

Lofty Depths and Tragic Brilliance:
The Interweaving of Celtic and Anglo-Saxon Mythology and Literature in the Arthurian Legends

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Introduction:

The Historical, Religious and Literary Development of the Celts and the Anglo-Saxons

In the fabulous court of Camelot, King Arthur presides over the valiant, chivalrous knights of the Round Table. Queen Guinevere is the most beautiful lady in a kingdom filled with beautiful ladies. Lancelot is the greatest knight in a company of illustrious knights. No sword is more fantastic than Excalibur. No quest is more noble than that of the Holy Grail. No king could ever be greater than King Arthur. The Arthurian legends of the modern imagination weave a medieval tapestry of bright colors and graceful forms. The tales of the Middle Ages embrace the tragic love triangle of Arthur, Guinevere, and Lancelot, the Quest for the Holy Grail, and a multitude of stories that are an integral part of the Arthurian identity. Without the drama of the medieval chivalry and courtly love or the Grail quest, the stories would become something foreign to the popular imaginings of Arthur and his court. Without these familiar portraits of knights in shining armor, damsels in high towers, and a splendid, medieval king presiding over all, the Arthurian cycle would likely lose its established identity. However, a closer look at the complex and colorful tapestry of the Arthurian legend reveals a series of subtle threads that work their way through every well-known scene and popular romance. While the image created is that of a medieval romance, the threads are formed from the history, culture, mythology, literature, and legends of the Celts and the Anglo-Saxons. The medieval imagery provides a surface identity for Arthur and his knights, but the underlying Anglo-Celtic threads are responsible for the captivating, vibrant, and ultimately enduring essence of the Arthurian legends.

The stories of Arthur have done more than merely survive centuries of English literary development. The cycle of tales has expanded, gathering strength in the collective, multi-cultural imagination of generations of story-tellers and writers. At first glance, these stories do

not seem to hold any singular element that distinguishes them from any other tales of kings and warriors. Virgil gave the Romans their Aeneas; the Greeks could choose from any number of wise and valiant leaders, from Theseus to Odysseus; the Celts had colorful characters like Cù Chùlainn, Fionn mac Cumhaill, and Pryderi; the Anglo-Saxons provided their literary hero Beowulf. Likewise, the British have King Arthur, one legendary leader among the many provided by centuries of different cultures. However, while all these stories are translated and studied and are still appreciated for their cultural and literary value, none of the others came to life in the vital and powerful sense that the Arthurian tales experienced. The stories of Arthur and his knights did not remain static, like the epics of Homer and Virgil or the poetry and literature of the Celts and Anglo-Saxons. Rather, King Arthur, his queen, the knights, the quests, and everything most often associated with the Arthurian cycle embody a living legend that is capable of retaining its original appeal while interacting with new cultures.

What the Arthurian legend has that other stories do not is a unique and indispensable cultural composition. While few would contest that Arthur is popularly viewed as a British king, the original inspiration and continuing influence in the stories are not what one might define as strictly “British.” The Celtic and Anglo-Saxon cultures lent themselves to the creation and evolution of the tales, providing the foundation and structure for what Arthur would become. The early Celtic myths of Arthur gave the legend its origin and Otherworldly spirit, and the Germanic ideals found in Anglo-Saxon literature brought the fantastic king back into this world and provided a solid, temporal framework. These two distinct bodies of mythology were woven together into a uniquely compelling fabric of cultural structures that coalesced in the medieval persona of the British King Arthur while remaining enduringly and fundamentally Anglo-Celtic.

Before the Celtic and Anglo-Saxon elements came together in Arthur, they were two entirely distinct entities. The historical development of each culture and their later literary emergence create important contexts for both and greatly influence how each is able to contribute to the Arthurian legend. Assumptions made about their various ideals and beliefs must first be grounded in their historical and cultural settings and in the literature produced by each. While the Celts and Anglo-Saxons shared much of the same geographical location, their chronological development coincides only slightly. Each culture has its own evolution and history, and each has a very different place in the story of Arthur.

The Celts provide the earliest traceable influence on Arthur's legend. The obscurity of Arthur's origins, both in history and literature, is paralleled by the mysteriousness Celts. The Celtic culture proves as elusive as its strange mythology. One of the distinguishing features of the Celts, and one that has proven the most frustrating for scholars attempting to understand their beliefs, is their strong oral tradition and their lack of a literary one. The religious leaders of the Celts were extremely protective of their knowledge and did not allow anything to be written down lest they lose their power among the people. They passed their knowledge orally from one generation to the next. The result of this tradition is a complete lack of written documents that were produced by the Celts themselves, and almost none at all surviving from before the medieval period. Knowledge of the people must be obtained primarily through archeology and classical commentaries. Unfortunately, archaeology can do very little to verify the intricate myths of the Celts. The myths and legends that must be used to explore the Celtic beliefs were all written long after the stories were told and after the religion had ceased to be practiced. Moreover, the myths were copied down by Christian scholars and monks who were not always directly related to the culture. This disconnection between the ancient past and the medieval

documents has resulted in a great deal of skepticism and doubt regarding the veracity of the myths and how truly they represent the Celts. Such stories as those of Pwyll, Pryderi, Taliesin, and Rhiannon from the Welsh *Mabinogion* have very medieval characteristics and are filled with Christian references rather than possessing the purely ancient, pagan qualities that one would expect to find in a truly Celtic tale. Andrew Breeze notes that particularly in the late twelfth and early thirteenth century additions to the *Mabinogion*, the Arthurian tales of “Owein,” “Peredur Son of Efwarg,” and “Gereint Son of Erbin,” the style and plots are “closer in spirit to the softened dream-world usually associated with medieval romance” (63). In order to justly employ both the medieval Welsh legends and the Irish tales, they must be firmly connected with their Celtic past. Once the written copies have been proved to have characteristics representative of their Celtic forebears, the legends can then be utilized in an examination of their later Arthurian manifestations.

Some facts about the Celtic myths and legends simply cannot be established and must remain educated conjecture. Foremost among these is the dating process of the first versions of the stories. The oral tradition of the Celts does not allow for an “original” copy of any of the stories. However, a lack of the written word, far from giving the tales a less reliable background, only emphasizes the importance the Celts must have placed on the spoken word. The documents that were copied based on orally conveyed legends are themselves late copies, but still reflect a far earlier cultural identity. Proinsias MacCana says of these copies, “These manuscripts are themselves relatively late, but they have been compiled from earlier sources and many of the individual items which they contain may be dated on linguistic grounds centuries earlier than their extant transcription” (17). While an exact date, or even a general timeframe might be difficult to determine for any one of the legends, their ancient origins can be accepted due to an

understood oral heritage that reaches back into a pre-literary past. In Patrick Ford's introduction to his translation of the *Mabinogion*, he reaffirms that although it is impossible to determine how much older they really are, many of the tales collected into the work are clearly of far earlier origins than their first written appearance (2). The existence of Celtic elements to varying degrees in these stories implies both a connection to the past at a literary level and an understood heritage by the later culture. The people these legends were written down for would still have recognized many of the names, places, dramatic elements, and plotlines because of that people's oral connection to their Celtic heritage. The chronological distance between the written and spoken stories does not necessarily signify a complete cultural dissociation, particularly in a culture that had invested so heavily in oral tradition before the introduction of the written word.

