

A Once and Future King in the Political Imagination of Eighteenth-Century Britain

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I have found Christopher Snyder's illustrated book *Exploring the World of King Arthur* to be one of the best general introductions to Arthurian legend, literature and history; and yet, within its 192 copiously illustrated pages, the historical period in which I work is dismissed in a few sentences. 'In the rational eighteenth century, writers remained suspicious of medieval themes,' Snyder writes.² Snyder's summary is accurate, but richly deserving of qualification. The eighteenth century was 'rational', in the sense that many of its writers were preoccupied with distinguishing between an objective truth based on uncontested fact or argument, and the superstitious and fabulous. However, there were many writers – scholars, antiquarians – and, at times, courtiers and politicians who were inspired by the medieval antecedents of the Britain they knew. All societies are in transition, but eighteenth-century Britain was perhaps more self-conscious of this than most; the shadow of the English Civil War still loomed for much of the century; the installation of William III and Mary II as the first in a series of protestant monarchs, sidelining the Catholic Stuart dynasty, had upset

¹ Uploaded to the Oxford Research Archive with minor changes, 25 January 2013

² C. Snyder, *Exploring the World of King Arthur* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2000)

the legitimist theory behind the reconstructed social order in England that followed the 1660 Restoration of Charles II. The Act of Union between England and Scotland established a single protestant island nation, one already anticipated by writers on both sides of the border for many centuries, but threatened not only by the possibility of risings in favour of the Stuart dynasty in Scotland, but by neglect of Scottish concerns by an overwhelmingly English parliament and ruling elite. In addition, the monarch of this newly united country, between 1714 and 1760, was a foreign-born prince whose first language was German. British national identity in the eighteenth century was something to be forged, and an appeal to a mythic past would play a substantial role; and playing his part was the figure of King Arthur.

The principal scholarly work to have examined the use of Arthur in literature in the eighteenth century is James Douglas Merriman's *The Flower of Kings*, published in 1973.³ Merriman's book is a useful guide, but is hampered by his adherence to the view that there is a Platonic ideal of what he calls the 'Arthurian story', a 'fixed core', essentially the same as Malory but with some qualifications.⁴ He is critical of seventeenth and eighteenth-century writers for not understanding the imaginative world of medieval writers, and looking instead for classical unities and for historical truths. However, in his turn Merriman could be said not to have greatly understood the concerns of eighteenth-century writers. Those who wrote about Arthur in this period may well have replied that medieval writers themselves made claims for historical authenticity. Malory himself dates the filling of the Siege Perilous to 'the feast of Pentecost after the four hundred and four and fifty year' from Christ's Passion.⁵ Such statements were difficult to distinguish from discredited appeals to the fabulous past for authenticity made by institutions in the pre-modern period, discredited by historical re-evaluation in the seventeenth century, such as by

³ James Douglas Merriman, *The Flower of Kings: A Study of the Arthurian Legend in England between 1485 and 1835* (Wichita, Kansas, 1973)

⁴ *Ibid*, 5

⁵ Sir Thomas Malory, *Le Morte D'Arthur*, XIII:1,

<http://etext.library.adelaide.edu.au/m/malory/thomas/m25m/book13.html>, accessed 1 August 2004

Milton. Eighteenth-century Arthurian writers were increasingly aware of what Merriman calls ‘poetic truth’ but sought to distinguish it from the truth of rational enquiry and the disciplined imagination, which would lend their works credibility in the minds of their readers.

One of the literary works which explored English or British national identity through King Arthur was John Dryden’s book for the semi-opera *King Arthur*, first performed in 1691, for which Henry Purcell provided the music. Dryden’s Arthur is an Arthur who spans two traditions. In writing a play about Arthur Dryden was employing a figure much used on behalf of the Stuart dynasty earlier in the seventeenth century; Dryden’s Arthur thus inherited chivalric and dynastic associations suitable for the play’s presumed original patron, Charles II. However, this Arthur is incorporated into a setting which seeks both to be historically plausible and flatter the monarchy. By the time that *King Arthur* was completed James II was in exile and William and Mary reigned, which as Dryden explained obliged him ‘so much to alter the first Design, and take away so many Beauties from the Writing, that it is now no more what it was formerly, than the present Ship of the *Royal Sovereign*, after so often taking down, and altering, is the Vessel it was at the first Building.’⁶ The play has a British King Arthur, shorn of his medieval court, competing with the Saxon King Oswald not only for the crown of Britain, but also for Emmeline, blind daughter of Conon, duke of Cornwall. Arthur is ultimately victorious. The allegory is sufficiently loose for critics to have seen much in the play to allow partisans of both William III and James II to identify their king with Arthur; the Saxons, as the ‘alien’ culture seeking to conquer the island of Britain, but ultimately harmonized within the established order, could be viewed as the Catholics, in the eyes of government propagandists identified with the universalist political schemes of Louis XIV of France, or alternatively in the eyes of James’s supporters the Dutch followers of William III, both those in the court and, more broadly, in the City of London who were converting England’s self-image from an agricultural country to a financing and trading one.

