme (Chism 24). They are rife with symbols but are more interested in the proliferation of meaning than in assigning each a corresponding and stable signified. Chism identifies even their “difficult, gorgeous, abstruse meter and diction” as contributing to this onslaught of signification (24).

The issues these works tackle—chivalry, religion, aristocracy—are historical and also contemporary, so that well-worn subjects can be imbued with new meaning. As Chism puts it, “…ghosts never return alone. They drag along on their mantles lost memories that compel audiences to confront their foundational evasions, to rewrite their histories, and to renovate themselves” (1). Rather than a static thing, the past becomes a site of negotiation and consumption; the tension between its fixity and its flexibility a productive gap (7, 8). Chism’s characterization of alliterative poetry as “historical recreation” inspired my own contribution to the genre, which takes the form of a television miniseries.

As Sarah McNamer points out in her analysis of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, these texts are inherently performative (246). She outlines a methodology that aims to understand literature of the past as it understood itself, and I follow her in this project. “First, reconstruct the historical conditions of the performance of a text…next, examine how a text seeks to produce emotions, through careful attention to its affective stylistics; then see how it all adds up, kinetically” (247). It is this combination of historical context and close literary analysis that will inform the performance of the texts I have chosen.

Visual and literary media intersect and diverge in their strategies to manipulate emotion. Modern Arthurian adaptations often tell medieval subject matter with contemporary narrative techniques in a way that familiarizes and sanitizes the source texts. I am more interested in what a specifically fourteenth-century alliterative text feels
like, and how close I can come to recreating that in my miniseries by adapting alliteration into a visual technique. Historians in the field of the history of emotions are quick to point out that feeling may never be entirely reproducible—names and even categories of emotion are socially contingent. McNamer proposes that the best way to get at feelings and the people who felt them is by mining “the chief archives of the emotions,” literature, to search for what Susan Matt identifies as the “traces of emotional life” (McNamer 242; Matt 41).

There have been several film and television adaptations of Arthurian literature, each with its own mission and merit, but often sharing a similar approach to the role of the source texts. There have been family-friendly teen dramas like the BBC’s Merlin, star-studded bodice-rippers a lá Starz’s Camelot, and big-budget Hollywood schlockbusters—Guy Ritchie’s upcoming epic is in 3D! What many of these adaptations share is an intertextual approach that combines several sources—from Geoffrey of Monmouth to Howard Pyle—to tell the “whole story” of Arthur’s rise and fall. The vastness of Arthurian material lends itself well to long-form storytelling, but I have chosen to restrict my show to a six-part miniseries based only on the Alliterative Morte Arthure and Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, focusing more on these texts as literature than merely as sources of plot. I have used the most recent scholarship from the fields of the history of emotions, post-colonialism, psychoanalysis, and historicism to piece together what these texts may have felt like and communicated at the time of their creations. McNamer’s methodology locates much of its analysis on the level of the word, and I prioritized texts I did not have to analyze entirely in translation, as well as texts from similar historical contexts so comparison would be more appropriate.
Christine Chism proposes that “to write the past” (whether in a miniseries or on a mosque wall) “is always to address the past’s uses for the present, to animate the writer’s own desires and fears concerning the past” (7). The scholarship I address in my critical chapters considers what the poets of these texts may have intended through their reanimation of past styles and subjects, and informs my own purposes in retelling them now. Chism’s connection between Arthur in the *Alliterative Morte Arthure* and King Edward III’s reign coupled with Heather Blurton’s analysis of cannibalism and the Crusades provide the framework for my first chapter, which reads chivalry (the moral and social code of medieval knights) in the *Alliterative Morte Arthure* as a metaphorically cannibalistic practice that leads to the self-destruction of the Round Table. The cannibal cues in the text are what I propose to draw out visually on screen: connecting feast and battle scenes, linking Arthur to explicitly cannibalistic characters, and emphasizing the bodily aspects of the text’s images of sacrament.

The second chapter analyzes *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* through the lens I develop for the *Alliterative Morte Arthure* to see how the texts can reinforce and complement each other. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* adds emotional interiority to Gawain, one of the most opaque and alienating characters in the *Alliterative Morte Arthure*. By including the text as a flashback, I continue alliterative poetry’s “obsession with temporality,” which Chism identifies through its use of retrospective framing, origin stories, and premonitions (21). Alliterative poetry can take the shape of chronicle or romance, and combining these two texts allows me to play with the tools available to both forms. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, which takes place mostly at court or in the woods rather than in Europe on the battlefield, both expands my visual palette and reveals the way the chivalric body becomes a site of consumption in all its arenas.
These critical chapters lead to a brief reader’s manual preceding the six episode proposals. The proposals are in a form of creative writing I have devised by combining the forms of the television treatment, short story, and camera shot list. The reader’s manual explains this style, as well as the composition and purpose of each episode, at greater length. I will explain which specific narrative techniques from the texts I am incorporating and how I adapt them visually. Stylistically, my primary goal has been to adapt alliteration into a visual style through television techniques. Alliterative poetry capitalizes on the auditory (when it is performed) and the visual (when it is read), and the television format expands on both these senses. At the same time, the reader’s manual addresses the limits and constraints I encountered in adaptation.

It was as I analyzed these texts that I began to understand how this project addresses my own contemporary “desires and fears” (Chism 7). While *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* has long been a hallmark of medieval literature, the *Alliterative Morte Arthure* has not enjoyed the same popularity. Part of this, I believe, comes from the gap between how we use Arthuriana today and how it exists in the text. The *Alliterative Morte Arthure* pushes back on the English nationalism its source material and genre often emphasize. In my reading, the text refutes notions of white superiority, critiques the link between masculinity and violence, and questions the value of war. It is a pessimistic text, making no final promise that the fallen king will rise or the kingdom be made great again. In a time when vandals spray-paint mosques with Crusader rhetoric and political discourse does not follow far behind, the *Alliterative Morte Arthure* makes us aware of the way the past continues to inform the present, and of how our vilification of the “other” is often only the projection of the threat we pose to ourselves.
Chapter One

“Selcouthe Bernes”: Chivalry, Cannibalism, and the Alliterative Morte Arthure

The Alliterative Morte Arthure opens with the Britons’ celebration of a successful military campaign at Arthur’s court. Roman senators arrive and demand Arthur pay tribute to Emperor Lucius. Arthur makes his own claim on the imperial throne and decides to fight Lucius in Europe. Leaving his bastard, Mordred, as his steward, Arthur sails to France. On the journey, he dreams of a majestic dragon who kills a savage bear. His philosophers inform him that he is the dragon who will end Lucius’s tyranny.

When Arthur arrives in France, a Knight Templar informs him of a giant ravaging the region. Arthur sets off to fight it and encounters an old woman grieving the death of her ward, the Duchess of Brittany, whom the giant has raped and killed. As Arthur approaches the giant, he finds the remains of victims and sees men roasting on spits for the giant’s meal. Arthur attacks, castrates, and beheads the giant.

Arthur’s knights engage in two small clashes with Lucius’s army, which is composed of witches, warlocks, and Eastern mercenaries the text identifies as “Saracens.” The Britons win both engagements. The armies meet for a third battle in which Arthur kills Lucius. Rather than return home, Arthur marches on Rome to claim the throne. His army ravages Tuscany and the Pope promises Arthur the imperial title in exchange for peace. Before his coronation, Arthur has a dream in which the Lady of Fortune tells him he has reached the height of his power and will soon fall. The next morning, a messenger from Britain informs him that Mordred has claimed the throne and impregnated Arthur’s wife, Guinevere.
Arthur rushes home. In his first battle with Mordred, Arthur’s nephew and best knight, Gawain, sacrifices himself and his small troop to take the beach so Arthur’s ships may land. Arthur vows that he will revenge Gawain and pursues Mordred, who has retreated. Arthur defeats Mordred and his forces in a second battle, but at the cost of almost his entire army and his own life. He dies shortly after, leaving the throne to his cousin, Constantine.

*The Alliterative Morte Arthure* is one of the texts within the genre of alliterative poetry about which scholars know the least. It is difficult to speak of author, audience, time, or place with much certainty. In his “The Alliterative Morte Arthur: Structure and Meaning,” J. Eadie acknowledges that although the one surviving manuscript comes from a scribe named Robert of Thornton in 1440, the actual poem could be older—he estimates its composition to have been between 1360 and 1430 C.E. (Eadie 1). Jutta Wurster identifies its audience as gentry in the West and East Midlands, its author as a learned cleric familiar with both the language and style of Old English as well as contemporary courtly culture (51-53).

Beyond the basics of its production, scholars have also struggled with the poem’s place within its genre and meaning as a text. It connects to Old English heroic poetry through its depiction of a generous king, loyal fighters, and stylized battle, while descriptions of damsels in distress and individual knights’ adventures recall the more contemporary romantic tradition (Krishna 20). Some read it as a tragedy while others trace influences of the *chanson de geste*, a French tradition of epic poetry (21). The text lends itself to several interpretations. Eadie insists on its place in the tradition of Boethian tragedy, in which Arthur, like any man, is subject to the Wheel of Fortune, and is redeemed at the end through his good works (2). Others identify its plot as charting
Arthur’s deterioration from a great king to “some kind of cruel and warlike monster who has to be punished” (Eadie 2). Christine Chism proposes that the text’s critique is aimed more at structures than at individuals, locating its concern in the specific brand of chivalry that allows for Arthur’s “greatest triumph” and “utter destruction” (189). My reading builds on hers to explore how the text manipulates the motifs of Crusader literature to reveal pure chivalry as a metaphorically cannibalistic practice.

**Chivalry is Death**

Christine Chism reads chivalry in the text as “a fantasy of solidarity between king and noble” at a time when the two were becoming increasingly divided (190). Arthur disavows the standard chivalric practice of the fourteenth century, instead reaching back to an “archaic…purism” through his use of feudal levies and sworn pledges along with his refusal to ransom hostages (190). The poet may be making a contemporary political statement through his allusions to the reign of Edward III, an English mid-fourteenth-century king, who was one of the instigators of the Hundred Years’ War and who often invoked the Arthurian legend to legitimize his own reign (190, 189). Chism explains how Edward reinvigorated old ideas of chivalry associated with Arthur, most notably through his creation of a new Order of knights, to “cement loyalties among the restless nobles” and bolster aristocratic enlistment in his armies (190, 204). Chism therefore reads the text as commentary both on these practices and Edward’s later military losses (189). Edward’s practices may have allowed for the “unprecedented scope and duration” of fourteenth-century English warfare that would plague the economy and complicate “authority, justice, and livelihood” in every social stratum (204). Chism argues that the poem connects the manipulation and expansion of chivalry to England’s woes in order to reveal the consequences of the practice in its purest form.
Arthur: From Dragon to Bear

Chism charts Arthur’s transformation in the *Alliterative Morte Arthure* from a justified leader fighting an oppressor to a perpetrator of “the arbitrary pillaging he is supposedly contesting” (194). In my own reading, I identified several repetitions and inversions that speak to this transformation and inform my portrayal of Arthur within the miniseries. One of the key images of the text is the blood-thirsty giant Arthur defeats upon landing in Brittany. When Arthur meets him, the giant is wearing a grotesque kirtle made of the beards of kings who have paid him tribute. After his victory, Arthur offers all of the giant’s treasure to his men, saying, “‘Have I the kirtle and the club, I covet nought elles’” (*Alliterative Morte Arthure* line 1191). His desire for the giant’s symbols of imperial ambition is the first suggestion of similarity between the king and his foe.

Arthur meets an old woman on his way to fight the giant. She warns him that the giant will not listen to reason: “...thir [these] words are but waste...for both landes and lythes [nations] full little by he settes;/of rentes ne [or] of red gold reckes [thinks] he never”—the giant will cease his violence only in exchange for Arthur’s beard (993-995). Shortly after Arthur’s encounter with the giant, his men skirmish with Lucius’s troops. The Britons win and capture several Romans, but their own Sir Ewain is injured. A knight encourages Arthur to ransom the Romans for “sixty horses charged of silver...charottes [chariots] chockful charged with gold” (1549-1552). Arthur refuses: “There shall no silver him [the captive] save but Ewain recover...for it comes to no king...to comone [bargain] with his captives for covetis [covetousness]...to carp [speak] of cosery [business] when captives are taken” (1572-1582). Arthur’s concern for his wounded knight is admirable, but his refusal to participate in the common practices of contemporary warfare is anomalous, recalling instead the giant’s own ultimatum.
As Arthur accrues military success in his European campaign, his actions become ever more tyrannical. In a moment that recalls the giant’s kirtle of beards, Arthur orders that two senators be shaved in order to humiliate Rome. Arthur’s philosophers analyze the bear in his first dream as a tyrant that “tormentes the pople [people],” and the text later uses this exact phrase to refer to Arthur (AMA 823-825, 3153). The poet goes into lengthy detail about Arthur’s destruction of churches, homes, and places of business, an act that hurts the commoners Arthur claims to protect (3050-3053). The poet presents the pitiful images of miserable widows “often werye [cursing] and weep[ing] and wringen their handes” as Arthur “wastes with war” their homes and livelihoods (3154-3157). Arthur continues on his rampage despite the fact that he has already defeated Lucius, a move which the narrative voice does not describe neutrally: “thus they [Arthur’s army] springen and sprede [spread] and spares but little, / spoiles dispiteously and spilles their vines, / spends unsparely that spared was longe” (3158-3160).

In Arthur’s dream about the Wheel of Fortune, he meets Julius Caesar, who as “a giaunt was holden [held]” (3140). If Arthur succeeds in ascending to Caesar’s throne, he will truly become the giant. Arthur’s philosophers condemn his rampage in their analysis of this dream: “thou has shed much blood and shalkes [men] destroyed, sakeles [innocent] in surquidrie [pride]…shrive [confess] thee of thy shame and shape for thine end” (3398-3400). The text focuses on the blood Arthur has shed, both of innocents and of his own men, in his quest for glory. Chism remarks on the way the poet meticulously describes the individuating details of a knight’s armor only to cover those intricate insignias in blood and break them to pieces on the battlefield (217-218). When Arthur looks out upon the devastation at his final battle, he laments, “here restes the rich blood of the Round Table” (AMA 4282). And in Gawain’s duel with the knight Priamus, the
poet revels in gory description of Gawain’s injury: “with a venomous sword a vein he has touched/that voides so violently that all his wit [color] changed;/the vesar, the aventail, his vestures [armor] rich/with valiant blood was verred [spotted] all over” (AMA 2570-2573). War reduces knights, the pinnacle of English civilization within the text, to grotesque bodies savaged on the battlefield.

**Impossibility of Generation**

The poet’s description of war and its cost questions its place as the “basis for chivalric practice” (Chism 202). Chism argues that the seemingly idyllic portrayal of kinship bonds between the knights and their king in the *Alliterative Morte Arthure* reveals how “the very mechanisms of martial display” both unite and destroy them (199). At the beginning of the text, Arthur commends them: “And let me never want you, whiles I in world regn;/my mensk [honor] and my manhed ye maintain in erthe…ye have knightly conquered that to my crown longes [belongs]” (AMA 398-402). When Arthur first encounters the giant, the poet remarks, “How unseemly that sot sat soupand [dining] him one [alone]” (1043). But it is Arthur who is alone at the poem’s conclusion. His increased belligerence throughout the text guarantees the inevitability of war and death for his knights.