One example of the significance of this oral tradition, most notable because it is the earliest connection to Arthur in the Welsh cycle, is found in "Culhwch and Olwen" from the *Mabinogion*. The anonymous writer of "Culhwch and Olwen" was drawing from several older sources, particularly the *Black Book of Camarthen*. Rachel Bromwich and D. Simon Evans suggest that because of the older connections in "Culhwch and Olwen," "already between the ninth and eleventh centuries Arthur's name was becoming a great matrix to which the names of mythical and legendary figures were being drawn" (xxxiv). Other elements in "Culhwch and Olwen," such as Culhwch's name, which relates to pigs and reflects his birth in a pigsty, and the trimming of his hair by Arthur as an acknowledgement of kinship, draw from earlier Celtic practices and beliefs found in other stories. Likewise, Bromwich and Evans concur, "Celtic folklore, and legendary matter are drawn upon as the story proceeds... It is likely that the story was primarily intended for ... an audience which shared with the author a common cultural inheritance, common beliefs, assumptions, and expectations" (lxxi). Despite the typical obscurity

within the Celtic myth-cycles, both Welsh and Irish, the continuity of older myths in later retellings is quite probable, although they must, obviously, be sifted through with care in order to distinguish between older motifs and later additions.

One of the most debated issues about the written manuscripts involves how much they were “tampered” with by Christian scholars who wished to represent the stories in a Christian light, rather than a pagan one. Nora Chadwick summarizes this debate:

In Ireland, where local written evidence, based on earlier oral tradition, is ample, conservative and eloquent, these sources date from after the introduction of Christianity, while archaeological evidence for Celtic cults in pre-Christian Ireland is generally less abundant... Early Welsh literature contains a certain amount of relevant material, but its interpretation is more difficult in context of Celtic mythology in that it was first written down later than the comparable Irish traditions, at a time when Christianity had acquired a stronger influence on learning generally. (141)

While some writers and historians feel that the later Christian influence somehow contaminates the old Celtic beliefs, they fail to take the adaptability of the Celts and of oral tradition itself into consideration. The Christian influence on these writings is undeniable. For example, Ford includes a translation of a story in his compilation, which he believes is of very old origins, about Taliesin, in which Taliesin is the reincarnation of the witch Ceridwen’s servant Gwion Bach, and claims to have lived through centuries of history. The earliest known copy, however, was written down by Elis Gruffydd in the sixteenth century, and, not surprisingly, many Christian elements are included: “The tale that Elis Gruffydd recorded for us in the sixteenth century was still sensitive to the tradition that Taliesin had existed among the Welsh for hundreds of years

under different names” (19), but Gruffydd also writes as “judge and editor of his material” (160). Gruffydd’s beliefs likely influenced his rendition of the tale, making it somewhat suspect as a reliable copy of the story he was telling. Nevertheless, the story is well developed and Gruffydd provides a great number of details, despite his grudging acceptance of some of the incidents. In his analysis, Breeze says that Taliesin was most likely a poet living in sixth century Britain, writing after the coming of St Augustine to the British Isles, and during a time when the Celts and the English were fighting one another (12). Taliesin’s poetry often includes Christian references. In “The Tale of Taliesin” in Ford’s compilation, Taliesin declares, “I was with my lord / in the heavens / When Lucifer fell / into the depths of hell” (172). But, at the same time, Taliesin’s words are deeply rooted in Celtic tradition: “And I was nearly nine months / in the womb of the witch Ceridwen; / I was formerly Gwion Bach / but now I am Taliesin” (173). No matter how much Gruffydd may have wished to promote Christianity, he still felt compelled to retain essential components of the story that draw from Celtic lore. Taliesin’s story reflects a popular Celtic motif involving shape-shifting and rebirth. Cù Chùlainn is a reincarnation of the Irish god Lugh. The immortal Etain is reborn, not knowing her heritage, until Midir comes and wins her from her mortal husband King Eochy. This motif originated entirely separately from Christian beliefs. As Taliesin recounts the many Christian figures he has encountered during his multiple reincarnations, he interweaves ancient myths with the new religion.

Poets such as Taliesin or Aneirin were likely far more prestigious members of society than poets would be in later times. Even through the Middle Ages, poets held a high position in the court. Alwyn and Brinley Rees say that these bards would have been equal to the king before the law (17). Moreover, their poems acted as more than just fireside tales for a long winter’s night. The bards once held religious positions connected to the druids or other religious leaders.

Their words were powerful and protected, never written, only spoken: “It was the initiates with this power and authority who had the custody of the original tales, and they recited them on auspicious occasions, even as the priests of other religions recite the scriptures” (17). Even after the coming and influence of Christianity, poets and bards would have been revered, and their duty to the words they spoke would have deterred them from removing the essence of the old stories: “It is no wonder that the greatest care was taken to ensure the integrity of the tradition. In the Book of Leinster a colophon to the *Tain Bo Cuailnge*, the most famous of all Irish sagas, is reminiscent of the end of the Book of Revelation. ‘A blessing on everyone who will memorize the *Tain* with fidelity in this form and will not put any other form on it’” (Rees and Rees 17). For a poet like Taliesin, preserving a wealth of traditions and beliefs through the tales he carried would have been a sacred duty.

The Christian religion appears throughout the Welsh tales, even more than in the Irish ones, but the Christian beliefs are not an invasive presence in either. The adaptable Celtic myths absorb and adopt Christianity, seamlessly melding the old religion with the new. The Celts, specifically the Irish, were introduced to Christianity in a manner that allowed them to retain many of their earlier practices and beliefs. Christianity first appeared during the Roman occupation of Britain at least by the third century AD, during which time, as Oliver Davies notes, “Christianity and paganism not only existed side by side but also at times in uneasy combination” (8). Saint Patrick brought Christianity to the Irish in the fifth century. Far from being a hostile religious takeover, he presented Christianity to the Celts on their own terms, creating a distinctly Celtic Christianity. This unique form of Christianity, Davies says, “appears to have survived with extraordinary tenacity” despite the later invasion of the Normans and the introduction of a more continental form of Christianity (5). Thus, the Christian scribes adapted

older beliefs with their own, and were able to preserve the essential Celtic legends. Gwion Bach was reborn as Taliesin without losing his personality developed from older incarnations; likewise, the Celtic myths are reworked to the changing culture and religion without losing themselves. Furthermore, as Chadwick observes, the Christian scholars, far from being responsible for the end of Celtic culture, deserve more credit for their diligent preservation of the legends: “Owing to the conservation of oral tradition in Ireland, however, a rich corpus of mythology survived to be written down in the early Christian period. The remarkable affection of the Celts in Ireland for their pre-Christian past allowed them, without compromising their newly won faith, to preserve something of their pagan tradition” (168). The oral tradition of the Celts, the adaptability of their religion, and the dedication of scholars who had a keen awareness of their heritage allowed the Celtic myths to be preserved in written manuscripts. While it is undeniable that the myths have evolved to some extent with time and cultural changes, the seed of Celtic belief is detectable and, therefore, well worth exploring to better understand the continuing Celtic influence in the literary phenomenon of Arthur.