⁶ J. Dryden, ‘To the Marquiss of Halifax’, *The Works of John Dryden*, 16 (1996) 3

Merlin is the only other character recognisable from romance, and he guides the various airy spirits who represent the magical content of the play, using them to direct combat and give Arthur various advantages over his foes; he also represents the far-sighted minister thus reconciling the Britons and the Saxons. It's Merlin who transforms the defeat of Oswald into harmonious reconciliation at the close of the play, with the words, to Oswald:

Nor thou, brave Saxon Prince, disdain our Triumphs;
Britains and Saxons shall be once more one People;
One Common Tongue, one Common Faith shall bind
Our Jarring Bands, in a perpetual Peace.⁷

It's Merlin's vision that enables the opposing parties to be reconciled in a new nation, complementing indirectly Dryden's dedicatee Halifax. If Dryden's *King Arthur* presents Arthur as a king who ultimately welcomes the Saxons and legitimates their conquest by bestowing his British culture upon them, it's perhaps not surprising that the monarch whose patronage he courts in his dedicatory preface is not William III but Mary II, the English-born eldest daughter of James II who in her person reconciled Stuart legitimacy and protestant authority. Briton and Saxon, whig and Jacobite, can thus gladly participate in country dances, sing 'Fairest Isle' and unite at the discovery of the Order of the Garter.

King Arthur is not regarded as one of the major works of either Dryden or Purcell, but it enjoyed a lengthy eighteenth-century career. This was boosted in the 1730s, as a consequence of the publicity afforded to Merlin's Cave, a grotto placed in Richmond Park by Queen Caroline, wife of George II. George and Caroline had positioned themselves as guardians of British cultural identity since their arrival in Britain in 1714. On George II's accession it was rumoured that Caroline had commissioned a series of portraits of British monarchs to adorn Kensington Palace; at one stage she rearranged the art displayed at Kensington so that those entering the royal presence would have to pass

⁷ Dryden, 'King Arthur', V:ii, ll. 86-9

directly by a full-length portrait of Charles I, thus investing the parliamentary monarchy of the Hanoverians with the divine right mysticism of the Stuarts. To some extent, although she was a queen consort rather than a queen regnant, Caroline sought to adopt some of the mantle of Queen Anne, the last Stuart queen, who had died in 1714. Anne had cultivated parallels with Elizabeth I, and Caroline's decision to build Merlin's Cave, with its deliberate allusions to Spenser's *Faerie Queene*, followed this tradition. The political circumstances of the construction of Merlin's Cave were themselves a fracture of the fragile English-British national identity explored by different factions within the whig party. Sir Robert Walpole's ill-advised attempt to introduce an excise on wine and tobacco had been viewed as an assault on the traditional whig view of the sanctity of English property, and had encouraged several prominent members of his party to go into opposition. These had included Richard Temple, first Viscount Cobham, a respected former soldier and diplomat who had served under Marlborough, and who was already engaged in the transformation of the gardens of his country house at Stowe in Buckinghamshire into a garden full of allegories about the collapse of the whig ideal under Walpole. Caroline's Merlin's Cave was conceived too early to be a counterstrike, but was derived from the same enthusiasm for shaping nature to reveal political allegory. It was the partner of the Hermitage, which William Kent had completed for her about 1731. The Hermitage, like Merlin's Cave situated in Richmond Park, included busts of Isaac Newton, John Locke, Samuel Clarke and William Wollaston, and later of Robert Boyle, all patron saints of the scientific revolution. Merlin's Cave contained, to quote Christine Gerrard, 'six full-size waxwork figures, some modelled from the life from characters in the royal household. One was Merlin with his staff, consulting his globe and conjuring-books, another in a farthingale was Elizabeth I. Henry VII's queen and Merlin's secretary flowed suit, then two ambiguous female figures: one described variously as Minerva, Britannia or Britomart from Spenser's *Faerie Queene*, and the other as Glauce, Britomart's nurse, or Melissa, the prophetess who accompanied Bradamante in Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso*, or (more bathetically) Mother Shipton, a