The bonds of kinship between king and knight “downplay the vertical bonds linking generations” (Chism 222). Because the knights value their relationship to Arthur above all else, they neglect their roles as husbands and fathers, thereby never producing a new generation of warriors to take their place when they die. Arthur himself does not have any children, and therefore no clear plan of succession. He aggravates the situation further by promising his throne to three knights, Mordred, Cador, and Gawain, over the course of the text. Arthur’s failure to provide a direct heir makes Mordred’s
impregnation of Guinevere all the more humiliating, casting doubt on Arthur’s virility and fitness to be king.

Even the characters who are related forsake family ties in service to their king. In the final battle, Arthur urges the young knight Idrous to assist his father Ewain, but the bonds of chivalry he has inculcated are too strong. Idrous responds, “I forsake this gate [going to his aid]…and soothly [truly] all sibreden [kinship] but thyself one [alone]” (AMA 4144-4145). Both Idrous and Ewain die in the battle. When the Templar first tells Arthur of the giant, he says, “He has clenly [completely] distroyed all the knave [male] childer,/and them carried to the crag and clenly devoured” (850-851). Arthur, too, feeds on his knights to grow his empire without generating any more. Just as the giant castrated kings, raped women, and killed children, Arthur “attacks family and generation in all its respects” (Chism 224). Arthur’s steward, Mordred, resents staying home from war because without battle experience he cannot establish a reputation. The poem’s figuring of war as the determinant of a man’s value “invalidates more peaceable transfers of power” in order to reveal “the violence by which nobility performs itself…a violence that feeds upon and is fed by monarchical ambition (196, 195).

**Chivalry and Cannibalism: You Are What You Eat**

Chism traces the intersection of chivalry and religious ritual throughout the text, reading in the poet’s description of Arthur’s “pilgrimage” to fight the giant, the “miraculous battlefield healings,” and the canonization of Gawain’s blood after his death a “sanctification” that reveals nostalgia (201). But her previous identification of pure chivalry as a self-consuming practice can also turn these elements into an allusion on the poet’s part to cannibalism, a popular subject in both chivalric literature and Christian tradition. In *Cannibalism in High Medieval Literature*, Heather Blurton identifies the cannibal
act as “a privileged metaphoric mode for representing invasion and conquest in high medieval England,” citing its long history of invasion and cultural assimilation as creating “a preoccupation with the construction of a cultural identity” (Blurton 1, 2).

Late medieval understandings of cannibalism were largely informed by three traditions: a political inheritance that “conceptualized society as a body politic,” a literary tradition known as the Marvels of the East, and the religious practice of the Eucharist (Blurton 3, 5, 9). The first proposed that a group of people could, like any body, be surrounded, dismembered, and reincorporated into another group (2). The *Alliterative Morte Arthure* opens with Arthur at a celebration during which “he dubbed his knightes,/devised ducheries and delt in [gave out] diverse rewmes [kingdoms],/made of his cosins kings anointed,/in kithes [countries] there [where] they covet crowns to bere [bear]” (*AMA* 48-51). This dismantling and redrawing of borders amounts to a form of geographical consumption. The poet plays with the image of warring groups encircling and destroying each other to refigure this consumption through battle tactics, here in a description of Lucius’s army: “then his enemy with host of outlawed bernes [men]/all entangles about our excellent knightes” (3780-81). Later, against Mordred, “hethenes of Argyle and Irish kinges/enverounes [surrounds] our avauntward [frontline] with venomous bernes [men]” (4123-4124).

The second, the literary tradition of the Marvels of the East, established “the context in which cannibals…would be encountered for the entirety of the Middle Ages”: an “Eastern” world of bizarre animals and monstrous men (Blurton 4). The presence of specifically “Saracen” forces in both Lucius’s and Mordred’s army would cue the audience to expect figures from this tradition. Saracens were not only pagans, but also cannibals in some literature from the period—one text describes an Eastern king who
dismembered the body and drank the blood of the archbishop of Salzburg (Tolan 108).
The presence of “sixty giauntes [giants]…engendered by fendes [fiends],/with witches
and warlaws [warlocks]” along with Saracens in Lucius’s army underscores the kind of
creatures with which the “Saracen” was associated (AMA 612-614).

The third, Christian Eucharistic practice, reveals how inextricably tied
cannibalism was to “the central symbol of Mass” (Blurton 1, 2). At the last supper,
Christ instructs, “Take, eat, this is my body,” and the orthodox medieval conception of
the practice viewed sacrament in the literal sense, as “the true body and blood of our
Lord Jesus Christ” (5). While anxiety over the cannibal connection to the Eucharist often
led to fierce debate in medieval theology, by the thirteenth century it had embraced “a
full-scale adoration of the host as Christ” (6).

The First Crusade added a new dimension to the category of the cannibal.
Crusader rhetoric often emphasized the threat the Saracens posed to the Christian
body—forced circumcision, disembowelment, decapitation—but records indicate that it
was the Crusaders themselves who posed the greatest threat over the course of the
conflict (Blurton 4). Several eye-witness accounts, both Christian and Muslim, attest to
“Christian knights, stranded and starving in the Syrian desert, cannibali[zing] the bodies
of the dead” (Blurton 11). The Frankish chronicler Radulph of Caen records, “In
Ma’arra our troops boiled pagan adults in cooking pots; they impaled children on spits
and devoured them grilled” (Maalouf 39). Muslim accounts recall the conquest of
Jerusalem as “an ineffable orgy of killing,” a “ravage” of “the city they [the Crusaders]
claimed to venerate,” and in Turkish literature from that point on the Crusaders are
almost invariably described as cannibals (51, 39).
Richard and Arthur

And yet European medieval literary accounts of contact with the East accuse the Saracens of cannibalism more than any other group, perhaps because of the accusation’s usefulness in discourse about invasion and conquest (Blurton 105, 106). This surfaces most clearly in the tradition of the *chanson de geste*, the genre that developed in the mid-twelfth century as a way to imagine Christian identity under the threat of being “devour[ed] and incorporate[ed] into Islam” even as Western forces invaded Muslim lands, and a tradition to which the *Alliterative Morte Arthure* is often compared (106). The representation of Saracens as cannibals is one of the motifs of the genre; even when texts do not explicitly make the accusation, they link them to other groups that would be recognized as cannibals thanks to the conventions of the Marvels of the East (107). This shows a conception of Islam as an “ideologically monstrous” threat, one that could dismember and consume the communal Christian body (108, 111). Othering the enemy also has the political function of displacing Crusader violence onto its victims (111).

However, a text that helps illuminate this cannibal connection is one that subverts many elements of the *chanson de geste*. *Richard Coer de Lyon*, a text roughly contemporaneous with the *Alliterative Morte Arthure*, depicts three cannibalistic episodes in the famed king’s life: when his Syrian mother flies away from a church rather than accept the Eucharist, when Richard eats a raw lion’s heart, and when he consumes Saracens’ heads. Blurton here identifies a reversal of imagined Muslim characteristics into the qualities of an English nationalist, but with ambiguous consequences (11). The text seems to affirm acts of cannibalism within the English Christian community through its portrayal of Richard’s mother, who cannot be part of the Church without partaking in its sacrament, and through its representation of Richard’s effectiveness against the Saracens.
Some scholars have read in the text a role-reversal between England and Europe, with the former announcing its intention to become the conqueror rather than the conquered (Blurton 121). At the same time, readers have a hard time moving away from the unsettling image of England’s own king as an “unrepentant cannibal,” a portrayal that is perhaps indicative of “a profound uneasiness with the development of an aggressive English nationalism directed…at other Christians in a newly fractured world” (130-131).

**Alliterative Morte Arthure as Crusader Text**

Blurton sees a reference to the Arthurian tradition in the naming of one of Richard’s enemies as “Modard” (recalling “Mordred”), but what does the *Alliterative Morte Arthure* take from *Richard Coeur de Lyon* and the literary tradition from which it stems (124)? The *Alliterative Morte Arthure* situates itself well before the Crusades but was produced centuries after and routinely associates itself with the events. Arthur traces his lineage to a Roman ancestor named Constantine whose mother, the notes following the poem indicate, is believed to have located the true Cross (*AMA* p. 265). In a list of Arthur’s knights, the poet mentions “Raynold and Richere, Rowlandes childer [children],” invoking the legendary Crusader from the wildly popular *Chanson de Roland* (1745).

Arthur takes on the role of protector of Christendom after he defeats Lucius: “I give my protection to all the pope[’s] landes…if we spare [save] the spiritual we speed [succeed] but the better;/whiles we have for [power] to speke, spill [be harmed] shall it [the Church] never?” (2410-2415). Arthur says that his ascension to the imperial throne will “revenge the renk [man] that on the rood [cross] died!” (3217). And in Arthur’s dream of the Wheel of Fortune he meets Godfrey of Bouillon, one of the most famous Crusaders.

Meanwhile, the poet invokes the Crusades not only by including Saracens in Lucius’s army (surprising given that the poem situates itself in the eighth century) but
also through identifying his other mercenaries as hailing from “those este [East] marches” of India, the Middle East, Asia, and Africa (AMA 577-587). The poet plays with the fantastic bodily descriptions found in the tradition of the Marvels of the East by describing the Saracens as “six foot large” from the waist up (1855). Other Orientalizing details include the Sultan of Syria’s arrival in Rome on “coverd cameles” and the Roman war camp’s “olyfantes” [elephants] as well as “cokadrisses [crocodiles] and coffers full rich…and marvelous bestes…that are of the Orient” (616, 1376, 2283-2289).

Even one of Arthur’s own knights, Priamus, cannot escape the exoticism of the East. He hails from Alexandria and performs a miraculous healing thanks to a salve “full of the flowr of the four welle [wells]/that flowes out of Paradise when the flood rises” (2706). And when Arthur returns west to face Mordred, the Saracens have found their way as far as Britain where they and other “paynims” [pagans] serve as mercenaries in the usurper’s army (3533). In a report on these forces, Arthur’s knight Craddok recycles Crusader rhetoric: “they rob thy religious and ravish thy nunnes” (3539). In Gawain’s speech before his final stand against Mordred, he tells his men, “We shall for yon Sarazenes, I seker [assure] you my trewth [word],/soupe [sup] with our saviour and solemnly in heven,/in presence of that precious prince of all other,/with prophetes and patriarkes and apostles full noble” (3804-3807).

**Cannibal Cues**

The physical presence of the Saracens, especially among Mordred’s army, enlists bodies that would have a specific meaning for an audience familiar with both the Marvels of the East and the *chanson de geste*, triggering an anxiety about cannibalism within both Christian theology and practice that the author can usefully extend to his presentation of chivalry. The text’s rich Crusader allusions, coupled with its gratuitous images of gore and meat,
elevate its material from simply the rise and fall of a long-ago king to a contemporary critique of the uses and consequences of chivalry.

The first explicit reference to cannibalism comes through Arthur’s encounter with the giant, who “soups all this sesoun [season] with seven knave childer [boys],/chopped in a chargeur [serving dish] of chalk-white silver,/with pickle and powder of precious spices,/and piment full plenteous of portingale wines” (AMA 1025-1028). While the consumption of children connotes all the barbarities of cannibalism, the way the poet describes the meal’s preparation and presentation suggests a level of sophistication that recalls Arthur’s opening feast. Both Arthur and the giant dine on elegant “chargeurs.” The first course at Arthur’s feast is served “all with taught men and towen [trained] in togges [clothes] full rich,/of sank real [royal blood] in suite [together], sixty at ones;/flesh fourisht of fermison [fattened in season]” (178-180). The “flesh” actually refers to what the men are serving, but the structure of the sentence suggests they themselves are the flesh. The poet proceeds to describe the dishes on Arthur’s table—boar, birds, pork, beef—in such nauseating excess that the reader can only hold on to the impression of vast amounts of indiscriminate meats. This becomes an uneasy image when followed almost immediately in the text by the description of the giant’s feast: “rostes [roasts] full rude and rewful bredes [roast meats],/bernes [men] and bestial [beasts] broched [spitted] togeders,/cowle [tub] full crammed of crismed [baptized] childer [children],/some as bred broched [roasts spitted] and birdes [maidens] them turned” (1049-1052). The giant does not discriminate between human and animal flesh.

The poet employs this blurring of the human/animal boundary in regards to Arthur and his men as well. The Roman senator who arrives at Arthur’s opening feast threatens that Lucius will “bring thee [Arthur] buxomly as a beste [beast]” to Rome to
pay tribute (107). The king’s expression, which “looked as a lion,” is so fierce that the
senators “couched [crouched] as kennetes [hounds]” (AMA 119, 122). Sir Cador
slanders Lucius’s men as “dogges-son,” and Arthur guts Lucius like a pig when “slant
down fro [from] the slot [throat] he slittes him” (1723, 2254). Gawain acts like a “wild
beste” when he attacks Mordred in his fatal last stand (AMA 3837). The disintegration
of the human/animal boundary becomes terrifying in its consequences when Arthur
dreams of “wolves and wild swine and wicked bestes…lions full lothly [loathsome]
lick[ing] their tuskes/all for lapping of blood of my lele [loyal] knights!” (3232-3235).
The reversal of predator and prey, eater and eaten, primes the audience to understand
that these very distinctions are losing meaning in a world where Arthur, supposedly the
just king, devours his own knights through his excessive belligerence.

When the Boethian Lady of Fortune meets Arthur in a dream, she invites him to
eat fruit, drink wine, and afterwards accuses him of overconsumption: “Thou has lived
in delite and lordshippes ynow [enough]!” connecting his eating habits to his land grabs
(3354, 3375, 3387). The text positions Arthur’s knights as animals but also casts them
explicitly as pieces of meat. Gawain pierces Mordred through the “shank,” and in battle
the knights’ “shoulders and sheldes they shrede to the haunches” (4167, emphasis added).
The poet’s use of “selcouthe” in Sir Craddok’s report on Mordred’s army—“of Sarazens
and Sessoines (Saxons)…he has sembled a sorte [troop] of selcouthe bernes [men]”—
holds special significance as a word the poet has repeatedly employed before this to
describe exotic meat (3530-3531). Guinevere gives Mordred Arthur’s second sword, and
Arthur says when the two swords meet he will finally know “whilk [which] is keener of
carfe [carving]” (4194). The poet’s references to hunting in battle scenes makes it sound
like the knights are pursuing prey; the king of Lybia fights “with a chasing spere [spear]” and Mordred stabs Gawain with “a trenchand [cutting] knife” (AMA 1823, 3856).

Royal Red Blood

Chivalry, cannibalism, and sacrament meet in Arthur’s climactic lament over Gawain’s body near the text’s conclusion. The poem plays with images of sacrament to prime the audience for this connection. The first is that of the sixty golden cups from which Arthur’s knights drink in the opening feast. These are magical cups which, if filled with poison, will either neutralize the substance or self-immolate to protect their recipients. The cups are a matched set in gold, the metal of the knights’ armor, recalling Blurton’s observation that “the cannibal by definition eats only those who are just like itself” (9).

The memory of these cups returns for the reader at the poem’s end when Arthur kisses Gawain’s dead body “til his burlich [burly] berde [beard] was bloody berunnen, als [as] he had bestes brittend [beat] and brought out of life” (3971-3972). The allusion to the hunt in this description incriminates Arthur in Gawain’s death while his desire to collect his nephew’s blood in a golden helmet connects the poisonous cups to Arthur’s brand of chivalry, which conquers its enemy by destroying itself. Arthur laments, “this real [royal] red blood run upon the erthe!/it were worthy to be shrede [clothed] and shrined in gold,/for it is sakless [innocent] of sin” (3990-3992). Chism identifies this scene as representative of a “transubstantial countermovement” in which “the impossible wounded bodies of the knights gain a transcendent and supernatural energy which ultimately transforms the loss of life into a chivalric sacrament” (218). She sees in Arthur’s gathering of the blood “the way…he has channeled the blood of his knights into his own military leadership,” but in my analysis the placement of the blood into a
receptacle that recalls the cups, along with the image of it staining Arthur’s mouth, further connect it to a specifically cannibalistic consumption (Chism 225).