The Celtic elements in the Arthurian legends are drawn from the literature of the Welsh, but the Irish myths provide a better source for Celtic traditions themselves. The Irish and Welsh literary traditions are similar regarding their adherence to oral tradition, their adoption and reflection of Christian beliefs, and many of their connections to their Celtic heritage. While each culture has its own development, they do draw on many similar beliefs. These shared beliefs of the Irish and Welsh, while sometimes manifested differently, allow for comparison. An obvious example of this is in regards to the gods of the Irish and Welsh. The Irish Tuatha dé Danaan are paralleled by the Welsh Children of Dôn. Significant, as well, is the singularly Celtic portrayal of the mysterious Otherworld in both the Irish Tir nà nOg and the Welsh Annwvn. Connections

have often been drawn between the two for the similarities in legend and religion, and they both employ the Celtic oral tradition. However, specifically regarding Arthur's Celtic roots, the Irish and Welsh tales each provide distinctive contributions.

The significance of Welsh literature, particularly the *Mabinogion*, is evident because Arthur first appears as an accepted mythological warrior-king in early Welsh legends. Unfortunately, precisely when Arthur became a well-known literary figure is harder to determine. Taliesin, supposedly writing in the sixth or seventh century, claims to be a contemporary of Arthur, but the earliest copy of his poem dates to the fourteenth century. In *The Spoils of Annwn (Preiddeu Annwn)*, Taliesin tells the story of Arthur's adventurous expedition into the Welsh Otherworld, Annwvn. Patrick Sims-Williams emphasizes the importance of Arthur's very brief appearance in the thirteenth century *Book of Anerin* in the poem *Gododdin*: "Arthur, then, was without peer according to the author of this [poem]; but, alas, no one can say for certain when it was [originally] composed" (37). However, Ceridwen Lloyd-Morgan points out that "by the time of the composition of *Y Gododdin* Arthur was known as a figure from a historical or legendary past, and that he was seen above all as a warrior, a model hero against whom contemporary fighting men could be measured" (2). Once again, the difficulties in dating any of the manuscripts reliably makes it all but impossible to make any definitive conclusions about when Arthur actually began to appear in the legends. Sims-Williams' analysis of the early Welsh poems about Arthur lists the earliest extant volume of Welsh Arthurian poems as the *Black Book of Camarthen*, which dates back to the twelfth century. The *Black Book* does not seem to have any French romantic influences or borrowings from Geoffrey of Monmouth, but it is difficult to determine with any certainty (38).

The earliest surviving prose tale of Arthur in the medieval Welsh texts is “Culhwch and Olwen,” where he is one of the major acting figures in the plot. Brynley Roberts describes the tale of “Culhwch and Olwen” as “an Arthurian world, not yet chivalrous perhaps, but wondrous, dangerous and defended by the leader ... Its characteristics can be recognized here as in the poems in the Black Book of Camarthen and the Book of Taliesin” (78). Sims-Williams identifies two specific Welsh poems that have significance in the study of Arthur. The *Dialogue of Arthur and the Eagle* and the *Dialogue of Melwas and Gwenhwyfar* are impossible to date precisely, but educated estimates date the composition of each perhaps as early as the twelfth century: “The second shows clear signs of oral transmission, and no doubt both were originally written (or orally composed) for oral performance” (57). Once again, the oral tradition of the Celts provides a connection to the past, although the tales cannot be viewed as pure oral tradition copied word for word. Nevertheless, implications of older inspirations remain within these poems. Sims-Williams notes that “the most interesting aspect of the [*Dialogue of Arthur and the Eagle*] is its incidental characterization of Arthur. We may be sure that the poet is not trying to represent a novel Arthur, but to recall a well-known figure” (58). Regarding the *Dialogue of Melwas and Gwenhwyfar*, Sims-Williams points out the similarity between this story of Gwenhwyfar and Melwas and that of Meleagant and Guinevere in Chrétien de Troyes’ later work, *Chevalier de la Charette*, implying that Chrétien could easily have drawn on an older Welsh tale for inspiration (58). The many medieval Welsh texts that reference Arthur, either in passing or with greater attention, provide an important introduction for Arthur before he is drawn into the larger British canon and the French romances. While these Welsh tales are not always as reliably connected to older traditions as one would like, their ties to the Celtic myths are still present, enough so to give them an important part in the development of Arthur as an Anglo-

Celtic hero. However, because the Welsh tales do not draw as heavily on Celtic mythology as the Irish ones do, and because the Irish and Welsh traditions share the same Celtic heritage, it is from the Irish sagas that a more thorough understanding of Celtic mythology and legend can best be gained and thence related to Arthur.

The common Celtic ties between the Welsh and the Irish extend into several shared deities as well. The Welsh Manawydan son of Llyr is reflected by the Irish Manannan mac Lir. The Welsh Lleu is comparable to the Irish Lugh. Many other famous figures of Celtic mythology mirror each other in the Irish and Welsh legends. Both possess the distinctive concept of the Otherworld. However, available Irish literature offers a far larger body of myths and legends than Welsh, whose tales and poems only give the barest hints of the mythology from which they draw. The Irish tales come under four major cycles: The Mythological Cycle, the Ulster Cycle, the Ossianic (or Fenian) Cycle, and the Historical Cycle. The Mythological Cycle provides all the stories that are considered to have happened first, involving the Fir Bolgs, the Tuatha Dé Danaan, and the Fomoiré. In this cycle, the gods and god-like figures of Celtic legend appear, including Manannan, his son Lugh, the Dagda, and Nuada. When the Tuatha Dé Danaan disappear into the *sidh*-mounds at the end of the cycle, they become part of the Otherworld, leaving the natural world to mortal heroes such as the Ulster Cycle hero Cù Chùlainn or Fionn mac Cumhaill from the Ossianic Cycle, and emerge only on occasion to interfere and manipulate events as they see fit.