famous popular British prophetic⁸ They have been described as an ‘ill-assorted’ selection⁹, but together they make a clear statement of the lineage which Caroline claimed for herself and the early Georgian monarchy, including a classical goddess, the woman through which the Tudors inherited legitimacy from the York branch of the Plantagenets, Elizabeth I as the incarnation of English protestant monarchy, and Merlin, who represented both the ancient prophecy of Geoffrey of Monmouth, the wise counsellor of Dryden, and also scientific knowledge.

The opening of Merlin’s Cave provoked a flurry of interest in Merlin by the press. A theme of the coverage was to explain the character of Merlin to the eighteenth-century reading public. One report, in the *Gentleman’s Magazine*, was accompanied by an illustration of Merlin depicting him as a monk reclining by a tree in front of a fortified town; it recounted the tale of Merlin’s parentage, telling how he reportedly was the child of a nun and a supernatural being, but then dismissing this story as the product of a superstitious age, and arguing that the stories grew up because of Merlin’s intellectual achievements were beyond the grasp of his primitive contemporaries; the rational world of Britain in the 1730s, however, was able to appreciate him for the first time, however dim and confused the records. The argument, however flimsy it may be, overcame the evident cultural resistance towards Merlin’s association with magic and prophecy. This probably derived from Merlin’s currency as a figure of low culture in the fairgrounds and as the supposed author of almanacks. Sensitivity to this association was displayed by Aaron Thompson in the preface to his 1718 edition of Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *Historia Regum Britanniae*. He excused the inclusion of the prophecy of Merlin in his translation on the grounds that ‘Jeffrey has so connected it with the History, that the Thread of the Story would not be entire without it’ and for the influence that Merlin’s prophecies had had on successive

⁸ Christine Gerrard, *The Patriot Opposition to Walpole: Politics, Poetry and National Myth, 1725-1742* (Oxford, 1994) 169

⁹ M.I. Wilson, *William Kent: Architect, Designer, Painter, Gardener 1675-1748* (London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984) 145

political leaders.¹⁰ The inclusion of Merlin in the Cave, arguably, justified his case.

In the first half of the eighteenth century, medieval romances had become all but unread in England, and the work of Malory had been forgotten. Arthur was a romance subject from a period that predated the rediscovery of the classical unities, and so was easily adapted for the mocking of superstition. Henry Fielding's *Tom Thumb* of 1731 exploited this. Merriman, in *The Flower of Kings*, viewed it as an attack on Restoration tragedy, made up as it is of parodied lines from Addison, Lee, Thomson, Dryden and others. However, it's also a political satire. When the bumbling King Arthur and his queen, Dollalolla, entrust their affairs to Tom Thumb, they are paralleling the entrusting of power by George II and Caroline to Walpole. Thumb's marriage to the daughter of the king and queen was described in terms of a worm infesting cheese, the barb being aimed at Walpole's ministry's alleged corruption of the state. When Queen Caroline tried to use Arthurian images to make a serious allegory, she opened herself up to being treated as a figure of fun by her opponents. Merlin, depicted staring into his globe predicting the marriage of Britomart, as in Book III of *The Faerie Queene*, became to opposition writers a false prophet, Spenser's Archimago. For the opposition, Caroline had no right to appropriate Spenserian romance for political purposes, as his themes, of moral and civic decline, were theirs, and Caroline and George II presided over what they argued was a decaying government. Nonetheless, the popularity of Merlin's Cave – whose figures seem calculated to have been aimed at elite and non-elite audiences – may have deterred the opposition poets from attempting an epic of their own that drew on Spenser and the mythic British past he exploited. Instead, James Thomson, David Mallet and Thomas Arne presented *Alfred at Cliveden* in 1740, in which its sponsor, Frederick Lewis, prince of Wales and focus of the Patriot opposition, was identified with a

¹⁰ A. Thompson, *The British History, Translated into English from the Latin of Geoffrey of Monmouth. With a large Preface concerning the Authority of the History* (London, 1718), v-vi

specifically Anglo-Saxon monarch who was part of the historical royal lineage.