The sacramental imagery also becomes more apparent thanks to Jeff Westover’s articulation of the relationship between Arthur and his knights. Westover identifies the Round Table as “a family of knights governed by its benevolent parent Arthur” (322). Understanding Gawain as Arthur’s symbolic son in this moment intensifies the Christ imagery with which the poem treats the knight’s body and Arthur’s act of lament, specifically when he connects Gawain’s death to sacrifice for his own sins: “he is sakless [innocent] surprised [captured] for sin of mine one [alone]!” (3986). The religious language of Arthur’s lament strengthens the connection between Christ’s sacrifice and the sacrifice of the knights for Arthur’s kingdom. The relationship between knight and king, Gawain and Arthur, becomes even clearer and more devastating in the following analysis of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. 
Chapter Two

“Styll as the Ston”: Perfect Chivalry in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*

The *Alliterative Morte Arthure* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* are texts that share a time period, a language, a genre, and seemingly little else. The first falls more squarely in the realm of chronicle than of romance, almost entirely eschewing that “crucial arena of chivalric practice,” the court (Chism 196). Meanwhile, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*’s knight-errant, fantastical foe, and beautiful lady revel in romance and particularly in the etiquette of courtly love. Even within Arthurian literature, the texts place themselves at opposite ends of the story: *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* at its exuberant beginning, the *Alliterative Morte Arthure* at its apocalyptic end. And yet *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, written as it was after Chrétien de Troyes first suggested the adulterous love of Lancelot and Guinevere, after the French Vulgate Cycle rejected chivalric practice for Christian virtue, after the anonymous *Death of King Arthur* brought the legend to its tragic finale, is more than a story of “exuberant beginnings” for both a poet and audience who know how it all will end. In my reading of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* as a text that looks back, both nostalgically and critically, on the beginning of a doomed court, I show how this text, superficially disparate from the *Alliterative Morte Arthure*, reinforces and expands on the themes my miniseries draws out.

*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* recounts in four fitts, or sections, a quest undertaken by Arthur’s nephew and most chivalrous knight. In the early days of Arthur’s reign, his court assembles at Camelot for the Christmas holidays. As they sit down to a feast, a green giant bursts into the hall and challenges the court to a game: any man may strike him with the giant’s huge axe if he agrees to receive a blow in one year’s time.
Arthur initially accepts, but Gawain steps forward and beheads the giant himself. The surviving giant tells Gawain to meet him at the Green Chapel next New Year.

As the year draws to a close, Gawain sets out into Wales on his search. He stumbles on Hautdesert, the castle where Lord Bertilak and his beautiful wife reside. Bertilak tells Gawain he is not far from the Green Chapel and invites him to stay for the holidays. Bertilak proposes his own game: every morning he will hunt and Gawain will stay in bed, and in the evening each will give the other their day’s winnings. Over the course of three days the lord presents Gawain with venison, boar’s meat, and a fox’s pelt. Gawain gives the lord the kisses his beautiful wife bestows on the knight each day, but refuses to say from where they come. On the third day, the lady offers Gawain a girdle (a belt) that will protect him from harm, which he accepts and hides from Bertilak.

Gawain wears the girdle for his encounter with the Green Knight, who, after giving Gawain a cut on the neck, reveals that he is Lord Bertilak and has been testing Gawain’s honesty. He nicks Gawain for keeping the girdle but forgives him for trying to save his life. Gawain is deeply ashamed and wears the girdle back to Arthur’s court as a sign of his failure. When he arrives, the knights laugh off his story and agree they will all wear green sashes in solidarity.

**Meaning, Between Pentangle and Girdle**

Scholars have often centered their discussion of meaning within the poem around two opposing symbols, that of the pentangle, with which Gawain’s shield is emblazoned, and that of the girdle. The text offers an all-encompassing and perfectly stable meaning for the pentangle, a star made of five interlocking lines. Each line represents one virtue of the perfect knight, and Gawain is understood to possess them all, creating exact alignment between the symbol and the figure who bears it. However, Christine Chism
identifies “the power and failure of signs” (particularly in insignias and heraldic devices) as one of the hallmarks of alliterative poetry, and the lady’s girdle entirely undoes the stability the pentangle offers within the text (24). That scholars have spent so long debating the meaning of the girdle has led some to suggest that it has no one meaning at all, and instead exists to explode the idea of unified meaning.

In his foundational article, “Unlocking What’s Locked,” Ralph Hanna identifies the girdle as “anything but delimited in its potential significance” (290). While several characters within the poem offer their own interpretations of the girdle, each contradicts the others and none receive full support from the text. To the lady, the girdle means protection from harm. To Gawain it is a sign of his failure, but to the Green Knight just the opposite: “another trophy for a Camelot display case” (296). To the members of the Round Table it is “a sign of their human complicity, their fellowship” with Gawain (297). The significance of the tension between this last interpretation and Gawain’s will be expanded upon later in this chapter, but Hanna primarily addresses these incompatible theories to show how “the point is not that the girdle means any single finite thing but that it has become a ‘token’ to be interpreted by both characters and reader” (301).

It is important to rehearse this argument to understand the basis of my approach in relating Sir Gawain and the Green Knight to the Alliterative Morte Arthure. Through Hanna’s reading, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight becomes a chameleon text whose different possible meanings gain credence based on the context of their interpretation. Reading Sir Gawain and the Green Knight through the interpretive lens I applied to the Alliterative Morte Arthure connects the former’s presentation of “perfect” knighthood and its fascination with consumption and the body to the cannibalistic chivalry of the latter. Its depiction of Arthur’s lavish court and luxurious imports become harbingers of the
imperial overreaching that lead to his downfall. Its trial of Gawain, and the sense of personal failure he derives from it, lend interiority to an otherwise opaque character in the *Alliterative Morte Arthure*, one who seems to yearn for the death he evades here.

**The Perfect Knight**

In his article, “The Ends of Excitement in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*,” Mark Miller applies a Lacanian framework to the text in order to understand how the two realms of knighthood, courtly chivalry and knightly battle, relate. He identifies in a knight’s battlefield behavior “the chivalric ethos of violent domination, self-command, and sacrificial commitment” that inform “ideal” chivalry within the *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (Miller 245). It is precisely this virtue of “self-command” that Sarah McNamer identifies in her article, “Feeling,” as the key quality that allows a knight to banish his instinct of “primal fear—the fear of killing and being killed” in order to do his duty (252). She suggests that the suppression of this fear is an unnatural and learned state that must be enacted for the knight by his most important figure, the king. When the Green Knight enters the hall, Arthur’s knights are so frightened that they fall silent, and it is Arthur who models for them how to deal with an object of fear by being the first to accept the Knight’s outrageous challenge (252).

The Knight’s proposal almost certainly spells death for any knight, but Miller identifies the desire for the death as the primary characteristic of ideal chivalric practice. In this death-drive he sees the knight’s quest for the psychic Real, which “remains in excess of anything figurable or signifiable”—a definition that recalls the elusive meaning of the girdle (247). In the ideal knight’s quest for the Real, all objects become “inadequate to desire, and the subject is driven…beyond anything objectifiable…outside of life and everything that participates in life. In this sense, desire aims at death” (247).
Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, Miller proposes, the poet explores “the condition of a creature in love with strife and loss,” one who brings itself closer to “an infigurable telos” in its desire for “ecstatic fulfillment” (253, 254).

Is Gawain this creature, the figure of a perfect knight? When the Green Knight first brings the axe down on Gawain’s neck, Gawain flinches and the Knight stops, irked by this show of cowardice. Miller locates in this flinch the betrayal of “nearly everything that constitutes [Gawain’s] chivalric identity…his courage and self-control in the face of danger and death, his commitment to his trawthe [“fidelity”], and his commitment to Arthur to stand for him, and in doing so stand for the virtue of Camelot” (216). Perhaps this is why Gawain critiques himself so harshly for submitting to his instinct for self-preservation even when the Green Knight ultimately commends it. While Miller’s perfect knight yearns for death as the ultimate Real, Gawain clings to life through his acceptance of the lady’s girdle. But Gawain masters his urge to flinch by the Knight’s second blow (again interrupted, this time because of the Knight’s desire to torment Gawain). It is in this moment that Miller identifies Gawain’s ascension to “an icon of knightly trawthe” (216). The text’s description of Gawain’s perfect stillness under the Knight’s blade signals his achievement of “the impenetrability of the unliving”: “Gawayn graythly hit bydez, and glent with no member,/bot stode stylle as the ston” [Gawain awaits it submissively, not moving a limb,/but stood still as a stone] (Miller 217; Sir Gawain and the Green Knight lines 2292-93). Describing him as a “stone” highlights the inhuman demands chivalry makes on its practitioners. Miller argues that Gawain finally lives up to the pentangle that adorns his shield, which in its fixed meaning becomes static and therefore dead (219). “Stone” also gestures toward Gawain’s body becoming an object in
the *Alliterative Morte Arthure*. At the same time, Gawain’s fundamental *penetrability* in that text compared to the inviolate stone underscores the impossibility of the chivalric ideal.

If in Miller’s reading Gawain becomes the perfect knight, McNamer suggests that this transformation is not actually the text’s goal. Instead, she reads *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* as a critique of the fatalistic brand of chivalry it presents. She uses the poem’s status as a performative text to understand how the poet intended his original audience to feel, and what those feelings reveal about his message. Just as Arthur and his knights gather at court for the holidays, McNamer suggests that the original audience, which she identifies as the Cheshire contingency of the court of Richard II, would also have heard it while gathered for the Yuletide feast (254). She proposes that *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* therefore functions as “experimental theatre” by mirroring text and audience to create “a performance that overlays [the poet’s] fiction on the base of the real,” conscripting the audience as extras, the hall as a backdrop, and the feast as “aural, visual, tactile, fragrant, even edible” set pieces (246, 251, 254). Through these techniques she identifies the poet’s desire to foster in the audience “a powerful attraction…to the lives they are living at that very moment” (254).

How does the poet foster this attraction textually? McNamer associates the aggressive greenness of the text with the “inevitability of growth and change” that will innovate on traditional chivalry (253). She identifies “green” itself not just as a color but also as the Middle English verb for “longing” or “desire,” and it is desire for life, in all its sensual pleasures, that the poet intends to communicate (253). McNamer suggests that the poet juxtaposes the vibrancy of court with the “profoundly bleak image of a man *en route to death*” to do this in the poem’s second fitt. The third maximizes narrative intensity through a triplicate plot of hunt, seduction, and exchange to “heighten suspense
on three levels at once” (McNamer 254). This suspense reveals how exciting life can be when it moves forward, attracting the audience to progress rather than the stasis of the pentangle and Miller’s ideal chivalry (254). These stylistic techniques celebrate life in order to convince the audience “there must be another way” for Gawain, and all knights (252). McNamer points out that when Gawain accepts the girdle, he does it “bot for to saven hymself, when suffer hym byhoved,/to byde bale withoute dabate of bronde hym to were” [but to safeguard himself when he had to submit,/to await death without sword to defend himself] (SGGK 2040-2042). The text encourages its audience to yearn for a chivalry that does not end in death.

**Knight as Prey**

Chivalry chooses the knightly body as the site of its destruction in both texts. Miller identifies the “sacrificial commitment” a knight must make, and in the *Alliterative Morte Arthure* this sacrifice happens physically when the knights die on the battlefield (245). In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, the poet represents Gawain’s body as a sacrifice to be consumed by the court by connecting scenes of hunting and of seduction with traditional warfare. When Sir Bertilak’s men hunt the boar, “thay umbekesten the knarre and the knot bothe” [the hunters surrounded both the crag and the knoll], encircling the boar in a move that recalls the way Gawain’s own small troop of men are subsumed by Mordred’s forces in the final battle of the *Alliterative Morte Arthure* (SGGK 1434). The boar “unsoundly out soght seggez overthwer,” which James Winny translates as “broke cover ferociously through a line of men,” but which through its specific use of “seggez” [siege] recalls a tactic that Arthur and his men make frequent use of in the *Alliterative Morte Arthure* (1438). When Bertilak and the boar face off, “the mon merkkez hym wel, as they mette fyrst,/set sadly the scharp in the slot even,/hit hym up to the hult, that the
hert schyndered” [the man takes aim carefully as the two met,/and thrust the sword firmly straight into his throat,/drove it up the hilt, so that the heart burst open] (SGGK 1592-1594). Here Bertilak attacks the boar in a way that mirrors how Arthur’s knights often fight the Saracens: aiming for the throat, thrusting to the hilt of the sword, and bursting the heart. The poet also demonstrates an ambush in the fox hunt: “thenne watz he went, er he wyst, to a wale tryster,/ther thre thro at thrich thrat hym at ones, al graye” [then he [the fox] came, before he knew it, to a well-placed station,/where three fierce greyhounds flew at him at once/in a rush] just as Lucius’s men ambush Arthur’s in the woods, and Arthur’s men ambush the bridge of a city (1712-1714). Note how the poet uses alliteration to play up the fox’s “stuck-ness” through the repetition of “th-,” making it hard to get the words out.

The chivalric knight is also a figure of sexual significance, and the poet connects hunt and seduction to underscore this connection. Whether on the battlefield or in bed, Gawain is in danger of being overcome by another. The poet seamlessly transitions between hunt and seduction by moving between the two spaces in the course of a single sentence. “On this maner by the mountes guile mid-over-under,/whyle the hende knyght at hom holsumly slepes” [the men hunt] across the hills in this manner until mid-afternoon,/while the noble knight in the castle takes his health-giving sleep] brings two seemingly incompatible worlds together in the reader’s mind (1730-31). The lady of Hautdesert frames her actions in the language of hunt, and these actions often line up with her husband’s tactics in the woods. “Now ar ye tan as-tyt!” [Now are you caught in a moment!] she boasts when she sneaks into Gawain’s room while her husband traps deer (1210). “I schal happe yow here that other half als” [I shall tuck you in here on both sides of the bed], making his sheets into a snare (1224). She confesses to Gawain that if
she could pick any man in the word, “ther schulde no freke upon folde before yow be chosen” [no man on Earth would be picked before you], conflating him with the prize stag her husband brings back from the hunt that evening (SGK 1275).

In love and war the knight becomes a hunted thing. Gawain’s position as the hunted animal in both aligns him with a danger of dismemberment beyond what even the Green Knight has planned for him, and which connects to the concerns of the Alliterative Morte Arthure. The girdle promises to protect its wearer from bodily harm, “for quat gome so is gorde with this grene lace,/while he hit hade hemely halched aboute,/there is no hathel under heven tohewe hym that myght,/for he myght not be slayn for slyght upon erthe” [for whoever is buckled into this green belt,/as long as it is tightly fastened about him/there is no man on earth who can strike him down,/for he cannot be killed by any trick in the world] (1851-1854). But Gawain’s nick by the Knight’s axe reveals the impossibility of the girdle’s promise, and the text revels in other, even more explicit violations of the human body.