The shift from viewing the Tuatha Dé Danaan as gods into portraying them as superhuman mortals or faery folk appears often in the Arthurian legends. In the *Mabinogion*, Manannan becomes Arthur's companion Manawydan. According to Jean Markale's examination of Arthur's relation to his Celtic roots, other Celtic figures have a similar evolution,

becoming “an amalgam between some historic hero and an ancient divinity” (99). Certainly, the myths were changed, some more than others, but the fact that the changes can be identified and separated from the original content demonstrates that the original content does remain in some recognizable form, despite the alterations: “Arthur soon became King Arthur and, as he did so, acquired all the trappings of many of the ancient Celtic gods whose memory had lived on through the introduction of Christianity” (Markale 136). Doubtless, the skepticism and concerns regarding the renditions of the Celtic myths and legends as they exist today will never be laid entirely to rest. However, regarding the Celtic influence on the Arthurian legends, it is enough to recognize that a Celtic identity exists in both the Welsh and the Irish tales, and that that heritage can be discovered and analyzed in the stories of Arthur from their earliest appearances through their later developments.

The Celts were the first to introduce Arthur as a legend, but the Celtic Arthur is not the heroic figure who takes hold of popular imagination. He is not the king of Chrétien’s romances, Tennyson’s poetry, or T.H. White’s fiction. Between his Celtic beginnings and his emergence into the greater literary sphere, Arthur became a British king. W.R.J. Barron’s analysis of the British Arthur describes the connection between England and Arthur as an indissoluble link: “Fifteen centuries of celebration in myth, legend, chronicle, epic, romance, drama, opera and film have engraved it upon the national consciousness as if England and Arthur were one” (xiii). The British Arthur never lost his Celtic heritage, but he gained the influence of a new, entirely separate culture. The Celts were unable to provide Arthur with the necessary temporal, reality-based framework that gives him a strong connection to such a widespread audience; Arthur required the contribution of a Germanic, specifically Anglo-Saxon, tradition, one that is so powerfully rooted in time, space, and historical reality that Arthur could be brought out of a

purely mythic realm into a knowable world. The Anglo-Saxons effectively provided a mythology and literary tradition that set Arthur's feet firmly on British soil and made him real.

By the time Arthur's name became known and popularized, he had expanded out of the Celtic realm and into a wider sphere. Barron posits that the one responsible for this sudden widespread attention to Arthur is Geoffrey of Monmouth. Geoffrey writes from Wales where Arthur's story began, his *Historia Regnum Brittanum* predominately a pseudo-history of the British, written for a Norman patron. However, once his *Historia* appeared, it gained almost instant popularity: "Local tradition and popular conviction extended and vivified what the *Historia* had made authentic and coherent" (xiii). The French, specifically Marie de France and Chrétien de Troyes, took Arthur's legend and created the most well-known and accepted images of the king. However, Arthur remains a British king, never becoming a French or German one, or even returning to being a purely Celtic one. The influence of Anglo-Saxon England on Arthur's legend makes of him a British king where neither his Celtic roots nor any other, later influences could do so alone.

Arthur's literary evolution from Celtic god-king to medieval, British ruler began to take place just after a time of great upheaval, when a strong, traditional leader would have been sought and welcomed, namely, the Norman Conquest of AD 1066. This new Arthur of English literature only appeared after the culture in which the historical Arthur had lived (so far as a historical figure has been argued to exist) had been overturned by foreign invaders. Even more ironic in the case of Arthur is the fact that the historical Arthur most likely lived at the very beginning of the early Anglo-Saxon period, a native inhabitant of Britain, perhaps a war-leader from the end of the Roman occupation, who would have fought against the invading warlike tribes that would settle in Britain and develop into the Anglo-Saxon people. Conversely, the

literary Arthur unites all the people of the British Isles under his rule and becomes their king. He is not a Dark Age warlord endlessly battling other tribes. When Arthur begins to figure in medieval literature, he is the quintessential medieval king. The separation between the Celtic rendering of Arthur and the medieval portrayal leaves a sort of disconnect in the development of the stories. The British Arthur who emerges in medieval literature is still linked with his Celtic origins, but in the interim between the Celtic past and medieval present, the Arthurian legends gain the influence of the people who came after the Celts and before the Normans: the Anglo-Saxons.

Barron makes the point that during the time of Arthur's initial popularization, the Norman Conquest had given the people of Britain a reason to revisit their older roots in order to resist complete absorption by the Normans: "It was perhaps a natural consequence of the cultural shock of the Norman Conquest that the earliest romances produced in England thereafter, in Anglo-Norman as well as English, dealt with heroes and episodes from the native past of the island, Norse or Anglo-Saxon rather than Celtic, as if seeking ancestral roots beyond the revolutionary present" (xv). Geoffrey of Monmouth wrote his *Historia Regnum Britannia* as a pseudo-history of how the English people developed. While he did present his work to a Norman patron, not a Welsh one or an Anglo-Saxon one, Geoffrey's writing sought to bring the history of the people of the Britain together, not to distinguish between warring tribes and people-groups. Arthur takes his place in the line of kings of Britain in Geoffrey's work. The Angles, Saxons, and Jutes invaded Celtic Britain, and the Normans conquered the Anglo-Saxons, but the subsequent generations of English people slowly began to develop a more singular identity.

Incidentally, the idea of a unified English people was already being promoted by Bede in the seventh century. Unlike the British historian Gildas, who was fiercely opposed to the presence of the Anglo-Saxon invaders, Bede presented the “*Angles seu Saxones*” as English people, and was perhaps the first, as N.J. Higham says, who “invented the English nation,” for it is after Bede’s writing that scholars begin to “sense the presence of a common ‘English’ identity” (99). The later invasion of the Normans brought new division to the inhabitants of England, but the idea already existed of a united English identity. Arthur could not be a king for the Anglo-Saxons, but he could become a king for the British, the people on whom the Anglo-Saxons would bestow invaluable cultural and literary traits that would last even after the Anglo-Saxon culture became an Anglo-Norman one.

Determining how facets of Anglo-Saxon culture would eventually draw Arthur out of his Celtic background and into a nationally British sphere is a far different matter from exploring his Celtic roots, because there is simply no Anglo-Saxon Arthur as there is a Celtic Arthur. Therefore, finding the Anglo-Saxon influence on King Arthur, which is both so crucial and yet so subtle, is not a matter of finding an Arthurian text written by an Anglo-Saxon. Rather, the Anglo-Saxon influence is found in a chronologically progressive study of the Germanic heritage of the Anglo-Saxons, their development as a singular culture in England, their conversion into a Christian people, and the resulting literary works of the newly Christian culture, including the famous epic poem *Beowulf*. Arthur was not a topic of Old English texts, appearing only after the Anglo-Saxons and the Normans had become a single people-group, but the writings of the Anglo-Saxons that have survived offer a glimpse into the beliefs and values of the culture that produced them. The elements that are essentially Germanic in Anglo-Saxon literature provide a

distinct and noticeable influence in later renderings of King Arthur in the medieval period onward.