Alfred's qualities would provide a model for the British ancestral hero as this role evolved during the remainder of the eighteenth century. Alfred was traditionally seen as the patron of the navy, and of English liberties. Yet he had limitations; historically he struggled against invasion and his success was in resisting Danish conquest and securing the survival of the West Saxon kingdom; his experience was increasingly less relevant to a Britain that was more and more self-conscious of its position as the arbiter of Europe. In addition, Alfred had no heritage of romance behind him, nor was he connected to the classical models loved by the British male ruling elite. Antiquarians, meanwhile, were possessed by places with Roman or even pre-Roman associations, places like Stonehenge which connected with Geoffrey of Monmouth. The literature of what Gerrard calls political Spenserianism declined following the fall of Walpole's ministry in 1742, but it contributed to a lasting interest in the Gothic. This retained its political awareness but was no longer employed as part of the day-to-day of political warfare. It appears in the poetry of Joseph and Thomas Warton, as well as in the works of minor writers who would have poems published in the newspapers and periodicals.

A connection with Arthur was provided by one of the last literary works produced by the anti-Walpole Patriot movement. This was Gilbert West's *The Institution of the Order of the Garter*. West incorporated Arthur into a scheme which involved the Genius of Britain who appears to Edward III at his play's climax. The Bards attending the Genius present Edward as having rescued Arthur from romance:

'Till thro' the dark Romantick Tale,
Thor' Superstition's magick Veil,
Sage Edward piercing view'd, and own'd
The Chief with genuine Lustre crown'd:
View'd the great Model, and restor'd

The long-lost Honours of his Martial Board.¹¹

West's intended patron was probably Frederick, prince of Wales, who lived not far from Windsor, at Cliveden in Buckinghamshire, as if hoping that he would profit from the chivalric associations of the castle, neglected by his father George II. West's work claims Arthur for history, but this history makes no pretence at being anything but dynastic mythology. Edward's foundation of the Order of the Garter is presented as a revival of a Round Table, founded by an historical Arthur. The play ultimately involves Arthur as a supporting character in an historical fantasy which glorifies the Plantagenets and, by implication, the play's Hanoverian patron as the dynasty's authentic air.

The ghost of Patriot literature survived in the political poetry of the 1740s, but as members of the opposition took their places in successive phases of the post-Walpole governments dominated by Henry Pelham and his brother, the duke of Newcastle, it came to be less partisan. There is a poem published following the battle of Dettingen which hailed William, duke of Cumberland as a Plantagenet, the heir of the Black Prince and Henry V. George II's second surviving son had never shown interest in opposition, nor in history nor literature, unlike Frederick; but as a victorious martial prince he was allowed the benefit of a comparison with the mythologised royal conquerors of France in the middle ages. The comparison had been attempted before; propagandists for the new dynasty had, at the accession of George I, pointed out that the Hanoverians were the descendants of Henry II's eldest daughter Matilda and, if King John and his progeny were considered barred from the throne by John's misconduct (comparable to that of James II in that John had managed to have England placed under papal administration) then Matilda's Hanoverian descendants had been the rightful kings of England all along. The Gothic mode of allegory was adopted by William Whitehead when he succeeded Colley Cibber as poet laureate in 1757. For his first official poem, the Ode to the New Year for 1758, Whitehead abandoned Cibber's classical parallels to instead related the saga of the migration of a branch of the Este

¹¹ Gilbert West, *The Institution of the Order of the Garter* (1742), 53

family of Italy into Germany where they became the ancestors of the House of Hanover; instead of the age of Augustus, Whitehead recalled those of Otto the Great and Henry the Lion. Yet there was no Arthurian verse forthcoming, and within a few years Whitehead had retreated back to classical iconography. I'd suggest that this was related to the popularity of the monarchy. Every educated person had access to classical literature and classical sources; only the monarch had access to a lineage of Gothic heroes, whether expressed in Germanic or British names. If the laureate poem was to appeal beyond the court it had to use comparisons that admitted a breadth of identification among its audience.