Miller identifies in this destructive urge the “desire for mastery over the life and death of the other” (226). This “desire to stick one’s hand down inside the opened body” in order to see beneath the skin functions as a “witnessing of one’s own mortality,” the satisfaction of “a desire to undo or unbind, but also to be undone or unbound; a wish to see and touch the interior stuff that is living flesh, but that can only be made accessible as dead meat” (226, 227). The Green Knight’s decapitated but animate head becomes this desire’s ultimate fulfillment.

Miller traces this desire to be “undone” in the deer hunting scene, where alliteration makes the deer’s experience “not just as something the hunters can cause, but as something they can undergo”—“ther myght mon se, as they slypte, slenting of arwes--
/at uche wende under wande wapped a flone” [there you might see, as they ran, arrows flying--/at each turn in the wood a shaft shot through the air], with the repeated “w” sound mimicking the whir of arrows (Miller 230; SGGK 1160-61). The poet uses “grece” to describe both the flesh of men and of animals, first when Gawain severs the giant’s head and second during the butchering of the deer (Miller 226). Gawain hears the same noise that horns make in the hunt—“Quat!”—immediately before he encounters the Green Knight a second time (230).

A hunted animal in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is not just killed but dismembered in gory detail. The poet revels in descriptions of cutting up the animals after they have been hunted in a way that recalls Miller’s “desire to stick one’s hand down inside the opened body” (226). The girdle seems to be the direct response to the butchers’ actions, guaranteeing that its wearer’s body cannot be harmed. It is (supposedly) the ultimate protection of the body’s boundaries, boundaries the butcher otherwise can easily transgress. After the deer hunt, the poet walks the reader through a nauseatingly detailed description of the butchering process: slitting each animal at the base of the throat, scraping the gullet, cutting off the legs, ripping the hide, breaking open the belly to remove the entrails, which are fed to the dogs, carving the shoulders, splitting the breasts in two, severing the membranes of the ribs, carving the legs, splitting the carcass along the spine, removing the head, and finally piercing both sides through the ribs to hang by the legs on a stick (SGGK 1330-1357). Cutting the deer down the middle recalls the many knights who die on the battlefields of the *Alliterative Morte Arthure* by being split “in sonder” [in two]. “The lappez thay lance bihynde” [at the back they cut the skin], the poet states, connecting the butcher’s actions to battlefield maneuvers through the word choice of “lance” (1350).
The poet next describes how the boar is decapitated and cut open, its body sliced “in bryght brode cheldez” [in broad glistening slabs] while its head Bertilak keeps as a trophy (SSGK 1605-1618). The fox, meanwhile, is torn apart by dogs: “and ryght biforn the horse feete they fal on hym alle/and worried me this wyly wyth a wroth noyse” [and right at the horse’s feet the pack fell on him,/tearing at the wily one with an enraged noise] (1904-1905). The poet identifies the fox as Reynard, an originally French literary stock character who frequently appears as the wily prey in hunting tales. This connection to literature transforms Reynard’s death, a death that begins with dismemberment, into a metaphor for the impossibility of unified meaning within the text.

Although Gawain does escape such dismemberment, his body is not entirely safe from harm, and neither is the Green Knight’s. When Gawain brings the ax down in Arthur’s hall, he “let hit doun lyghtly lyght on the naked,/that the scharp of the shalk schyndered the bones,/and schrank thurgh the schyire grece, and schade hit in twynne” [brought it down swiftly on the bare flesh,/so that the bright blade slashed through the man’s spine,/and cut through the white flesh, severing it in two] (423-35). When Gawain meets the Green Knight again, he similarly presents his neck as a sacrifice to the ax: “he lened with the nek, and lutte,/and schewed that schyre al bare” [he bent his neck and bowed,/showing the flesh all bare] (2255-56). The Green Knight “snyrt hym on that syde, that severed the hyde./The scharp schrank to the flesche thurgh the schyre grece, that the schene blod over his schulderes schot to the erthe” [slashes the back of his neck, laying open the skin. The blade cut into the body through the fair flesh/so that the bright blood shot over his shoulders to the ground] (2312-2314). Like animals, neither man is safe from bodily harm, and the similarities between their injuries and the
dismemberment of the hunted animals recalls the way knightly bodies become sites of consumption in the *Alliterative Morte Arthure*.

**Knight as Meat**

For all the nauseating description of animal dismemberment, Bertilak’s kills are meant to be eaten, and the poet delights in depicting scenes of feasting both at Hautdesert and at Arthur’s hall, scenes that simultaneously attract and repulse through their excess and association with violence. When the Knight arrives at Arthur’s court, the festivities are well underway, “for ther the fest watz ilyche ful fifteen days/with all the mete and the mirthe that men couthe avyse;/such glaume and gle glorious to here,/dere dyn upon day, daunsyng on nyghtes” [for there the festival lasted the whole fifteen days,/with all the feasting and merry-making that could be devised;/such sounds of revelry splendid to hear,/days full of uproar, dancing at night] (SGGK 44-47). The poet explicitly connects consumption and adventure or combat through Arthur’s refusal to eat until he is told “of sum aventurus [adventurous] thyng”—a marvel, a battle, an offer to joust or quest (93). After the Green Knight satisfies this demand (and while his blood presumably still stains the floor), the assembled group feasts on “dayntes driven therwyrth of full dere metes,/foysoun of the fresche, and on so fele disches” [servings of such exquisite food,/abundance of fresh meat, in so many dishes] that “ich lede…ay two had disches twelve,/good ber and bryght wyn both” [each man…ate from a dozen tasty dishes,/ and drank good beer and wine] (121-122, 126-129).

At Hautdesert the offerings are no less decadent or abundant, as the table is covered “wyth sere sewes and sete, sesounde of the best,/double-felde, as hit fallez” [with many excellent dishes, wonderfully seasoned,/in double portions, as is fitting] (SGGK 889-890). The poet describes four different preparations just of fish, and after
dinner the lady serves Gawain with spiced cake and “wynnelych wyne” [marvelous wine], which, as in the _Alliterative Morte Arthure_, is an omnipresent offering (SGGK 980). Three days of festivities are filled with “both at mes and at mele messes full quaynt” [both light meals and great dishes cunningly prepared] and “forthy wonderly thay woke, and the wyn dronken,/daunsed ful dregly wyth dere carolez” [so they reveled all night, drinking the wine/and ceaselessly dancing and caroling songs] (1025-1026). In contrast, on mornings when Bertilak leaves for the hunt the poet emphasizes how little he eats—“a morsel”—suggesting that hunt and consumption serve the same function, so that participating in the first renders the second unnecessary (1690). On their last night together, Gawain and Bertilak “so glad were they bothe/bot if the douthe had been doted, other dronken ben other” [were ravished with joy,/as if the company had gone too crazy or taken too much to drink], their festivities verging on bacchanalia (1955-1956). This almost-crazed description reinforces the conflation of sex and meat in the text as Gawain trades the lady’s kisses for the lord’s kills. Their merriment takes on a sexual undertone that hints at the dissolution of boundaries, both sexual and physical, and allows for the objectification that makes a human body a site of consumption in _Sir Gawain and the Green Knight_ and the _Alliterative Morte Arthure_. The homoeroticism of both poems—in the latter, through Arthur’s wrestle with the naked giant and the undressing of captives—hints again at the impossibility of generation in chivalric structures.

**Young Court, Old Court**

The audience meets Arthur and his court at their youngest, most beautiful, and best-reputed. At first sight, Arthur’s Christmas court is filled “with mony luuflych lorde, ledez of the best” and “rych revel oryght and rechles merthes” [with many lovely lords, men of great worth and carefree amusement, as was right] (SGGK 47-40). Arthur himself “watz
so joly of his joyfulness, and sumquat childgered” [was so lively in his youth, and somewhat childish] (SGGK 86). When the Green Knight enters, the best knights of the realm are struck dumb with fear. The Green Knight belittles them, saying if he were looking for a fight he would not come to Arthurs court, as “hit arn aboute on this bench bot berdlez chylder” [those about me in this hall are but beardless children] (280). When no one will take his challenge, he mocks, “What, is this Arthures house?/…that all the rous rennes of thurgh ryalmes so mony?” (309-310).

The depiction of the court’s exuberant youth becomes tragic for a poet and audience who know Arthur’s house will eventually fall. The poet foreshadows Arthur’s imperial ambitions that are so harshly realized in the Alliterative Morte Arthure. Patricia Ingham reveals how Sir Gawain and the Green Knight navigates the “fractured regnal community” of England and Wales by playing with “exotic others from mysterious places” (107). She points out that the poet emphasizes Arthur’s Welshness by using his Welsh rather than French or Latin name and referring to his kingdom as “Logres,” the Welsh name for England (115, 116). At the same time, Gawain’s journey through Wales lines up with Henry II’s 1135 invasion path, so that the knight’s travels take on the association of annexation (116, 118). Gawain’s encounters with the exotic on this journey become markers of ethnic difference. “So mony mervayl by mount there the mon fyndez” [so many wonders befell him in the hills]—adventures with dragons, wolves, bulls, ogres, and more (SGGK 718). The poet includes in this list “wodwos” [woodwoses], which were medieval mythic half-men half-beasts, and in this reference recalls the Alliterative Morte Arthure’s inclusion of the Saracens in groupings of witches, warlocks, fiends, and other anthropomorphic horrors (721). Gawain’s travels through the Welsh Wirral Forest contain the moments of his most heightened Christianity as he
prays repeatedly to Jesus and Mary for protection, a move that fashions him into a sort of Crusader knight battling foreign and fiendish creatures

While Sir Gawain and the Green Knight represents the “young” court, this court at the same time appears more mature and developed thanks to its imperial associations than does the Green Knight with his “signs of the natural world”—a green hue and lack of shoes (Ingham 123). The poet describes “a selure hir over/of tryed Toulouse, of tars tapites innoghe,/that were enbrawded and beten wyth the best gemmes,/that myght be preved of prys wyth penyes to bye” [a canopy overhead of costly French fabric, silk carpets underfoot,/that were embroidered and beaten with the best gems/that money could buy at the highest price] (SGGK 76-79). This juxtaposes “old,” more isolationist power structures and Arthur’s new imperial practices. Ingham states, “the opulence of Arthur’s court links explicitly to the colonizing impulses of European desires for exotic riches from other lands”—desires that found satisfaction through the Crusades (128).

Even the way some of Arthur’s knights kick the Green Knight’s head after its decapitation suggests an exploitation of and violence toward the Other, and I have tried to communicate this sense of foreboding in the text’s treatment within the miniseries.

The images of greatest beauty within the text also hint at their own inevitable demise. In the radiant lady of Hautdesert and the hideous old woman who attends her, the reader sees both two people and the lifespan of one. Bertilak’s wife “watz the fayrest in felle, of flesche and of lyre, and of compas and colour and costes, of all other, and wener then wenore” [she was the loveliest on earth in complexion and features,/in figure, in colouring and behaviour above all others,/and more beautiful than Guinevere], while her older companion “yolwe watz was the other” [was withered as the lady is fresh] (SGGK 943-945, 951). “Hir body watz schort and thik,/hir buttokez balgh and brode”
[her body was short and thick, her buttocks bulging broad] (SGK 996-997). The poet often describes Gawain, in the prime of his youth, as exceedingly handsome, which makes his description of Gawain’s body as he dons the girdle all the more jarring: “he hade belted the bronde upon his balghe haunchez” [he had buckled his sword on his curving hips] (2032). The use of “balghe” recalls the grotesque sight of the old woman’s aging body, suggesting that in Gawain’s acceptance of the girdle lies his (and by extension, the Round Table’s) downfall.

**Sir Gawain in the Alliterative Morte Arthure**

*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* provides context for a character whose motivations are somewhat inaccessible within the *Alliterative Morte Arthure*. Chism identifies Gawain’s death in that text as a “tour de force of bravery and idiocy,” the embodiment of the “knightly potential for self-destruction foreshadowed at Arthur’s feast by the cup that burst with rage at the poison within it” (224, 225). My interpretation of Gawain’s development through his experience with the Green Knight, presented in the fifth episode, attempts to answer how he becomes the “figure of pure, untrammeled, and ultimately suicidal fury” we meet in the *Alliterative Morte Arthure* (Chism 225). I connect Gawain’s actions in that text with a desire to fully denounce the instinct for self-preservation that led him to accept the girdle and break his trawthe in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. He transforms himself by the time of the *Alliterative Morte Arthure* into the death-driven chivalrous knight Miller identifies, the knight he initially fails to be.

Gawain’s body becomes the site of rupture in the *Alliterative Morte Arthure* that *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* teases but does not deliver. In his fight with Priamus, “the knights’ armored social personae undergo the rupture that enables their flesh to speak through their armored bodies” (Chism 220). Priamus splits Gawain’s ailette, a piece of
armor that “individuates Gawain as a knight of a particular family and a certain reputation, and its destruction shows a shift in the means by which his identity is expressed” (Chism 220). Gawain gets closer to the Real as the objects with which he protects himself from death lose their literal function and symbolic meaning. Chism sees this battle with Priamus as constructive destruction. The “unstable heraldic insignia of chivalric status,” the signs that declare sides and make knights enemies, are destroyed in battle and replaced by the knights’ physical bodies, which make it impossible to tell sides and in fact bring the knights closer together (222). This is why I frame Priamus and Gawain in a two-shot during their duel, as this composition conventionally implies affection and partnership.

However, the constructive destruction of Gawain’s fight with Priamus is ultimately not enough to extinguish his desire for death. Gawain brings about his final, fatal rupture through martyrdom in a battle against Mordred, and it is in the moment of death that I insert *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* through flashback. The inclusion of this text creates echoes in the miniseries to create foster greater emotional resonance in Gawain as a character. His encounter with the Green Knight partially explains his proclivity for beheading (as seen when he overreacts to an insult by one of Lucius’s men). The way he scrambles for his helmet after the Knight nicks him—“hent heterly his helem, and his hed cast” [snatched up his helmet and crammed it on his head]—lends tragic significance to Arthur’s attempts to collects Gawain’s blood in his helmet on the battlefield (*SGGK* 2317). The pairing of the two texts in my miniseries proposal shows how Arthur’s brand of chivalry makes even its victims complicit in their own demise.
Reader’s Manual

I conceived of this thesis as a diptych: theory and analysis to inform my reading of The Alliterative Morte Arthure and Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, coupled with the proposal for a television miniseries that enacts it. Sarah McNamer’s methodology of treating literature as performance encouraged me to think concretely about how an adaptation could be produced. In choosing the television miniseries format, I had in mind Ralph Hanna’s characterization of the Gawain poet’s self-presentation as “primarily recreative, only secondarily edificatory: he provides after-dinner entertainment” (502). Hanna goes on to illustrate how the poet’s sophisticated style and cultural critique complicate this persona. Television creators, too, have often played with their format’s association with entertainment in order to mask more subversive commentary.

In a course on American television since the 1990’s, I studied how the recent golden age of “dark” T.V. (think Breaking Bad or Mad Men) functions to interrogate contemporary masculinity. The style and sophistication of these shows, arguably beginning with The Sopranos, changed public perception of the format into something that can be both recreational and edificatory. In her article on Masterpiece Theater, Simone Knox argues that the miniseries format has enjoyed even greater cultural standing and for longer thanks to its association with literature and theater, as well as its reputation for “well-acted, well-crafted” drama (31). I am an ardent fan of the miniseries format, but I also chose it as the vehicle for my project because of this tradition of adapting texts, as well as its appropriate length (typically six to eight episodes) and stylistic conventions: settings from another time or place, older forms of English.