Before progressing from the Anglo-Saxons period into the Middle Ages, understanding the foundational beliefs of the Anglo-Saxon people requires a look back into their cultural background. Just as the Welsh and Irish literature drew on an older mythic tradition, the Anglo-Saxons had a mythological heritage of their own. The Anglo-Saxon period of England spanned the time between the fifth century AD and the momentous year of the Norman Conquest in 1066. The Venerable Bede offers an early description of the Anglo-Saxons as originating from three Germanic people-groups known as the Saxons, Jutes, and Angles; however, Sally Crawford supplements this early evidence with more recent archaeological data that suggests some other groups, such as the Frisians, were also likely included in the earliest Anglo-Saxon settlers in England (9-10). While they were not a united tribe from the beginning, and it would take some time before they came together into a more cohesive culture of their own, most of these Germanic tribes drew on a similar language, cultural background, and religious heritage. Before there was a Christian Anglo-Saxon people in England, their ancestors consisted of Danes, Jutes, Saxons, Angles, and other Germanic tribes on the European continent.

As with the Celts, the Anglo-Saxon culture owes its preservation in large part to the work of the Christian scholars. Because of the literacy of the Christian monks, the oral tradition gave way to a more permanent literature-based culture. Also similar to the Celts and their early religious practices, written documentation of the pagan beliefs of the pre-Christian Anglo-Saxons was composed through a Christian lens, by Christian scholars who were, Crawford notes, likely more interested in ensuring the survival of their new religion than they were in documenting the old, fading one (154). Christianity brought about the earliest Anglo-Saxon writings, and the

majority of these literary works were either of a religious nature or infused with religious references. Nevertheless, what little can be known about the Anglo-Saxons supports the fact that the Anglo-Saxon culture drew on a strongly Germanic tradition, which was, in turn, connected with Scandinavian mythology. Christianity altered the Anglo-Saxon culture, but by no means eradicated all evidence of earlier beliefs. Crawford goes so far as to say that “knowledge of the pagan past, and stories about old gods and heroes, circulated even after England had converted to Christianity” (155). The fact that the myths are not fully explained in any writings is frustrating for those who would wish to study them, but offers reassurance that the people who would have read that literature when it was first produced must have had some awareness of the older stories in order to understand the references.

A conversion to a new religion would not have heralded an abrupt end to all pagan practices and beliefs. Rather, many of those beliefs would simply have been assimilated into the new Christian religion. Likewise, the literature would begin to include Christian themes, but still invoke pagan influences as well. William Chaney says, “Although no Anglo-Saxon work gives us full information on pre-Christian religion in England, almost no poem from before the Norman Conquest, no matter how Christian its theme, is not steeped in it” (200). Unfortunately, the dearth of evidence on the precise beliefs of the pre-Christian Anglo-Saxons leaves much to speculation. Not only did they not possess a written literature, but they were also physically removed from their immediate Germanic roots. A more abundant source of mythology exists in Scandinavian literature; because of the close ties between Germanic culture and its northern neighbors, evinced clearly in the common deities (Woden/Odin and Thuron/Thor, for example), Norse mythology provides insight into what the Germanic mythology and, consequently, Anglo-

Saxon beliefs likely involved, at least in part. Many of the ideals that are clearly narrated in the Norse myths of Snorri Sturlson's *Prose Edda* can be found in Anglo-Saxon writings.

The Norse myths, unlike the Celtic ones, have a very clear framework, with an easily identifiable pantheon of gods and goddesses and a chronological story that begins with creation and ends with the destruction of the world. Sturlson's *Prose Edda*, copied down in the early thirteenth century from older texts, is the earliest written record of the Norse myths. Later, the *Poetic Edda* was compiled, including 31 poems dealing with the Norse gods and heroes. As with Celtic writings, scholars continue to doubt, debate, and ultimately disagree on the quality and veracity of these recorded myths, but a sufficient number have concluded that the *Prose Edda* and *Poetic Edda* have proven reliable enough to allow them to be evidence of Norse beliefs, compiled by what John Lindow calls "antiquarians secure enough in their Christianity to be able to compose in the old form about the old gods" (14). Tom Shippey describes "the 'rootedness' of the *Prose Edda*," and he adds that the origin of Snorri's writing "goes back to a pagan age years before Snorri wrote, and it draws on material that must be, in essence and perhaps in actual wording, even older" (147). While there are obviously difficulties in determining whether or not certain elements are authentic or later additions to an older story, there is simply nothing better than the *Edda*'s on which to base knowledge of the Scandinavian and Germanic religion.

Some of the more important works of Old English literature for understanding the combination of older Germanic traditions and later Christian beliefs are the elegies and the heroic poems. The elegies include such poems as "The Seafarer," "The Wanderer," and "The Wife's Lament." All of these are notable for their overtly Christian messages, as well as their distinctive Germanic undertones, particularly in the matter of death and the afterlife. Exemplifying heroic poetry is the unsurpassed *Beowulf*. *Beowulf* provides the most important

supply of Germanic elements because of its size and its specifically Germanic storyline (the *Beowulf* poet deliberately writes about a Scandinavian culture set at an earlier time period than that in which the poet lives). William Lawrence makes the important distinction that “though ever present, the Christianity is all on the surface. The real vitality of the epic lies in its paganism” (9). The *Beowulf* poet’s desire to include his faith in the poem is clear, but he draws from an oral heritage of traditional myths more than from a current, recently introduced religion.

Like the Celtic tales, the earliest Anglo-Saxon narratives are born of an oral tradition that connects generations of storytellers with a common mythology. Theodore Andersson ties this oral tradition to *Beowulf*: “The poets responsible for the earliest versions of medieval heroic legend appear not to have invented their stories, but to have fixed already existing oral stories in written form... By extension, it is generally assumed that there is a traditional core in *Beowulf*” (90). However, that “traditional core” is a matter of great debate. *Beowulf* is not universally acknowledged as a work representative of a traditional Germanic heroic poem. This disagreement stems from a variety of elements within the poem. Already noted is the Christian influence that finds a place in the majority of Anglo-Saxon literature. In *Beowulf*, there are the usual overt references to Christian beliefs. As Beowulf lies dying after his encounter with the dragon, he says, “With these words I thank / the King of Glory, the Eternal Lord, / the Ruler, for all the treasures here before me” (*Beowulf* 144). However, Tolkien notes that Beowulf often substitutes references to God with Fate as the controller of his destiny. While the concept of fate persists even into the Christian era, Beowulf uses both distinctively, implying that the author included the references deliberately and with purpose, rather than at random. Tolkien also points out that Beowulf rarely acknowledges God’s help or thanks God, making him, while not entirely pagan, more of a figure of ancient culture (50). Very clear references to pagan traditions exist,

such as the subsequent funeral pyre on which Beowulf's body is cremated. As Crawford explains, cremation was a form of burial practiced by Anglo-Saxons before the advent of Christianity, predominantly in the Anglian regions of northern and eastern England (16). As a result, *Beowulf* is often viewed either as a traditional, Germanic epic with Christian references or as a Christian poem with traditional, Germanic influences, depending on where the focus is placed in the poem.