In her 2000 study *Myth and National Identity in Nineteenth-Century Britain: The Legends of King Arthur and Robin Hood*, Stephanie Barczewski cited one play and two poems as examples of the developing interest in Arthur as the embodiment of an English patriotic ideal.¹² The earliest of these is the play, *Arthur: Monarch of the Britons*, by William Hilton, an obscure poet and playwright from Newcastle upon Tyne, who published a collected works in two volumes in 1773. Hilton's preface expressed his nostalgia for the 'civilizing power' that he thought the poetry of Pope or Addison exerted in the reign of Queen Anne, and his Arthur seems very much to have been inspired by the Patriot poets and their antecedents. Hilton had written his play in 1759, when the Seven Years' War was proceeding fairly well for Britain in the North American theatre, but less well in Europe. Hilton's treatment of the state of Arthur's Britain might arise from the contemporary domestic situation; the 1750s saw an expressed weariness with factional politics and Hilton's Arthurian Britain is divided against itself. Hilton, apparently drawing on Geoffrey of Monmouth, has a Modred who has seized the Queen (eventually identified in the dialogue as Guinever), and an Arthur whose closest allies are King Hoel of Brittany, and Arthur's nephews Cador, duke of Cornwall, and Galvan. Arthur, though hailed in dialogue as an heroic model patriot, is portrayed as elderly and in Act III, Scene 3, declares his infirmity and inability to defend his country. It's unclear if the play was performed, but Hilton must have had George

¹² Barczewski, 30

II in mind, who was 76 years old in 1759, the oldest age attained by any king of England or Scotland. Arthur is predeceased by both his nephews in the course of the play, and is succeeded by his young great-nephew Constantine. It's tempting to view this development as an allegory for the death of Frederick in 1751 and the neutralization of Cumberland following his humiliation at the Peace of Kloster-Zeven in 1757, with the Hanoverian royal inheritance firmly in the hands of Frederick's son, George, 21 in 1759 and a year from becoming George III. Constantine succeeds Arthur at the end of the play, with an injunction that he rule as a patriot. He promises at least short-term harmony and it is possible that the process envisaged by the Pictish leader Pictutius and the Saxon leader Withgar, by which their descendants "warm'd with freedom, into *Britons* grow" was meant to reflect a hope-for reconciliation between parties. The alternative, if no favourable agreement can be reached, is that Constantine will lead his people into internal exile in Cambria. The audience is presented with two models, suggesting either immediate Patriot triumph on the accession of a new king, or their short-term defeat, leading however to the eventual conversion of the conquerors.

Barczewski's first poem echoes in theme the poem from the 1740s addressed to the duke of Cumberland. This one is addressed to another royal prince with military associations, Edward Augustus, duke of York, the second son of Frederick, prince of Wales. By the time the poem was written and published, in 1761, Frederick's son was almost a year into his reign as George III. Just as germane was that Britain was in the sixth year of the Seven Years' War. The poem was written or at least edited by Joseph Warton, on behalf of an Oxford friend serving as adjutant at a military camp near Winchester, Richard Phelps. The poem, though addressed to York, celebrates the arrival of Princess Charlotte of Mecklenburg-Strelitz in Britain to marry George III. However, in the two years before the poem's publication York had undertaken dramatic, if undistinguished, service in the army and navy, and this had been enough for some patriotic propagandists to see him as a new focus for eulogies to British military splendour. Cumberland's disastrous early campaigns in the war had humiliated him, while the

press fell to celebrating the skills of Britain's ally, the king of Prussia, Frederick the Great. Although by 1761 Britain had defeated France comprehensively in North America, as far as the popular image of the European campaign Britain was in danger of looking like a satellite; hence the need to portray Edward as a martial hero inspired by Arthur. As the poem draws to a close the poet recounts how he encountered Arthur: 'a sapling oak his spear;/ He wore his beaver up, and on his cheek/ Simplicity was mixed with grace'. This Arthur recalls West's Genius of Britain, who was crowned with a Naval Crown and wore a sea-green robe embroidered with gold tridents.¹³ In his address Arthur cited York's involvement in the capture of Cherbourg in 1759 as an example of the prowess he would display in his projected future as a naval commander.¹⁴ With hindsight, this was a forlorn hope; Edward too little part in the final phase of the conflict and spent the next few years in an un-patriotic and not particularly Arthurian pursuit of pleasure, until his sudden death in Monaco in 1767. The poem also praises George III as a conqueror who 'shall crush/ Each stubborn foe'; yet anyone who read newspapers would have realised that George and his circle were not well-disposed towards the continuation of the war, a conflict that George had wanted to describe in his accession speech as 'bloody and expensive' until William Pitt the Elder persuaded him otherwise. In his poem Joseph Warton had provided his soldiering friend Phelps with verse that extolled the glory of both the Hanoverian dynasty and the mythological British past, as well as Britain's military achievements and capabilities, while finessing away the various inadequacies of the king and his brother. He had also developed Arthur's role as a dynastic and national patron, amalgamating his military reputation with an appeal to an unsophisticated natural imagined past.