The following “chapter” consists of six episode proposals that constitute the miniseries The Death of Arthur. I call them “proposals” because, while they borrow heavily
from the episode treatment format common in television writing, I have also used the descriptive elements of fiction writing and the camera direction of a shot list. A traditional treatment uses about four to six pages to communicate major plot points and key lines of dialogue. As one of the primary goals of my undertaking is to adapt alliteration into a visual style, I include the camera movements and scene details that articulate my interpretations of the texts. I have included a camera movement key that defines these techniques and their conventional uses.

From episode treatments I have also adopted a somewhat fragmentary style of writing, which in the industry functions to save space and in my writing has the further benefit of communicating feeling. Television episodes usually contain three plots, an A, B, and C story, running concurrently, and I have played with the Alliterative Morte Arthure’s chronological timeline to achieve this. Shifts in storyline are designated by “Switch to” in the proposals. The lines of dialogue I have selected or written were chosen primarily because they support themes of my interpretation: men as animals or meat, the conflation of chivalry and religion, Arthur’s imperial urges, and so on. I have kept dialogue as original and at the same time as comprehensible as possible. In his translation of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, James Winny ruminates on the difficulties of translation considering that many Middle English words no longer exist in our vocabulary. Translators of alliterative poetry often find themselves choosing between fealty to meaning or to sound; Winny advocates the former, and I have followed his lead.

Some general notes before a brief analysis of each episode—while the proposals are for a visual art form, they exist firstly as a form of creative writing, and my goal has been to write as visually and as evocatively as possible. Alliteration becomes a visual technique through repeated shot sequences and frame compositions, color motifs, and
imagery. I spend a good deal of time (considering that conventional treatments move from plot point to plot point) on description, especially of feasts and of battles. I have enlarged the role of two characters: Gawain and Arthur’s philosopher. The first takes over the narratives of several less significant knights in order to make his death a more significant commentary on Arthur’s rule. Gawain is one of the foundational characters of the Arthurian legend and his death would have inherently carried great significance for a fourteenth-century audience familiar with the canon; I attempt to recreate the connection by foregrounding him in the text. Expanding the role of the philosopher was both a way to incorporate the text’s narrative voice, which occasionally interjects, and to provide the audience with an identifiable character whose role is primarily to observe, and whose interactions with Arthur mark the king’s moral deterioration. I have included a character key, but several characters go unnamed both within the Alliterative Morte Arthure and the miniseries. While this can lead to disorientation, Valerie Krishna argues that it is part of the poet’s emphasis on characters by their functions rather than their individual identities, their role as things rather than people (30).

I started this project with the question, what would a fourteenth-century text feel like today? What I often felt as I attempted an entirely faithful adaptation of these texts was alienation and confusion. These poems, unlike modern storytelling, do not privilege character development or motivation. They are more likely to include episodes for the sake of form than solely to advance plot. While recognizing this brought me closer than ever to my own emotional understanding of author and audience, it was making for bad T.V. I could not recreate the emotional experiences of these texts, and instead began to ask how I could communicate my interpretation in a new format without fundamentally altering the texts as previous adaptations have. Beyond consolidating minor events and
characters, I have only added to, never changed, my sources: inserted imagery to complicate plot (the gash-like shadow down Arthur’s back at the end of the first episode), modernized dialogue, and, most significantly, added storylines about Mordred and Guinevere to account for their actions between Arthur’s departure and return.

In the *Alliterative Morte Arthure*, Mordred and Guinevere appear only in the very beginning, when Arthur appoints Mordred, his illegitimate son, as steward, and at the very end, when Mordred rebels against Arthur and takes Guinevere as his wife. But I could not resist the pull of interiority of these seemingly minor characters. How did Mordred relate to Arthur’s knights as his bastard son? What did it mean for Guinevere to be a barren queen? And what would the relationship between these two characters look like? As a text that primarily concerns itself with war, there are understandably few women in the *Alliterative Morte Arthure*, but based on my own interests I could not tell this story without addressing how women may have negotiated their lives within such militaristic and masculine structures. Guinevere’s and Mordred’s storylines in the second through fourth episodes are my invention, but I structured each to be in conversation with the texts. Moving between Arthur’s battle lines and court back home is also a way to illustrate the price of war that Chism addresses in her discussion of Edward III’s military campaigns.

The first episode, “The Dragon,” sets up many of the key images to which later episodes return: feasts (with an emphasis on meat and wine), Arthur’s enchanted goblets, Lucius’s overtly “Oriental” court, and the bear (keep an eye out for matted hair and foaming lips as the miniseries progresses). It establishes characters as individuals (Gawain’s thirst for war) and in relation to each other (Arthur’s and Guinevere’s estrangement). Shot sequences like the Roman senator’s arrival at Arthur’s court or the
senator’s return to Lucius’s reappear later to create associations between these and subsequent events and characters.

The second episode, “The Giant,” presents three threats to Arthur’s kingdom, one of which Mordred and Guinevere realize is no threat at all, but rather collateral damage. The inclusion of the Knight Templar is the first explicit Crusader reference, and his image reappears in the final episode. I maintained language about fiends, pilgrimage, and heretics in the dialogue to reiterate the sanctification of chivalry that Chism identifies in the *Alliterative Morte Arthure*. Imagery and shot sequences associated both with the giant and with the Duchess’s servant return in later episodes.

The third episode, “The Emperor,” plays birth and death against each other as Arthur wages his largest battle yet. Images of Arthur protecting his people in this episode are inverted in the one that follows, when he becomes the imperial tyrant. Chism identifies the *Alliterative Morte Arthure* poet as delighting in both the description and destruction of traditional symbols of chivalry, and I echo this through empty saddles, ruptured armor, and dismembered men. Quick cuts enhance the excitement of battle while pans reveal the devastation of war. Aerial shots in battle scenes illustrate Heather Blurton’s description of armies as bodies trying to consume each other. Images of maps and dialogue about dividing and redistributing land echo this on the scale of empire.

The fourth episode, “The Sword,” ramps up its pacing through montage as Arthur goes on an imperial binge—the feast after he conquers Viterbo is the only time he gets truly drunk. The siege of Viterbo is also the first time we witness Arthur’s actions from his victims’ perspectives. Meanwhile, we see the price of this war at Mordred’s paltry feast for Arthur’s vassals. Mordred and Guinevere begin their affair in this episode, but I do not show more than a kiss. The *Alliterative Morte Arthure* is a text that is
interested in the destructive, rather than the generative, capabilities of the body, and so I have intentionally withheld these visuals. For the same reason, the audience only ever sees children in a flashback, and while infants do appear in the contemporary timelines, the audience never sees their faces.

The children appear briefly in the fifth episode, “The Knight.” This episode incorporates *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* into the miniseries as a flashback in an homage to alliterative poetry’s delight in playing with time. The flashback explains how Gawain becomes the death-driven knight we meet in the *Alliterative Morte Arthure* and why the rift between Arthur and Guinevere arises. “The Knight” shows Arthur’s court in all its youth and optimism while also sowing the seeds for its downfall. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* has an undeniable aesthetic allure, and part of its inclusion came from my desire to expand my visual palette beyond the *Alliterative Morte Arthure*’s battle tableaus to the midwinter landscapes of twisting Welsh woods. At the same time, this change in scenery shows how both on the battlefield and at court, abroad and at home, chivalry makes the knight a site of consumption. Itsf a circular text, beginning and ending with “Sithen the sege and the assaut watz sesed at Troye” [When the siege and the assault were ended at Troy]—*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* reinforces the circularity of the miniseries, which ends with the inverted image of its beginning: a bleak funeral in place of a celebratory feast (*SGGK* 1, 2525). I engineered the miniseries as circular to incorporate consumption into its very structure, like a wheel turning on itself.

The final episode, “The Wheel,” shows Arthur reckoning with the consequences of his actions. It answers the image of the wine-filled goblets in the first episode with the image of Gawain’s helmet dripping with blood. It visually connects Arthur with the Duchess’s grieving servant in “The Giant.” Arthur’s dream reveals how he has turned his
knights into bodies to be consumed, and the Lady of Fortune locates his downfall precisely in his excessive consumption. Idrous’s and Ewain’s death, as well as Guinevere’s forsaking of her child, illustrate the impossibility of generation in the structure Arthur has created. But the burial of Gawain with Arthur, after the king asks that his knight not be interred until the man responsible for the war is dead, suggests that Arthur ultimately realizes his complicity in what has happened.

In the final line of dialogue in the miniseries, the philosopher, watching the funeral service, declares, “Thus ends Arthur, that was of Hector’s blood” (AMA 4342). I included this line as an answer to the beginning of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight (“When the siege and the assault were ended at Troy…”), which goes on to describe the series of conquests that led to the descendants of the Trojans supposedly settling Britain. I included it to end both that lineage and the violence it sanctions by casting its members as rightful conquerors. It is for a similar reason that the miniseries, whose many images of doors bursting open signal the beginning of adventure or conflict, ends with one of doors closing. Arthur in the Alliterative Morte Artur uses the specious connection between Britain and Troy as a claim to the Roman Empire and an excuse for war. The poem is rife with nationalism, militarism, and Orientalism, just as “Arthur” as a literary and historical figure has often been appropriated by people who subscribe to these ideas. But in my reading, it is precisely in Arthur’s nationalism, militarism and Orientalism that the poet locates his downfall. I have named my miniseries The Death of Arthur both in tribute to its primary source text, and because I hope my interpretation contributes to the end of the way Arthur and the events associated with him have been used—my own answer to “Saracen Go Home.”
Open on a midwinter feast at Arthur’s court, fourteenth-century England, as he celebrates another successful military campaign. T.S. on a server carrying a silver platter heaped with meat as he weaves through the crowd: minstrels (“Ye that lust has to listen, hear and hold ye still”), wine bearers, knights with goblets in hand and red stains on their lips (AM4 12-15). A stag roasts over a fire whose flames turn men into abstract shadows on the castle walls.

Camera follows as the server wends his way to Arthur’s table at the end of the hall. Pan from the platter as he sets it down to the king and his knights: Gawain, green belt around his waist, Mordred, Kay. The men down their goblets and scramble to refill their plates, playfully slapping at each other’s hands over cuts of meat. Behind them, the server joins a line of servants waiting on the king’s table. Camera cuts to C.U. on an older man in the line, simply dressed, scanning the feast with a gentle smile.

The man’s head whips toward the main door and the camera racks focus to reveal a Roman senator, toga edged in purple, bursting in. X.I.S. as Arthur rises at one end of the hall and the senator approaches from the other. The senator wishes Arthur and his wife a happy New Year—cut to Guinevere sitting at an adjacent table, her brow furrowed with worry. The senator announces he comes on behalf of Emperor Lucius, who demands that Arthur cease his wars and pay tribute to Rome as a proper vassal. The senator warns that Lucius will hunt down Arthur “as befits a beast” (109).

Arthur’s knights rise in outrage but the king stays them with an outstretched hand. Arthur tells the senator he will take council with his men and in the meantime
invites him to enjoy the feast: “Force yourself to feed on such feeble foods as ye find—in these barren lands breeds no better,” on cut to laden tables (AMA 224-226). A.S. as camera pans Arthur’s table: hands reaching for boar’s head, peacock, stews, pastries, until the offerings are reduced to scraps and the candles are low.

Camera lifts on Arthur and the now-drunken senator. Arthur signals and sixty serving-men fill the hall, each distributing a gleaming golden goblet. Arthur explains that the goblets are enchanted: if filled with poison, they either render the substance harmless or else self-destruct to protect their drinker. C.U. on Arthur as he takes the largest goblet with two hands and drinks deeply, eyes on the senator. The senator guffaws and downs his goblet: “There never reigned such royalty in Rome’s walls” (228).

Servants escort the senator to his chambers and the hall empties. Arthur and his men stay behind to discuss Emperor Lucius’s demands. Gawain steps forward: “I thank God of the trouble that threatens—we have as wastrels lived,” as he gestures at the remains of the feast, “and lessened our praise” (251-257). C.U. on Arthur nodding thoughtfully. In a booming voice, he declares that he will wage war on Lucius. O.T.S on Arthur looking out over his knights as a cheer rises. Arthur surveys his men, his eyes flashing: “Let me never want you while I in this world reign. My honor and my manhood you maintain in Earth” (398-405).

Arthur sends the senator back to Lucius with a declaration of war. He instructs his knights to return to their lands and prepare for a spring invasion of the Continent.

Rome, a few months later. L.S. of glittering palace gates opening for the Roman senator as he returns to Lucius’s court. T.S. on the Senator as he makes his way through the sun-filled courtyard: trappings of purple silk, camels tied to posts, the hum of Latin
and Arabic as men bustle about. He approaches Lucius, in a purple toga, reclining on a low couch. A turbaned mercenary sits at his side.

O.T.S. senator kneeling as Lucius props himself up and, snidely: “How fares the rebel king?” The senator opens his mouth to answer but Lucius mutters, “You should have seized his scepter and sat above him. He should have served you himself” (4MA 511-514). C.U. on the senator as he raises his eyes to Lucius and reports that Arthur showed him the greatest courtesy. Cut to O.T.S. senator on Lucius’s look of contempt. The senator cautiously continues that Lucius must prepare for war. Camera stays on Lucius’s expression of indignation as the senator says, “Be sure of thy mercenaries,” and on cut to the turbaned man rising and gesturing for a messenger, the senator continues: “Send to the Orient for your giants and warlocks, for the Sultan and his Saracens” (551).

Arthur’s court at spring. It is the day of departure and Arthur summons Mordred. He appoints Mordred as his steward but H.A.S. as the young knight protests: no knight will respect him if he never proves himself in battle. Arthur is firm: “If I come back, I will crown you king with my own hands” (676-678). C.U. on Mordred’s shocked expression, then rack focus to Gawain behind him, eyes dark. Gawain leaves the hall.

Arthur turns to Guinevere, standing behind him and holding back tears. Intercut between them as he gestures for her to approach and she takes his hands, says shakily: “I curse the man that this war made” (699). Arthur places her hands back at her side, responds gruffly: “Grieve you not, nor begrudge my going” (705-706). Guinevere, pale, begins to swoon and Mordred rushes forward to catch her. Arthur tells Mordred to protect her, then hastens from the hall. He jumps on his horse and rides out.

Arthur and his entourage arrive at port where his ships await. Arthur hurries to board but the old man from the feast takes a moment to survey the sight as camera pans:
a mass of ships hugging the coast, their white sails bright in the sun and the sea sparkling. A bustle as steeds, tents, and coffers are loaded. Cut to Arthur and the old man boarding. A.S. as each ship’s sails unfurl with a snap and they set off for Brittany.

Night in Arthur’s chamber aboard ship, the only light from a sputtering candle. C.U. on Arthur’s clammy face as he thrashes about in the throes of a dream. Dissolve to black and a dragon appears, wings streaked with every color and blistering flames spewing from a cavernous mouth. Cut to O.T.S. dragon as a wild black bear emerges from the light of the rising sun. Curling claws and bowed legs, lips foaming behind matted fur. L.S. as the bear pounces on the dragon and the two lock in ferocious battle. M.S. as the dragon rips the bear’s back open with its talons. The bear collapses and C.U. Arthur as his eyes fly open.

Arthur shouts for his philosopher and the old man hurries in. Cut to the philosopher at the edge of the bed, the candle waxy and low. Arthur, trembling: “What make you of this nightmare?” The philosopher’s face is calm: “Sir, the dragon for certain is yourself, its colors all your kingdoms. The bear, the tyrant that torments your people. You shall have victory as your vision showed” (4MA 815-828). C.U. on Arthur, his face relaxing, a grateful nod.