Studies done on the potentially allegorical nature of the poem tend to point out the more Christian works of the Anglo-Saxons. Beowulf becomes a sort of Christ-figure, or the story is a moral tale cautioning against pride. Andersson suggests that Beowulf's death is a transition between the fleeting present world and the eternal Christian heaven: "the futility of this life as a background for the permanence of the next" (95). However, what Andersson calls the Christian-inspired "rhythm of a mutable world" (97) is also evident in Norse mythology. In the ancient text known as the *Voluspa*, the Norse father-god Odin gives up his eye to receive knowledge of the future. He sees the eventual destruction of the world, and that knowledge weighs on him thereafter. The Norse world-legend prophesies the world's ending almost as soon as it narrates its creation. Andersson believes that by invoking Christian beliefs, the *Beowulf* poet tempers the gloomy view of Germanic tradition with Christian hope: "The pessimism of the secular life is counterbalanced by the optimism of the spiritual life. Secular struggle has spiritual meaning and this is what distinguishes *Beowulf* from the antecedent lay with its grim finality" (95). On the other hand, Tolkien suggests that because the poem was written after Christian poetry had become an established literature, "the language of *Beowulf* is in fact partly 're-paganized' by the author with a special purpose, rather than christianized (by him or later) without consistent purpose" (51). Whichever the case may be, the Christian elements of the poem do not entirely

overshadow the Germanic tradition; nor the pagan influences, the Christian. The *Beowulf* poet had control over his poem and his content and implemented both to his advantage. Both religious traditions work together in the poem, each one enhancing the other, to form an Anglo-Saxon epic that is Christian, and yet very Germanic.

Beyond the surface elements is a deeper structure in the poem of *Beowulf* that harkens back to a traditional foundation, not a later Christian one. Several scholars have noted the traditional structure of the poem itself. Andersson compares the pattern of the poem and the sequence of events with Germanic heroic lays, such as the *Nibelungenlied* and the story of Sigurd (92-93). Both John Foley and Albert Lord argue that *Beowulf* is constructed after an oral narrative formula (117; 137), which would imply that the poet was drawing on older traditions, since literature with a more Christian theme was less concerned with oral constructs. Francis Magoun's analysis concludes that *Beowulf* retains a strong connection with an early narrative tradition and a specifically Germanic essence: "Anglo-Saxon verse is cast in a form to all intents and purposes identical with all Old-Germanic poetry – Old-Norse, Old-Saxon, Old-High-German – in a word, identical" (87). There certainly is a Christian theme running through *Beowulf* – primarily, the belief and trust in the Christian God – but it lies within a greater Germanic construct. The hero who trusts in a Christian God also faces dragons and giants, undergoes fantastic swimming contests, wields a sword too heavy for any normal man to carry, and eventually loses his life in the dark, natural world of Germanic myth.

This Germanic atmosphere that pervades Old English literature is drastically different from the Celtic world in many significant ways. Despite the fact that the Anglo-Saxons and the Celts of the British Isles both formed identifiable cultures, perhaps from the same original people, in the same general area of Western Europe, they went separate ways and developed as

entirely separate cultures. The Celts were noted by early Greek and Roman scholars for their fearless battle-rage. The Greek writer Polybius, in speaking of the Celts, mentions that “the old fear of the Gauls had never been eradicated from [the Roman] minds” (120). T.W. Rolleston describes Julius Caesar’s opinion of the Celts: “Of their courage he speaks with great respect, attributing their scorn of death, in some degree at least, to their firm faith in the immortality of the soul” (14-15). The Celts in literature are paragons of this daring mindset. They take on the world with an aggressive lack of concern for the dangers they might face. Heroes like Cù Chùlainn and Pryderi face one adventure after another, each more fantastic than the last, without any sense of weariness or desire to escape. The literature of the Celts is infused with magic and the ever-present Otherworld. Dangers exist in the natural environment outside the walls, but there is also a sense of wonder and endless possibility that makes any adventure well worth the risk. As the Celtic hero moves in and out of this magical environment, attention to the passing of time fades away.

The Anglo-Saxon hero faces a far different world. Certainly, his fearlessness in battle is not to be questioned. The Germanic warrior is noted for his courage in the face of death. However, this courage is joined with what George Anderson calls “the near-fatalistic acceptance of life as a somber fight that must be endured to the setting of the sun” (4). No Celtic Otherworld awaits Beowulf when he leaves Hrothgar’s hearth. The supernatural is a dark force that resides outside the walls in nature. The Germanic hero will face it – the fact that he is willing to confront these dangers is a part of what makes him so heroic– but he knows that he must also face death, and death will eventually overtake him. For the Anglo-Saxon, heaven awaits the faithful hero, but the overshadowing pessimistic awareness of a transient world brings a solemnity and a tragic grandeur to every endeavor.

The Celtic worldview and the Anglo-Saxon perspective on life and death, time and immortality, nature and magic, adventure and community are positioned across a great divide of belief and tradition, as well as chronological and literary distance. As the Anglo-Norman culture developed and the Middle Ages progressed, both of these cultures had been overtaken to a great extent. They were remembered, but no longer dominant. A growing sense of “Englishness” was forming. Yet, in the medieval period, amidst a variety of poetry and prose, a spectacular body of literature appeared concerning a certain legendary king. These stories joined both Celtic and Anglo-Saxon mythology in a cohesive whole with stunning success. In the Arthurian legends, the disparate traditions of Celt and Anglo-Saxon created a world that is both too fantastic to believe and too real to ignore.

Chapter One:

Timelessness and Transience

The Arthurian world has remained forever caught in its own timeless sphere, in a medieval realm of knights and jousts and stone castles and chivalrous expeditions. Despite this changeless nature that could easily have sapped its vibrancy as history moved past the Middle Ages, the world of Arthur has captured the interest of authors and audiences for centuries after it coalesced into its most identifiable medieval form. A multitude of stories of knights on adventures have been told, too many to have actually happened during one king's lifetime, but Arthur continues to exist in a historical setting, rather than a purely fantastic one. The stories seem to go on forever, but the passing of Arthur and the destruction of Camelot are a constant and immanent threat, giving Arthur's world a unique construction that retains both a sense of endless magic and tragic conclusions.

The earliest recorded story of King Arthur, the Welsh tale from the *Mabinogion*, "Culhwch and Olwen," draws its audience into a world outside of time. The storyteller does not indicate what year or period the story took place. The events are recounted from the beginning of the action, not the beginning of an acknowledged point in history. All the audience can know is that the story is removed from the mundane. The adventure takes place during a better, greater past when heroes were stronger, braver, and nobler than they have ever been in memorable history, bringing to mind, perhaps, the Greek tales of heroes who could perform feats that ten men of a later era could not accomplish. However, the Greek myths still connect with history. The father of the great god Zeus was Khronos, the god of time itself. The Greek myths are especially coherent because they are detailed and generally consistent in their chronology. Like

a multitude of other well-known cultures, the Greeks were interested in connecting the beginning of time with their current civilization. The Welsh myths seem to be removed from history altogether. Rather than connecting the stories from a beginning through to the present, the tales take place in a separate timeframe.