Joseph Warton's introduction of Arthur into the context of a poem which had earlier called on classical parallels - 'the Doric bard, Sicilia's boast,/ Pour'd forth at Berenice's honour'd throne' – reflected the work that his brother Thomas Warton had already done to reclaim

¹³ West, 10

¹⁴ H. Reid, 'A Probable Addition to the Poetic Works of Joseph Warton' *Review of English Studies*, 38 (1987), 526-529

Arthur's place in English literature, and the place of that literature in history. Writers earlier in the century who had made use of Arthurian material had placed themselves at a distance from the Arthur of medieval romance. Spenser was praised as the principal agent of the introduction of the classical unities into English literature, and such as the first English poet proper, and it was thought proper to ignore or conceal Spenser's debt to sources of legend outside authors of the ancient world and Ariosto. Warton himself contended, 'Although Spenser formed his *Faerie Queene* upon the fanciful plan of Ariosto, yet it must be confessed, that the adventures of his knights are a more exact and immediate copy of those which we meet with in old romances, or books of chivalry, than of those which form the *Orlando Furioso*.'¹⁵ Warton's modern critic David Fairer has detailed how, on 7 May 1753, at the Bodleian Library, Oxford, Warton discovered the 1634 edition of Malory's *Morte Darthur*, and how Warton consulted and cited it frequently thereafter. In the same year as he discovered Malory Warton wrote 'On the Approach of Summer', in which he called on heaven to allow him to abandon pastoral and instead "paint heroic ancient deeds: /To chant fam'd ARTHUR's magic tale, And EDWARD, stern in sable mail; Or wand'ring BRUTUS' lawless doom, / Or brave BONDUCA, scourge of Rome'.¹⁶ Warton thus associated an Arthur whom he was coming to associate with Malory, with the Black Prince, favoured by the patriot writers of the opposition to Walpole and by subsequent Hanoverian dynastic propagandists, with Boudicca, recovered for British historical mythology in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries by editions of Tacitus and by John Fletcher's play *Bonduca*, and with Brutus and the origin myth of the Britons. Warton was appealing to the idea of a coherent national myth – a sort of Geoffrey of Monmouth with Boudicca added and extended into the middle ages. It's remarkable that Elizabeth does not appear. Warton's taste was formed in the age of political Spenserianism, but his belief that medieval literature had to be judged as a product of its own time, not by post-Renaissance values, led him to end the heroic genealogy of British

¹⁵ *Spenser's Faerie Queene: Warton's Observations and Hurd's Letters*, with an introduction by David Fairer, vol. 1 (2001), 19

¹⁶ J.A. Vance, *Joseph and Thomas Warton* (1983), 31

kingship before Gloriana's day. Elizabeth, perhaps, was part of the broader present, while Warton was appealing to a remote chivalric past where modern codes of taste did not apply.

Both Wartons wrote verse which, like that of the patriot writers, regretted the apparent decline of society from a virtuous past. Unlike the patriots, the Wartons could both acknowledge the appeal to mythology while acknowledging the achievements of eighteenth-century society. Thomas Warton was an admirer of romance but he was also opposed to superstition. J.A. Vance has argued that Thomas Warton was distinguished by a belief that the rational study of the past could be inspired by imaginative experiences at historic sites such as Stonehenge or Wilton House; and this would be a more level-headed and selective study than the efforts of Stukeley's circle earlier in the century, many of whom had allowed poetic theorization to shape their arguments about Roman or prehistoric remains. Thomas Warton's poems that include references to Arthur are distinguished by their attempts to put the items he is considering, such as the Round Table at Winchester, in their historic context. In this way it is true, as has been argued, that Warton's medievalist poems are 'in the end, relentlessly modern.' Eighteenth-century Britain is a better society in which to live than that described by medieval romances, but the medieval world, however superstitious, has an ever-present legacy that deserves exploration and explanation.