The philosopher exits and Arthur lies back down in bed. M.S. as he rolls over, facing away from the camera. The light from the candle turns a fold in his nightshirt into a shadow like a jagged gash down his back. Fade to black.
**Episode 2: “The Giant”**

Camera faces Guinevere looking out a window onto the castle grounds. Mordred appears in frame from behind; Guinevere recoils when she notices him. Intercut: Mordred asks how she will pass the day and Guinevere, eyes still out the window, responds she will ride the grounds. Guinevere turns to leave. Mordred follows and, when she whips around, shrugs apologetically: “The king commanded I keep by you.”

Switch to Brittany as Arthur disembarks and sets up his encampment. Two French messengers have been awaiting his arrival and approach. The first informs him that Lucius has already invaded France, his forces killing commoners, clergy, and noblemen alike as they pillage the land.

The second, a Knight Templar in a white tunic emblazoned with a red cross, warns of another danger: “Here there is a tyrant that torments thy people: a great giant engendered of fiends” (842-843). The giant has been ravaging the region, devouring its children and raping its women. It has just kidnapped the Duchess of Brittany. The Knight points to the nearby promontory known as Mount Saint Michel, from which the lights of two fires can be seen: “There you may find more florins than has France, more treasure than has Troy, more dead men than has the Devil” (AMA 884-885). “Revenge thy people that thus are rebuked,” urges the Knight (867).

Arthur tells Gawain to ride to Lucius’s camp and issue an ultimatum: return to Rome or fight. Meanwhile he orders his own horse prepared: “For I will pass in pilgrimage to seek the saint of Mount Michel” (896-899). Arthur dresses—mail shirt, gold-trimmed leather jacket, silver helmet, gloves set with pearls—and heads off.

Switch to Guinevere and Mordred galloping through the woods, Guinevere urging her horse faster. C.U. on Guinevere as she pulls ahead, branches blurring in the
background, the sounds of Mordred calling after her to slow down. Cut to L.A.S.
beneath her horse as it rears. She has caught a poacher in the royal woods. The poacher
freezes, bent over his kill, his young son’s hand clamped over their dog’s snout.

Mordred clatters toward them and when he sees the poacher, reaches for his
sword. Guinevere reaches out to stay his hand and he looks at her questioningly.
“Remember Arthur’s orders,” she says and spurs her horse, forcing Mordred to follow.
Mordred takes a last glance at the poacher and rides away.

Switch to Gawain’s troop, armor glittering, raising Arthur’s banners of gold, red,
and blue as they ride into the wood. Cut to trees clearing and they find themselves on the
top of a hill beneath which Lucius’s camp spreads. Pan on a riot of activity: knights
weaving through billowing tents of purple silk, elephant tamers guarding their animals,
sparks and clangs as smiths forge weaponry. Gawain watches Lucius and the Sultan of
Syria glide softly in their robes into the Emperor’s tent, followed by servers with platters
of meat and casks of wine.

T.S. on Gawain as he leads his men into the camp. Lucius’s soldiers watch in
silence, their hands perched on their weapons. X.I.S. as Gawain rides into the tent and
Lucius rises from his laden table at the other end. Gawain dismounts: “I greet the false
heretic who calls himself Emperor. The king commands you leave his lands or else
encounter him at once” (AMA 1303-1320).

Switch to Arthur arriving at the first fire on the promontory to find an old
woman in a heavy dress of blue and black weeping over a fresh-dug grave. She is the
Duchess’s former servant and she wails that the giant slit her lady open from the throat
to the navel. Arthur declares he will avenge the Duchess. The woman gives Arthur’s
finery a skeptical once-over and replies that the giant won’t accept bribes: “Your words
are but waste, for he sets little by land and money” (AMA 993-995). The giant wants only the beards of kings to sew into his hairy cloak.

A roar and the sound of bones snapping. The woman shudders and says the giant begins his supper—Arthur ought to turn back while the giant is distracted. Arthur brandishes his sword, Excalibur, and continues up the cliff.

Switch to Lucius, eyeing Gawain contemptuously. He slowly sits and cuts at his meat. Silence as all wait for a response. Lucius swallows. “Were it not for reverence of my table, I would make you repent your rude words,” he hisses (1330-1331). A Roman senator standing behind Gawain steps forward and booms, “Ever were these Britons braggarts of old! Lo,” gesturing at the sword at Gawain’s side, “he barks as if he might beat us down, but a boy he stands” (1348-1351).

Laughter from Lucius’s men. Gawain joins in, pulling sword from scabbard as if to display it. Suddenly he whips around and beheads the senator with a swipe. P.O.V. Lucius as the senator’s head lands on the table before him. A second of silence and cut to C.U. Gawain, breathing hard. A.S. as the hall fills with roars and Lucius’s men converge on Gawain, who leaps onto his horse and races out.

Switch to Arthur peering out from behind a crag at the mountain’s peak. O.T.S. on a terrible tableau: the giant, ten feet tall and naked save for a motley cloak of black, yellow, and red, sprawled out by a roaring fire over which children roast the carcasses of men and pigs on spits. They slide the meat onto silver platters before the giant, who sucks at bones and stains his lips with wine. “How foully you feed!” Arthur exclaims as he comes out from behind the crag (1062).

L.A.S. as the giant lumbers to his feet—matted hair, hooked nose, beard splattered with flesh—and brandishes an iron club. The giant lunges and Arthur slashes
him in the face, making his eyes weep blood. Another slash to the giant’s bulging stomach and a third at his uncovered genitals. With a bellow the giant hits Arthur in the chest. Arthur falls to the ground and the giant throws himself on the king. Two-shot as they wrestle and Arthur plunges a dagger into the giant’s stomach.

Switch to M.S. Gawain racing through the woods with Lucius’s men close behind. Gawain launches a spear at an approaching Roman soldier who falls to the ground with a crash. One of Gawain’s men runs another Roman through with his lance. A third Roman races through the trees to meet Gawain head-on and Gawain slashes the rider from the crown of his head to the pit of his stomach.

Gawain and his men enter a clearing and into an ambush by Lucius’s men. Gawain turns toward his men: “May I never look on my lord all the days of my life if I so loathly help him here!” (1444-1448). A cheer and they ride on the Romans. The grisly sounds of battle: swords striking, men groaning, horses’ screams. Gawain captures the Roman captain leading the troop and the Romans scatter. Gawain pushes the captain to the ground. L.A.S. O.T.S. of the captain as Gawain orders him to undress.

Switch to Guinevere and Mordred clattering back into the stables. Mordred jumps from his horse and grabs Guinevere’s reins. He reminds her that poaching on the king’s land is punishable by death—as Arthur’s warden, Mordred is charged with enforcing these laws. She sneers: “Those are the robbers that ravage Arthur’s lands?” All she saw was a hungry man and his child.

Guinevere dismounts and Mordred hangs up her saddle. The harvest was bad, he allows. Guinevere warns it will only worsen the longer they must send food to Arthur’s troops. Mordred keeps his eyes on her richly-embroidered saddle as he quietly offers,
“We could permit the people entry while Arthur is away.” C.U. on Guinevere searching Mordred’s face for sincerity. She lifts the saddle from Mordred’s horse and hangs it.

Switch to Arthur stumbling back into camp, his clothes ripped to shreds, his face almost unrecognizable from swelling and blood. He carries the giant’s cloak in one hand and the club in the other. X.L.S. Gawain rides in at the same time from the other direction. The captured Roman captain, flushing and humiliated in his underclothes, walks behind him. Gawain rushes to Arthur and frantically checks his body—stomach, sides, loins—for injury. “If the saints that serve our Lord be such, I shall never saint be!” Gawain exclaims and Arthur grimaces a laugh (AMA 1168-1169).

Switch to the surviving Roman knights limping back to Lucius’s tent. The floor is still covered in blood but the tables have been cleared for maps over which Lucius and his mercenaries pore. The knights report, “Sir Arthur has destroyed your lords that rode for revenge” (1952-1953). Lucius’s face blanches with rage and he turns to his advisors: “Saracens! My heart is set, assent if you like, to fight my foe in France” (1960-1965). He sends them out to mobilize.

Switch to Guinevere and Mordred watching from a window as peasants, bows on their backs and dogs at their sides, hesitantly enter the wood. They shoot glances back at the castle as if waiting to be called off. Two-shot through window as Guinevere tells Mordred he must keep this from Arthur. Mordred asks how she will pass the day, and she says she will inspect the winter storage. L.S. as they head down the hall together.

Switch to Arthur calling Gawain, the Knight Templar, and the philosopher to his tent where he is recuperating. Gawain, hair still matted in blood, throws the Roman captain at Arthur’s feet. “We have fought with the boldest forces that to your foe
belong” (*AMA* 1535-36). Gesturing at the captain, “You may have for the soldier sixty horses loaded in silver, and chariots encharged with gold” (1549-1552).

Arthur asks if Gawain suffered losses and the knight reports that only Sir Ewain was injured. Arthur tries to rise from bed and winces. “Soldier, there shall no silver save you but Ewain recover. It becomes no king to trade his captives for covetousness” (1595-1597).

Arthur motions at the Knight Templar, who steps forward. He tells the Knight to take a troop of men back up the cliff, where they are to retrieve the giant’s treasure and his head, which Arthur cut off in the fight. The first is to be distributed among Arthur’s men, the second to be hung from the Duke of Brittany’s castle wall.

Arthur dismisses the men, saying he will rest. The philosopher is the last to file out. He turns back at the last moment and O.T.S. sees that Arthur has risen and draped the giant’s cloak over his shoulders. The tent flap closes and the frame goes black.
Episode 3: “The Emperor”

Arthur’s scouts report that Lucius wants to stage the battle at the city of Soissons, and if they move quickly they can beat the Emperor to the high ground. The British forces set up a blockade around the city: L.S. on watchtower windows as the city’s archers, in tunics of blue and white, are replaced by Arthur’s men in gold, red, and blue. Arthur orders that the peasants of the surrounding region be brought to safety within the city’s wall. A.S. as they stream in through the gate.

Lucius watches from a nearby hilltop as Arthur’s men reinforce the city’s protections. “The traitor has his treason worked,” he mutters to himself (AMA 2017). As his sprawling army sets up camp, he turns to the Sultan: “We will surround the city and fight with our foe—flee may we never” (2020-2021).

Switch to Guinevere at court kneeling in front of the priest to take Communion. C.U. as he places the wafer on her tongue, then a gasp from the pews—camera racks focus to a woman behind Guinevere, her hands clutching at her bulging stomach. Urgent whispers as ladies escort the woman out of the chapel.

Guinevere rises quickly to follow. As she passes by Mordred, she whispers excitedly, “Kay’s child comes early!” C.U. on Mordred as he watches Guinevere leave.

Switch to Lucius feasting with his men the night before battle. Flickering firelight obscures a chaos of movement and sound: servers with heaped platters above their heads as they navigate gyrating performers, men shouting to be heard over cymbals, flutes, and drums. Lucius rises and the camera stays steady on him as he raises his goblet. Silence for a moment, then: “It is reason and right that rebels be restrained. Revel we this night and bide no longer, for without doubt the day shall be ours!” (2041-2043). A raucous cheer as men drain their cups.
In the early morning light, Arthur assembles his men on the battlefield. T.S. on Arthur as he rides up and down the frontline. He declares, “This is the day I kill Lucius or else die myself!” (AMA 2046). A battle cry and Arthur leads the charge. A.S as the two armies, each moving like one body, converge on each other.

Battle cries morph to the scream of a woman. Switch to Kay’s wife crushing Guinevere’s hands as she pushes. Women scurry about the room heating compresses, preparing herbal mixes, and stoking the roaring fire. Guinevere urges Kay’s wife to walk to get the baby moving. She stands. Two-shot of Guinevere’s shadow long and thin on the wall, Kay’s wife’s bulging and bent over.

A bang on the door and Guinevere steps outside. Mordred is pacing. Two-shot as he turns to her: “Shall I send for the surgeon?” Guinevere’s smile at his concern turns to a scowl and she steps out of frame. C.U. as she recovers: “We women have welcomed every child born at court into this world.” Guinevere reminds Mordred that she herself has pulled babies from between their mothers’ legs. Then, moaning from inside the room—Guinevere tells Mordred she will call for him when the child comes.

Switch to camera following an arrow as it flies from a watchtower into the throat of a Roman soldier. On the field, one of Arthur’s knights throws a spear into a Roman’s ribs. The Roman falls forward onto his horse and, as the spear pushes further, his blood gushes on the animal. Suddenly Arthur’s horse rears: P.O.V. Arthur and sound cuts as he watches Lucius’s giants emerge from the forest. Sound cuts back in with the giants’ roars as they fall on the British forces. Arthur brandishes Excalibur and slashes the largest giant in the knees. The giant falls to the ground and Arthur sinks his sword into its neck. Gawain motions at a troop behind him and they follow Arthur’s lead—giants fall with deafening thuds.
Flashes of flying spears, rupturing armor, and glinting shields. Galloping horses, riders dead in their saddles, crush fallen banners beneath their hooves. A Roman soldier rides up from behind Kay and strikes him in the side. Kay runs the soldier through with his sword, then clutches at his side as the blood spurts. He makes his way to Arthur, who is directing troops. “Bring me to burial,” he pleads (\textit{AMA} 2187). Arthur shouts for the battlefield priest, who jumps up from a fallen knight to give Kay absolution: “\textit{Ego te absolvo a peccatis tuis}.” O.T.S. Arthur as Kay coughs up blood, murmurs, “My wife…” C.U. Kay’s unseeing eyes fixed on the sky. Arthur spurs his horse and re-enters the fray with a bellow.

Arthur rides through the chaos shouting for Lucius. He passes injured men, severed men, men whose torsos have fallen but whose stiff legs stay clamped around horses’ sides.

Lucius has hit one of Arthur’s men through the heart. Arthur shouts and Lucius spurs around and with a slash strikes Arthur’s shoulder. Arthur rams his sword through the base of Lucius’s throat and drags the blade down, gutting him to the navel. Arthur watches as Lucius, choking, puts his hands to his spewing intestines. Lucius falls.

The remaining Romans cry for retreat and Arthur orders his men to give chase as they disappear into the wood. “No captain shall be kept for silver, ere Kay be cruelly avenged” he barks (2263-2265). G.L.S. of hooves racing by as a forest stream runs red with blood.

Switch to women removing stained sheets as Guinevere rocks the newborn by the fire. Mordred enters. “Kay’s wife—?” he looks around the room, and she responds that the mother is in a clean bed, resting. Mordred approaches. Two-shot as he strokes
the baby’s head, their silhouettes framed by the fire. Mordred says gently that the baby sleeps as if she is in her mother’s arms. Guinevere stiffens.

C.U. as Mordred’s face drains. “I didn’t—” but Guinevere interrupts that she will only deliver a child, never have one. “Arthur’s surgeon believes me barren.” C.U. on her scornful face as she narrows her eyes at Mordred. “You are proof enough of Arthur’s potency.” Mordred’s face flushes and his eyes fall to the ground, hand frozen on the baby’s head. She continues: “And you will be your father’s only offspring.” She leaves. Mordred remains in frame, his hand falling to his side.