The story is about a young hero named Culhwch and his quest to win the hand of the giant Ysbaddaden's daughter Olwen. Culhwch goes to his kinsman, Arthur, who rallies his company of famous warriors to complete the challenges Ysbaddaden has laid out. Despite its title, the tale is not about the young chieftain and his lady. Ford's introduction to the *Mabinogion* says, "Culhwch is a flat character, and Olwen, although her description is one of the most elegant passages in the tale, has no development as a character at all. The story is really about Arthur" (119). Culhwch seems fairly standard adventure hero; he is a daring young man seeking a beautiful, nearly unobtainable maiden. Arthur and his men, however, are something very different. "Culhwch and Olwen" is notable for its lengthy, impressive catalogue of heroes whom Arthur calls upon to aid in the quest. Loomis identifies not only Welsh heroes, but known Irish figures as well, many of whom are also considered deities in Welsh or Irish literature (27). One notable example is Manawydan son of Llyr. Manawydan is the Welsh version of the Irish Manannan mac Lyr, the god of the sea and of the Otherworld. That Arthur is in command of such a company of heroes and deities implies that he himself is above them, perhaps a god himself.

The gatekeeper Glewlwyd Mighty-grip gives a list of Arthur's battles and adventures that are unbelievable for any mere mortal to have accomplished in one lifetime, and Arthur is only in the midst of his reign. Arthur is godlike, and, if not ageless, then perhaps timeless. When the storyteller of "Culhwch and Olwen" first describes Culhwch, he says, "the boy was noble,

however, and a cousin to Arthur” (121) assuming an established glory attached to the court of Arthur. He presides over a company of equally fantastic warriors: “like the other members of the court, including Arthur himself, Cei [also “Kei” or “Kay”] is still semi-divine” (121), and the impression given from Culhwch’s first approach of Arthur’s court is of an eternal feast of the gods: “Knife has gone into food, drink into horns, and there is thronging in the Hall of Arthur” (124). The events have been removed from knowable history and placed in an alternate reality where the concept of time is utilized only to further the sense of adventure on the quest. Culhwch gives Arthur exactly a year to find Olwen. Beyond the passing of each day, the adventurers disregard time altogether.

Inevitably connected with the concept of time is the reality of death. In “Culhwch and Olwen,” death is certainly a presence. The demands of the giant Ysbaddaden exact a heavy toll on Arthur’s warriors. The Twrch Twryth, a great, vicious boar that Arthur’s warriors hunt on one of the missions, costs Arthur countless men in the long chase. In the list of warriors, Gwyddawg son of Menestyr is named as the one who eventually kills Kei, one of the greatest knights of Arthur’s company. The author of the tale adds that Arthur would avenge Kei by killing Gwyddawg and his brothers (129). The possibility of death is very real. Were it not, the adventures would lose their dramatic tension and appeal. The forty demands that Ysbaddaden makes are life-threatening and all but impossible, testing the mettle of every hero who attempts to complete them. However, *Culhwch and Olwen* is notable for the characters’ lack of concern over this possibility of death. Culhwch, while he does not complete the demands himself, represents the extremely confident attitude of the Celtic hero when he responds to every one of Ysbaddaden’s challenges with, “It is easy for me to accomplish that, though you may not think so” (137-144). The image of the young, handsome Culhwch called up by this account is one of a

man who is courageous to the point of foolhardiness, who does not blink at the catalogue of tasks between him and his prize, and who will risk everything in the hunt. Culhwch himself is not part of the quests, but Arthur's warriors are precisely as courageous as Culhwch claims he will be. They never dwell on death. For these heroes, death is a possibility, perhaps a probability, but not a concern.

When the challenges are completed, Culhwch gains his bride and Arthur returns to his court to continue a seemingly eternal existence as king over an enchanted world outside of reality; outside of history. Despite the medieval framework in which the stories were first written, the essential, Celtic concept of a timeless world and disregard for death pervade the story and Arthur's character. In this story, Kei (Kay), Gwalchmai (Gawain), and Bedywr (Bedivere) first appear, not as mere mortals, but as fantastic, Otherworldly heroes, the equals of the Celtic gods. In this first Arthurian legend, the world is so detached from history and reality that it is impossible to connect it with the known world. The story remains firmly in the "once upon a time" realm of myth.

Several centuries later, when Geoffrey of Monmouth pens his *Historia Regum Britanniae*, Arthur reappears as a heroic, powerful figure who defeats everyone in his path. Like the Welsh Arthur, this king is the best, the greatest, the most noble, and the most respected of men: "of a courage beyond compare, whereunto his inborn goodness did lend such grace as that he was beloved of well-nigh all the peoples of the land" (Geoffrey 183) Geoffrey records Arthur's life from the very beginning, even before his birth, detailing Uther Pendragon's affair with Igerne through the wizard Merlin's machinations. By the time Arthur is fifteen, he is already a respected, loved war-leader. He proceeds to conquer the hated Saxons and establish rule over the whole of Britain: "And herein was he monished of his own lawful right, seeing that

of right ought he to hold the sovereignty of the whole island in virtue of his claim hereditary” (184). His subsequent conquests lead him beyond Britain and into Europe. Only the treachery of his nephew Modred brings him back to Britain and to the end of his reign. Geoffrey’s story is chronological, detailed, and firmly, clearly, and entirely grounded in a real Britain, a real Europe, and in real history. Despite the mythological Trojan beginnings for the British heritage, Geoffrey sets Arthur up in a line of kings who are not entirely fictitious, including Cassibelaunus, Cymbeline, and Vortigern. Julius and Claudius Caesar, as well as various Saxon warlords, appear as adversaries to the British kings. After Arthur, Geoffrey includes even more kings who lived and ruled in Britain, some of whom have been named by other historians, such as Gildas. While there is no doubt that a significant portion of Geoffrey’s *Historia* is entirely fabricated, and there is no way to know what “certain most ancient book in the British language” (3) he claimed to be drawing from, the *Historia* is precisely that, a history, albeit a mixture of truths and fiction. Whether this account of Arthur is based more on historical accuracies or imaginative conjecture, the Arthur presented is a king firmly grounded in a real time and place, before one king and after another. The reader of Geoffrey’s account can place the battles and adventures in a knowable chronological sequence. Kings are born and kings die in a regular chain of events that is known and accepted as a normal part of history, no matter how extraordinary that history might be.

The account of Arthur ends as any other historical account would, with the end of Arthur’s reign. Modred is defeated, but not before dealing Arthur a mortal blow. Arthur departs for the Isle of Avalon “for the healing of his wounds, where he gave up the crown of Britain” (236). By sending Arthur to Avalon, Geoffrey demonstrates his willingness to include the extraordinary and the supernatural in his accounts, not as anti-history, but as a part of history.