In combining medievalism and the modern Thomas Warton was shadowed by another enthusiast for the Gothic – George III. It's true, as Christine Gerrard writes, that the medievalism of George's Windsor court was foreshadowed by the rhetoric and practice of that of his father Prince Frederick in the 1730s. George's interest in the Gothic, however, was not a throwback to Frederick's practice, but was informed by George's interest in science and architecture. Frederick had patronised architects but had had little opportunity to sponsor building projects, apart from his remodelling of Carlton House which included a garden pavilion featuring an image of the Black Prince. His interest in technology was less deep, though he patronised the Spitalfields weavers

and was one of the initiators of the British Herring Fishery Company. George, by contrast, aspired to be an architect as well as the patron of architects. He was personally involved in designing the new works at Windsor which began in the second decade of his reign. It is not surprising that, when the poet laureateship fell vacant on Whitehead's death, it was offered to Thomas Warton.

As has been mentioned, Whitehead's laureate poems eventually returned to the neo-classical style favoured by Cibber. The third work, and second poem, mentioned by Stephanie Barczewski, is *Briddyn Jubilee* by Edward Thomas. This poem, as Barczewski states, 'utilizes an Arthurian metaphor in order to provide Rodney's glorious achievement with an appropriate precedent:

Like noble Arthur, in the days of yore,
His name be echo'd from each grateful tongue.¹⁷

Barczewski doesn't mention that much of the poem is devoted to Cambrian – Welsh – claims to be the original 'sons of Liberty' in the British Isles, playing a role in a chain of freedom-loving heroes beginning with Leonidas and ending – for the moment – with Admiral George Rodney. The poem was written to commemorate the construction of Rodney's Pillar on Breidden Hill in Montgomeryshire, itself marking Rodney's naval victory over the French at the Battle of the Saints in the West Indies on 12 April 1782. The poem is not dynastic and associates Arthur with an abstract form of Liberty, related to a people or peoples – the Britons in their ancient and modern senses – more so than any earlier work discussed.

The works discussed in this paper are not intended to be representative of all the eighteenth century literature that made some use of Arthur, but they do emphasise some of the ways in which Arthur could be used by writers who wanted to reflect aspects of the political

¹⁷ Stephanie Barczewski, *Myth and National Identity in Nineteenth-Century Britain: The Legends of King Arthur and Robin Hood* (2000) 30; *European Magazine* 2 (1782) 153

situation of their times. Perhaps there is no substantial Arthurian work in the eighteenth century because the right political circumstances never arose. Arthur is a royal symbol, used either in favour of factions with a royal patron or leader, such as the Patriots, or else he is a symbol of a nation united under a king. It's perhaps instructive that Whitehead reverts to neoclassical models in the 1760s when the king is unpopular; Gothic imagery, with its emphasis on heredity and racial ancestry, was perhaps an unsafe focus for the union of a country amalgamating 'Anglo-Saxon' and Celtic elements. It's perhaps just as important that liberty itself – the Gothic inheritance – was contested; better, then, for more remote models to be employed as the source of national poetry, thus the classical allusions endured. The sole laureate verse of Thomas Warton to mention Arthur was the King's Birthday Ode of 1787, when Pitt the Younger's government seemed unchallenged, and Warton could afford an ode dwelling on medieval and renaissance literature, calling attention to Spenser, the 'allegoric Muse' and 'old Uther's elfin tale'.¹⁸ He followed this with the New Year Ode of 1788, calling up memories of Magna Carta and the tyranny of John. This must have suggest the quiescence of the political opposition; George III can be safely praised as the heir of the freedom-loving barons and not of King John. The vogue for Arthurian political poetry was yet to come, when Arthur could be used as a symbol of the ancient balanced British constitution against the dangerous and brutal new ideas of revolutionary France and Napoleon, and provide the context for the return of Arthur to a central place in literary endeavour.

¹⁸ *Gentleman's Magazine*, 57 (1787) 525