Switch to the sun setting as the philosopher rides out onto the now-deserted battlefield, quiet save for the low groans of men. O.T.S. pan of shattered armor, empty saddles, and the outlines of bodies. In the silence a roar builds from the woods and I.S. as Arthur’s knights burst out in triumph, their horses laden with gold from Lucius’s camp. They lead a trail of Arabian horses, camels, and brimming coffers.

Arthur collects the bodies of the Emperor, the Sultan, and the kings who fought for the Roman army. He motions and a captured senator, stripped to his underclothes, is thrown at Arthur’s feet. Arthur tells the senator he is to escort the bodies as well as all of Lucius’s wealth back to Rome. “Say to the senators that I send them the tax and tribute of ten score winters, but bid them never be so bold, while my blood reigns, to beg more treasure than this” (AMA 2345-2351). Arthur motions at someone in the watching crowd. H.A.S. as a butcher comes forward and with a cleaver hacks the senator’s hair to mark him as captive.

Switch to Guinevere and Kay’s wife standing at the front of the chapel as the baby is baptized. The priest turns to Guinevere and asks her to speak on her
as water sprinkles on the baby’s head.

After the service, Guinevere thanks Kay’s wife for the honor. Kay’s wife blushes: “I would never have dared had Sir Mordred not advised it.” Guinevere blinks. The sound of women cooing fades as she searches out Mordred in the crowd of well-wishers. Their eyes meet and C.U. on her smile.

Switch to the philosopher in his tent packing when a page summons him. In Arthur’s tent he sees the king reclining in a low chair, toying with the giant’s club. The philosopher, eagerly: “Guinevere will be glad to hear of our homecoming.”

Arthur, eyes on the club, says he cannot go back now that he knows the dangers under which his people—“the children of this crown”—live. The philosopher asks what Arthur intends to do but the entrance of Gawain and Arthur’s advisors cuts him off.

Arthur rises and rolls out a map of the Continent on a table. The men gather around. Arthur places his finger on the duchy of Lorraine, whose duke fought for Lucius and escaped into the wood. “I will that duchy divide and deal out as I like” (AMA 2396-2403). He traces the way to Lombardy: “I will set in that land law that shall last forever” (2407). Over Tuscany: “These tyrants I shall trouble a little” (2408). C.U. on the philosopher’s eyes following and cut to C.U. of the map, firelight making the shadow of Arthur’s finger loom over it. Arthur’s fingers rest on Rome and his eyes rise to meet the philosopher’s: “I will give my protection to all the Pope’s lands” (2410). Arthur means to be Emperor. Fade to black on a shot of the map.
Episode 4: “The Sword”

Open on a feast at Arthur’s court as Mordred hosts the stewards of the king’s lands, come to pay tribute. T.S. on a server with an empty tray as he walks through the cavernous and quiet hall, its tables sparsely inhabited with so many men at war. A steward, face grim, approaches Mordred: he’ll have nothing to give come harvest if the war tax continues. Mordred gives an understanding nod and invites him to sit with him at the head table.

Guinevere enters and Mordred gestures at a seat by his side. Guinevere smiles as she sits in Gawain’s old seat, and she wonders aloud how he fares. Reminiscing: “I brought him up from a boy, and now…to lose him in battle…” Mordred says Guinevere raised him well—Gawain was the first to make the king’s bastard feel welcome at court.

Guinevere’s and Mordred’s heads snap up as a messenger clatters through the feast with a letter. C.U. on Mordred as he reads, his face lighting up. Shouting to the hall: “Arthur has ended our enemy!” The room fills with cheers but Guinevere watches as Mordred reads on. His face falls and he shoots a devastated look at Kay’s wife, then continues reading. Suddenly he raises his eyes to meet Guinevere’s gaze, his voice flat: “The king continues this conflict ‘til he is crowned in Rome.”

The hall quiets. A steward stands: are the people to pay for that as well? Men erupt into cries, proclaiming the war will kill them. Mordred raises his hand and they quiet again. He promises not to collect any more tribute until he has communicated their concerns to Arthur. Cut to C.U. Guinevere watching Mordred thoughtfully as men come forward to thank him. Mordred turns to look at her and she gives a nod of approval. Cut to another steward, Craddok, standing at the back of the hall. P.O.V Craddok as he watches Mordred and the queen.
Montage as Arthur moves from Lorraine to Viterbo, the last city on the way to Rome. Shots of his knights overrunning a watch tower on a mountain peak; emerging from tree cover to ambush a bridge; galloping down city streets as inhabitants flee, all overlaid with the image of the map, camera panning it along the path of Arthur’s forces.

Arthur and his men set up a siege at Viterbo and wait for its duke to engage. The knights grow restless as their catapults fail to bring down the walls and no force emerges from the city gate. Arthur rides in front of his knights: today they will break the city’s doors down. The knights whoop, banners crack, shields glint. Gawain and his troop storm the bridge, running their swords up to the hilts through guards’ bodies A.S. on battering rams crashing into the gate. But it won’t budge, and Gawain’s men fall as archers’ arrows fly through the gaps in their upturned shields. Gawain urges them to keep pushing. C.U. the philosopher spots the city’s defenders assembling balls of flame in the watchtowers. Arthur calls Gawain off and the knights limp back to camp.

Low spirits as the sun sets. Food supplies are short and the men pick at bread. G.L.S. as a knight drops a scrap and a dog sniffs disinterestedly. Arthur summons Gawain to his tent. “Our forces grow feeble, for they want the flesh and food that they like” (AMA 2484-2486). He instructs Gawain to take a hunting party into the woods.

First light and Gawain races with his party into the forest. They ride through valleys and over hills, past hazel copses and misty meadows. The men pause in a clearing and the horses graze on sweet flowers. Gawain, eager to hunt, continues on into the wood, urging his dog to get a scent. The hound turns a bend and Gawain discovers an unknown knight watering his horse in a stream. Gawain flexes his fingers around his lance and issues a challenge.
The knight eyes him warily. “Thou picks no prey,” he warns (AMA 2534). Gawain spurs and they collide in a two-shot, each drawing a spurt of blood. A.S. as they brandish swords that glint like flames in the sun. Gawain strikes the knight’s shoulder, exposes pulsing flesh. The knight groans and grazes Gawain’s thigh.

His sword hits a vein and in an instant Gawain’s green belt runs red with blood. His face blanches and he falls forward on his horse. The knight grabs Gawain’s reins and follows the hound back to the hunting party. Gawain and the knight stagger from their horses and the men rush to strip them. From his pocket the knight withdraws a vial: “salves that shall save us both, full of the flower of the four wells of Paradise” (2705-2706). Gawain’s men massage the oils into the wounds and gasp as C.U. the sinews rejoin, the skin seals.

The knight introduces himself as Priamus, descendant of Alexander and Hector, a mercenary for the Duke of Viterbo. Upon learning Gawain fights for Arthur, he exclaims, “There is no king under Christ who may conquer him. Arthur will be heir to Alexander, abler than Hector” (2630-2637). But Priamus warns that the Duke has camps of men scattered throughout the wood planning an ambush in the night.

Gawain jumps to his feet, pulling on his clothing, armor, and belt, now unrecognizable under a coat of dried blood. He is hatching a plan to surprise the Duke’s camp with the hunting party. Priamus warns, “You are at the fairest too few to fight them all. You will be overset with Saracens,” (2742, 2815). Gawain is determined: “The false shall fall—they make faith to the fiend. When we are in distress we pray to Mary. Whoso minds that maid, miscarries he never!” (2855-2873). Priamus gives Gawain directions to the Duke’s own camp, then leaves to retrieve his forces in Gawain’s aid.
Gawain’s men sneak through the wood. The Duke’s camp mills about, waiting for night to fall. P.O.V. inside the camp as figures emerge from the cover of trees—the camera spins to reveal Gawain’s knights taking shape as they converge on the camp. They cut down unarmed men and the woods fills with screams. G.L.S. as horses’ hooves squelch on the bloody ground. Priamus’s men charge from the wood, overrunning the frame. Cut to Gawain racing through the chaos when he spots the Duke’s banner, a lion beneath a crown. Two-shot as he runs his sword through the Duke’s throat.

Knights ride ahead to Arthur’s camp to herald their victory. “Your men have foraged full well,” they announce and throw the Duke’s body at Arthur’s feet (AMA 3019). When Arthur learns that the Duke planned to ambush him, he roars that he will raze the city in retribution.

From inside the walls, L.A.S. as heads turn up to watch catapulted rocks rain down. Monasteries and churches, hospitals and inns crumble. Wall torches set fires as they fall and the streets fill with screams and smoke. From a window in the castle, the Duchess watches Arthur’s men display the Duke’s body on the bridge. T.S. as the Duchess, in her pale dress, pushes through the dark mass of the castle’s fleeing inhabitants and up to the highest tower.

The philosopher, anxiously scanning the city’s walls from camp, cries to Arthur that a white flag flies. Arthur calls off the attack and prepares to enter. A.S. on Arthur’s knights, gleaming in gold, pushing through hordes of people running to the woods for refuge. Arthur enters a silent city save for the crackling of fire. He passes crumbling walls and fountains filled with mortar. Arthur arrives at the castle to find the Duchess waiting. Unable to conceal her contempt, she smirks as she hands him the key, now useless—cut to a door ajar, torn off its hinges by the fleeing stampede.
Arthur’s men raid the castle pantries and assemble a gluttonous feast. As they load the tables in the hall, a Roman cardinal arrives. He bows before Arthur: “I pray thee for peace and to have pity on the Pope” (AMA 3179-3180). The cardinal tells Arthur that if he spares Rome, the Pope will crown him Emperor.

Arthur invites the cardinal to sit as the platters before them fill with meat, the cups besides them slosh with wine. Arthur proposes toast after toast: “Now we may revel, for Rome is our own!” (3207). His cheeks grow red, his laughter loud. Men’s shadows leer and blur on the castle walls. Arthur, unsteady on his feet, rises for a final toast: “We shall be overlord of all that on Earth lives—we will revenge Christ that on the cross died” (3211, 3217). Cut to the philosopher watching, his plate and goblet empty.

Morning and Arthur rides through the countryside to survey his new land. He spots a man alone on the road and approaches. O.T.S. man kneeling as Arthur asks, “Whither goes thou, walking alone while this world is at war?” (3479-3482). C.U. man as he raises his eyes to Arthur—it is Craddok. He reports, “Sir, thy warden is wicked and wild of deeds” (3523). Camera stays on Arthur’s expression of shock as Craddok continues, “He has woe wrought since you went” (3524).

Cut to a dark hall, two figures, and a flickering candle. The night of Mordred’s feast for the vassals. O.T.S. Craddok peering from behind a corner as Mordred asks where they are going and Guinevere shushes him. Guinevere pulls a key from her dress and gently eases the door to the royal armory open. L.S. of the room, moonlight streaming from a window onto a glinting sword: Clarent, Arthur’s dearest possession. Guinevere and Mordred approach. “Arthur’s rampage will not rest in Rome,” she whispers. Two-shot as she holds the sword out to Mordred. “You must claim this kingdom from its king.” C.U. Mordred, stunned.
Back to close two-shot as Guinevere puts the sword in his hands and presses her lips on his. C.U. on the silhouettes of their faces, framed in moonlight. As she steps back, camera reveals Craddok watching in the doorway.

Craddok tells Arthur that Mordred has redistributed the king’s lands to his stewards, assembled a mercenary army of Saracens and Picts, and wed Guinevere. Arthur, ashen and unable to respond, spurs back to camp. He storms into his tent and knocks his coronation clothes off a chair, pulls on his mail shirt. The philosopher enters, confused, and Arthur tells him they will leave at once, but for Britain. Fade to black on G.L.S. of the coronation clothes, the giant’s cloak out of focus in the background.
Episode 5: “The Knight”

Camera framed through a spyglass as Mordred watches Arthur’s ships appear on the horizon. He nods to his men and they return to their camp.

Arthur’s banner snaps in the wind: C.U. on a flag with a golden crown beneath a woman holding a baby. Mordred’s forces wait on the beach and arrows rain down as the ships run aground. Gawain, leading his troop in a small ship, lands first. Gawain turns to his men: “Blanch for no blade or bright weapon, but bear down on the best and bring them down!” (AMA 3739-3743). He jumps into the shallows. X.I.S. as his men, shimmering with water, clash with Mordred’s forces.

Camera follows a spear as it soars into an oncoming soldier’s throat. Gawain searches for Mordred in the melee—the beach heaves with the glint of swords and cries of men. Gawain charges to the top of a dune and his horse rears at the sight below: pan of Mordred and hundreds of knights waiting in ambush. “False-fathered creature,” Gawain shouts, “Thou shall be dead and undone for thy deeds” (3776-3778). He leads his men down the dune with a shout.

A.S. as Gawain’s men are surrounded. P.O.V. Gawain as the camera spins to reveal his men falling to the ground. Gawain raises his sword with a bellow and rushes at Mordred, hitting him in the shoulder. Mordred, not recognizing Gawain’s belt for the dried blood or face through the helmet, knocks the sword from his hands and tackles him. Mordred pulls out a dagger and stabs Gawain through the visor. Flash of white.

Fade in on a midwinter feast at Arthur’s court to celebrate the New Year. Chirping pipes, roasting pigs, and a storyteller who holds a group of children enthralled: “When the siege and the assault were ceased at Troy…” (SGK 1). Arthur, Guinevere, and his knights, faces young and unlined, laugh around a table laden with food at the end
of the hall. Kay compliments a spiced dish and Arthur responds it would be less costly to invade the East than continue paying such prices for its goods. Kay laughs uncertainly.

O.T.S. Mordred as he cautiously approaches the table and pauses when Guinevere stiffens. Gawain rests a hand on hers and motions for Mordred to join. Trumpets blare as servers appear with more food.

Sound ceases as the hall doors burst open—L.A.S. to reveal a gigantic man.

X.L.S. as he approaches Arthur’s table, the thud of his feet the only sound. Arthur takes him in: burly body, long limbs, loins bulging in green tights. A broad chest tapering to a trim waist wrapped in a green coat intricately trimmed with gold. In his hands, a monstrous axe. O.T.S. on the man as knights pull back in fear.

The man reaches Arthur’s table and bellows, “Where is the king of this crowd?” (SGGK 224-226). Arthur rises slowly. P.O.V. Arthur as he sees his own hands shaking—he puts them behind his back and asks the man’s business. The man says he proposes a holiday game to the greatest court in Christendom.

The man passes the axe back and forth in his hands. C.U. on Arthur’s eyes following. The man says any knight may strike him so long as he agrees to receive a blow in one year. Silence. The man brings the axe to the floor with a crash. “What, is this Arthur’s house?” (309).

Camera racks focus from Arthur to Gawain as the knight suddenly stands. Arthur glances at Guinevere, who shakes her head frantically. Arthur hesitates but steps aside, and, as Gawain passes, says lightheartedly: “Hit him right and you will wait long for his return” (372-374). Gawain forces a laugh as he weighs the axe in his hands.

The man kneels and sweeps his hair to reveal the naked neck. H.A.S. as Gawain brings the axe down, a spurt of blood as he slashes through spine. T.S. on the head as it
thuds to the ground and rolls toward a knight, now bold, who playfully kicks it at another knight. Cut to the philosopher, brow furrowed, stepping forward to stop the game when—

Gasps as the man’s body rises and staggers toward its head. The head speaks:

Gawain must find the Green Knight in a year’s time. “Come or be called coward” (SGGK 456). The figure, head in hand, thuds out of the hall.

Silence as Gawain, face white, turns to Arthur. Arthur gently takes the Knight’s weapon: “Hang up thine axe, it has hewed enough,” and places it by a window on a wall decorated with weaponry (477). Camera stays on the axe as O.S. Arthur orders the music to resume. Seasons pass in the window: spring storms, green fields, falling leaves, first frost. Camera turns back on the hall, where Arthur is bidding Gawain goodbye. Arthur presents Gawain with a crimson coat and a glimmering shield, its center decoration five interlocking lines forming a star. “The endless knot,” Arthur says, a symbol of fidelity and the emblem of his truest knight (630).

Guinevere’s face is streaked with tears. “He could have been king who now will be killed in a child’s game,” she whispers as Arthur comes to stand beside her in a two-shot (674-683). Arthur turns toward her but she exits frame, leaving the hall.

Camera pulls back with Gawain as he rides out, the castle retreating in the background. Montage of his journey: midwinter landscapes and knotted trees, O.T.S. as his horse races down narrow forest paths. “I beseech thee, Mary, of some harbor” Gawain prays in the wilderness (753-755).

Suddenly the brush opens to a valley in which a splendid castle sits. The drawbridge lowers and the lord appears: Bertilak, strong and smiling with a glossy auburn beard. T.S. as he leads Gawain through a lively feast to a table laden with meat:
pheasant, turkey, boar. Bertilak’s wife, radiantly beautiful, curtsies. Camera racks focus to a withered old woman behind her, who nods acknowledgment. Gawain tells his host he seeks the Green Knight and Bertilak gives a delighted laugh—the Knight’s chapel is not a day’s ride from the castle.

Gawain has three days until New Year, and Bertilak proposes a game to pass the time. “You have wearied yourself—lie at leisure in bed while I hunt. What I catch in the wood shall be yours, if you swap what you win in the day” (SGGK 1093-1109). Gawain agrees with a clink of cups.

Daybreak and the lord rides out. Bugles blow and dogs bark as they enter the frosted wood. Hounds nip at deer’s heels and drive them toward Bertilak’s waiting archers. The whiz of arrows morphs into…

The whir of a door gently opening as Bertilak’s wife tiptoes into Gawain’s room. He opens his eyes to find her on the edge of his bed: “You are an unwary sleeper, that one may steal in—now you are caught!” as she pins him down between her arms with a laugh (1209-1211). She has heard so much of Gawain’s courtesy, she demands to experience it herself. “And you are welcome to me, as well, take whatever you want,” sweetly as she twists a long curl around her finger (1237-1238).

Match cut from curl to rope as Bertilak ties up his kills. The butcher sharpens his knife and gets to work so they can leave what they don’t want in the wood. Rhythmic: throat slit, gullet scraped, entrails out, meat carved, head cut. G.L.S. as hounds feast on innards and bread. Barks and trumpet blares as they head back.

Far-off trumpets and the lady rises from Gawain’s bed. She scolds him for not taking a kiss and C.U. presses her lips against his.
Match cut to C.U. Gawain planting a lingering kiss on Bertilak, who blinks and then bellows a laugh. He presents Gawain with venison: “Does our play please you?” (5GGK 1379). They sit down to a feast.

Morning: shots of Bertilak chasing a boar intercut with the lady laughing at the edge of Gawain’s bed, stroking his hair. Bertilak running the boar through with the sword cuts to the lady swooping in for a kiss. Cut to Gawain kissing Bertilak and the lord presenting him with the boar’s head. Laughter in the hall and another feast.

Morning: white countryside set on fire by the sunrise. A brilliant red fox dashes out of a copse and Bertilak gives chase.

Cut to the same landscape view as the lady, in a gleaming emerald dress, throws open the curtains and scolds Gawain for sleeping so late. She turns at the sound of his murmuring, “axe” the only intelligible word as he tosses in a nightmare.

She kisses him and he bolts up, breathing hard. The lady unties her green belt and offers it to Gawain: “What man wears this lace cannot be killed by any strike” (1851-1853). C.U. as Gawain’s hand floats to the back of his neck, his eyes fixed on the belt; two-shot as he accepts it. The lady leaves and Gawain stashes it under the bed.

That night at the feast, a fox pelt sits before Gawain. Gawain asks Bertilak for directions to the Green Knight’s chapel. “All that I ever promised you I shall readily give,” Bertilak says, suddenly solemn (1970). C.U. on Gawain’s goblet as Bertilak refills it, then pan up hours later when cheeks are flushed and laughter loud. Bertilak has a hand on Gawain’s leg and his wife brushes against Gawain as she passes. P.O.V. Gawain on a blurred image of Bertilak’s laughing face transposing into the lady’s and back again, then in the last moment the old woman’s as camera fades out…
Fade in on sunrise as Gawain rides out into the snow-covered fields. Montage of rock faces and icy streams before he arrives at a great mound with an opening at one end. Gawain pokes his head in—P.O.V. on a floor littered with bones. He whips around at the sound of a blade sharpening: the Green Knight before him, new axe in hand.

Gawain kneels for the first blow. L.A.S. as the Knight brings the axe down. C.U. as Gawain flinches and the Knight halts the axe. “Thou art not Gawain, who is held so good,” the Knight sneers (SGK 2270). Cut to C.U. on a nearby boulder as the Knight raises the axe in the background. Camera racks focus to Gawain as the axe falls—he is still as stone. “Now you have your heart,” the Knight grins (2296). H.A.S. as the Knight swings the axe a third time.

A spurt of blood on the snow and Gawain leaps forward from under the axe, hand pressed to a cut on the back of his neck. Gawain crams his helmet back on and brandishes his sword as the Knight watches, amused. “It is my belt thou bears, and my wife who bestowed it,” the Knight reveals (2358). A booming laugh at Gawain’s stunned expression. It has all been a test of Gawain’s word, and he almost passed perfectly, but Bertilak can forgive a man for trying to save his life.

Blood rushes to Gawain’s face. “A curse upon cowardice and covetousness,” he spits (2374). Bertilak’s expression turns to concern and he invites Gawain back to the castle to celebrate the New Year as friends. Gawain says all he wants now from the Green Knight is the belt that will remind him of his failure, “the frailty of my perverse flesh” (2435). Bertilak’s reassurances fade out as Gawain rides off.

T.S. from behind as Gawain rides into Arthur’s courtyard, green belt around his waist and red scar on his neck. He bursts into the hall and Guinevere embraces him,
beaming. C.U. as her face falls and cut to reveal Arthur approaching. Guinevere leaves and Gawain prostrates himself before Arthur in a two-shot.

Cut to Gawain holding up the belt as he finishes telling Arthur his tale: “This is the token of untruth, and I will wear it as long as I live” (AMA 2511-2512). Arthur says Gawain did well and claps him on the shoulders, but Gawain brushes him off. He promises never to fail his king again.

Night in Gawain’s chamber. He sets the belt by his bed and lies down. C.U. on the scar on his neck.

Match cut to the scar as Mordred lifts Gawain’s helmet to identify the knight. C.U. as Mordred’s eyes widen. O.S. voice of Mordred’s knight: “Know you this knight? He has greatly grieved us” (3866-3870). Tears begin to track down Mordred’s bloodied face. Insert shot of P.O.V. Mordred as young Gawain beckons him to sit at Arthur’s table. “This was Sir Gawain,” Mordred murmurs. “Had you known him, you would have grieved his death all the days of your life” (3876-3885). A.S. of Gawain’s head in Mordred’s lap and fade to black.
Episode 6: “The Wheel”

A.S. on the beach as Mordred’s forces retreat. Cut to Arthur frantically searching for Gawain’s party. He races through broken armor and trampled banners, past horses running wild with fear. Arthur reaches the top of the dune and camera pans on the remains of the battle. Camera rests on a mass of bodies in Arthur’s colors of blue, red, and gold. Arthur staggers towards them.

G.L.S. of Gawain’s golden helmet glinting, camera racks focus on Arthur coming closer in background. H.A.S. as Arthur sinks to the ground and collects Gawain, eyes frozen open, in his arms. Arthur’s tears run: “Now my worship is went and my war ended. Here is the hope of my heart” (AMA 3957-3958). Arthur removes his coat, beneath which he wears a doublet of blue and black, and lays it over Gawain’s body. Arthur bends to kiss Gawain’s bloodied face.

Arthur’s men approach. One steps forward with the remonstrance: “It is no worship to wring thine hands and weep as a woman!” (3977-3978). Arthur turns to face him. O.T.S. from the knights as they fall back at the sight of the king’s beard covered in blood. “Cease shall I never! He is innocent, captured for my own sin” (3981-3986).

Arthur reaches for Gawain’s helmet and scoops the bloody sand around his nephew into it. C.U. on Arthur as he holds the helmet before his face like an offering. “Here I make my vow to Mary, his death be duly revenged” (3997-4006). Arthur’s men gingerly lift Gawain’s body.

Switch to Mordred fleeing back to his castle to regroup. Guinevere races to the courtyard to meet him and exclaims over his wounds. Two-shot as Mordred clasps her hands and presses them to her protruding stomach. Mordred tells Guinevere to flee to
his ally’s castle in Ireland and wait until he can retrieve her. Guinevere, eyes full, puts her hands to Mordred’s face.

Guinevere watches from a window as Mordred and his men ride back out. She calls for horses. Cut to G.L.S. hooves clattering up to a gate. L.S. from behind as Guinevere falls to her feet before a nun at the door. C.U. on Guinevere’s face as she looks up at the woman: “I would take the veil,” she whispers, “for falsehood and fraud, and fear of my lord” (AMA 3918). The nun ushers her in and Guinevere’s figure recedes down the dark hall.

Arthur’s men secure a monastery near the beach and bring the bodies for burial. Arthur commands the monks to perform dirges and masses for Gawain, embalm the body and surround it with candles, but “abide of the burying ‘til they be brought under that this war moved” (4023-24).

A knight approaches and urges Arthur to rest the men at the monastery. Arthur, weary, agrees. Cut to night in Arthur’s chamber in the monastery, the only light a sputtering candle. C.U. on Arthur’s clammy face as he thrashes about in the throes of a dream. Dissolve to darkness and fade into a dark wood, Arthur walking alone as shadowy figures pace behind the trees. Arthur turns a bend and gasps to find a lion, its fur covered in blood as it crouches over the body of a knight in blue, red, and gold. Arthur runs out of the wood and into a beautiful meadow: clover and grass, silver vines heavy with golden grapes, the sweet smell of spring.

A beautiful woman (note: actress who plays Bertilak’s wife) stands in the center by a towering wheel, all of gold and adorned with gems. On the top sits a glittering throne, and men cling to the spikes as they reach for it. One man is crushed beneath the
wheel, naked and his loins exposed. Another foams at the mouth as he grips the spikes. Near the top Arthur sees a man all in white, his chest emblazoned with a red cross.

“Welcome,” the woman smiles. She gestures up at the throne: “Thou shall the chair achieve—I choose you” (AMA 3347). She places a gleaming diadem on his head, a scepter in one hand and an enameled globe in the other. A tree’s bough bends toward them and C.U. as Arthur picks a piece of fruit. She scoops a goblet of wine from a well and P.O.V. watches Arthur drink, drops running down his chin. As he finishes, her smile turns to a scowl. Her body begins to morph, become squat and thick, her face wrinkled (note: the actress who plays the old woman at Bertilak’s court). “Thou shall lose this leisure and thy life after—” she knocks the goblet from his hand, its wine spills on the ground, “thou has lived in delight enough!” (3386-87). She motions at the wheel. L.A.S. as it rolls forward to crush Arthur.

Arthur bolts up in bed with a gasp. Camera cuts to the sputtering candle and pans back to the bed, where the philosopher now stands. Arthur concludes, “And I have shivered for chill since this happened” (3391). Arthur raises his eyes to the philosopher’s. “I would know my woe” (3393).

The philosopher’s face is dark in the shadow of the candle. His voice quiet: “Your fortune is passed, and Lady Fortune your foe” (3394-3395). What Arthur saw was the fate of great kings before him and kings to come, all who reached the peak of power and lost it. “Thou has shed much blood and men destroyed. Confess thee of thy shame and shape for thine end” (3398-3400).

In the morning, Arthur orders his men to prepare to meet Mordred—he knows there is no hope in waiting. They ride to the battlefield in silence. Arthur turns to face his men on the frontline: “If we be destined to die this day, we shall be lifted into Heaven
ere we are cold. Now work my worship—here my war ends” (A.M.A 4090-4099). The
trumpets blare and Arthur raises Excalibur above his head.

A.S. as the two army lines dissolve into one another as they meet on the field.
Camera stays close on Arthur as he races through, the blur of dueling knights, shredded
men and spurts of blood behind him. He seeks Mordred.

Arthur sees that his knight, Ewain, is surrounded. He calls for Idrous, Ewain’s
son: “I see Sir Ewain overset with Saracens. Go with good men in help of your father”
(4136-4138). P.O.V. Idrous looking at Ewain, then camera racks focus onto Arthur.
Idrous: “I forsake this task, and all siblings but yourself alone” (4144-4145). Arthur’s
eyes fill and he rides on, Idrous following.

Mordred watches from the cover of trees, directing men. The sun beats down on
the field and he hears moans for water. Mordred rides out into the chaos of battle.
O.T.S. on Mordred as he pushes through men who part to reveal a terrible tableau:
Arthur, sword brandished, bodies of fallen knights sprawled about him. Mordred’s
sword glints and Arthur turns toward him.

“Today Clarent and Excalibur shall make themselves known who is keener of
carving,” Arthur snarls as he recognizes his sword in Mordred’s hand (4193). Arthur
races toward Mordred and splits his son’s shield in two. Blood gushes from a wound in
Mordred’s shoulder.

Mordred slashes Arthur in the loins and Arthur hits Mordred’s sword arm,
almost cleaving it at the elbow. Mordred falls from his horse. L.A.S. from ground as
Arthur stands over Mordred, seemingly frozen. H.A.S. as Arthur takes a breath and
plunges his sword through Mordred’s chest. Mordred’s mercenaries shout that their
leader is dead and begin to flee. Some of Arthur’s men pursue them into the wood while others collect the bodies of the dead.

Camera pan as Arthur surveys the knights he has lost: Priamus, Ewain, Idrous, and more. “Here rests the rich blood of the Round Table,” as he falls to his knees beside them, “and I a woeful widow that wants her children” (AMA 4282-4285). A knight exclaims as blood gushes from Arthur’s wound. Arthur’s face is white as he orders his men to take him back to the monastery.

Switch to Guinevere lying in bed with her baby. Two-shot as the nun approaches and Guinevere hands the child to her. C.U. as Guinevere looks out the window. Camera stays on Guinevere as she instructs the nun, O.S., to entrust the baby to the Church but predicts in a flat tone, “Arthur’s men will murder him for my misdeed.” Sounds of footsteps leaving as Guinevere’s eyes stay out the window.

Switch to Arthur lying in bed as a surgeon tends to him. His wounds will not heal. “Call me a confessor with Christ in his arms,” Arthur begs the philosopher (4314). O.S. “Ego te absolvo…” as C.U. Arthur’s eyes close.

The sound of bells tolling. A.S. as people in heavy black dress enter the gates of the monastery. L.S. of the chapel, candelabras stuttering around two caskets. The drone of psalms punctuated by mourners’ sobs. Cut to the philosopher watching from the back. He turns to a monk: “Thus ends Arthur, that was of Hector’s blood” (4342). The philosopher leaves the chapel. Camera stays on the doors as they close behind him and frame fades to black.
Works Cited and Consulted