Indeed, Geoffrey's *Historia* was considered a factual account for many years, questioned by few for its truthfulness. Merlin's magic throughout the *Historia* is not outside of a historical time-sequence, as in the case of the *Mabinogion* tales, but is included within it.

While both "Culhwch and Olwen" and Geoffrey's *Historia* are written by Welsh authors, they each represent a widely different worldview, structure, and style. Despite the *Historia*'s inclusion of the supernatural, the Arthur who walks through those pages is a different man from the god-king of the *Mabinogion*. "Culhwch and Olwen" represents the Celtic aura of timelessness and almost a disassociation from the finality and bleakness of death. In the *Historia*, Geoffrey of Monmouth presents an Arthur who is a king of Britain at a real time in history. With the coming of the Anglo-Saxons, the mystic timelessness of the Celts was drawn back into the real world by Germanic concepts of time and death. While the history presents death as an inevitability through the succession of rising and falling kings, Geoffrey does make one exception to this in Arthur. Arthur is borne away to Avalon, and the reader never hears of his death at all. Geoffrey is still aware of a certain immortality in Arthur. Nevertheless, Geoffrey's account is vastly more conscious of both time and death than the *Mabinogion*. Before the Germanic traditions were instilled in the British minds, Celtic mythology presented a world-myth that was more cyclic than linear.

Celtic mythology stands apart from the majority of the well-known mythologies of the world because of its lack of a recorded creation myth. Rolleston's collection of Irish myths marks this lack as one of the most distinguishing characteristics of the Celtic myths:

There is nothing in the most ancient legendary literature of the Irish Gaels, which is the oldest Celtic literature in existence, corresponding to the Babylonian conquest of Chaos, or the wild Norse myth of the making of Midgard out of the

corpse of Ymir, or the Egyptian creation of the universe out of the primeval Water by Throth, the Word of God, or even to the primitive folklore conceptions found in almost every savage tribe. (59-60)

While there is always the possibility that some bard during the development of the Celtic civilization may have at one time sung the story of earth's beginning for the Celts, the oral tradition that allowed so many other Celtic legends to endure did not include any such creation myth, implying that either there never was a generally accepted one, or that it was not considered an important enough story to perpetuate in later retellings. If the secretive Druids or religious leaders of the Celts taught a creation story, they did not see fit to share it with the masses. Celtic literature avoids the topic altogether.

Between the Irish and the Welsh, the Irish myths and legends provide the more cohesive mythology. Welsh divinities are mentioned throughout Welsh literature, but never as a catalogue of stories as in the Irish legends. In Irish myths, the earliest chronological tale tells of the coming of the Irish divinities to Ireland. For the Celts, the beginning, if it even need be called that, is simply when the story's events commence, not in some long-lost time before the adventures would actually take place, and certainly never with the beginning of the whole world. In "Culhwch and Olwen," the story gives the necessary information about Culhwch's birth, his affiliation with Arthur, the jealousy of his stepmother, and the subsequent quest for Olwen. No information about the current state of Arthur's kingdom or the surrounding lands is necessary to begin the tale. The story goes immediately into the important action of the plot. For the Celts of Ireland, the important action begins with the coming of the god-like Tuatha Dé Danaan to the shores of Ireland.

The People of the Goddess Danu are a many-skilled group of deities who conquer the inhabitants of Ireland, the Firbolgs, but are then enslaved by later invaders, the Fomorians. Eventually, with the rise of the mortal men, called Milesians, the deities retreat into the *sidh*-mounds, which become their dwelling places. The entire Mythological Cycle that recounts the stories of the Tuatha Dé Danaan follows their rise and their fall, but neither their beginning nor their end. Lugh and Manannan, the Dagda and the Morrigan, Midir and Nuada “were wafted into the land in a magic cloud” (Rolleston 69), and when they eventually lose their dominance over Ireland to the Milesians, they neither perish nor run away. They relocate to the Otherworld. In Rolleston’s account, he describes the shifting existence of these supernatural beings: “The People of Dana do not withdraw. By their magic art they cast over themselves a veil of invisibility, which they can put on or off as they choose,” and this new realm of the Tuatha Dé Danaan is, one might imagine, the same as that from which they first came: “there they hold their revels in eternal sunshine, nourished by the magic meat and ale that give them undying youth and beauty” (96). While the Tuatha Dé Danaan do spend a certain period on a mortal plane, they are never confined to a set time in any of those places they choose to live, whether in the clouds of heaven, the fields of Ireland, or the distant, yet immanent Otherworld. The Celtic gods embody eternity. When they make the Otherworld their home, they attach to that realm timelessness and eternal life and youth.

Similar to the stories of the Greeks and Romans, in the Irish legends, the Celtic deities have many interactions with the mortals who take up residence in their lands. In the stories of Cù Chùlainn, Fionn, and many of the other heroes, the cyclic nature of Celtic mythology emerges. Time and death are very real, but flexible, changeable, and often avoidable. One of the most beautiful stories in the Ossianic Cycle is that of Fionn’s son Ossian who wins the heart of

the fairy queen Niamh. Niamh carries him away to the Land of Youth, where “[t]he feast shall cloy not, nor the chase shall tire, nor music cease forever through the hall” (Rolleston 209).

Ossian lives with his fairy queen in a world outside of the mortal world, but also lives in a time dissociated from mortal time. For Ossian, his stay seems to last only three weeks, but when he returns to visit his father and friends in Ireland, he finds that three hundred years have passed. As soon as his feet touch mortal soil, all three hundred years attach themselves to him. Ossian loses his beloved fairy queen, his youth, and his eternal existence as mortality takes hold. He learns in the most tragic way imaginable that time passes differently in the Otherworld than it does in the mortal world. Mortals can die.

The Celts certainly pay attention to the existence and even the misfortune of eventual death, but because they view time as a fluid entity, death functions differently and the thought of death weighs less heavily on the Celtic mind than it does on the Germanic. One way in which this view of death is clearly evidenced is in the reincarnation stories that appear in both Welsh and Irish myths. One such story involves Midir, a Danaan prince whose second wife Etain is turned into a butterfly by a jealous first wife. Etain falls into the drinking cup of a woman and is swallowed, only to be reborn with no memory of her immortal past. She marries a mortal king Eochy and when Midir eventually finds her, he is forced to win her from King Eochy in a chess game. Taliesin too was first Gwion Bach. Gwion is pursued by a vengeful deity Cerridwen for an accidental offense against her. They go through a series of shapes as Gwion attempts to elude Cerridwen. Finally, Gwion becomes a grain of wheat and Cerridwen, as a hen, swallows him and gives birth to him. Gwion becomes Taliesin. Cù Chùlainn, while not directly reborn in the manner of Etain or Taliesin, has been considered both the son of the god Lugh and a reincarnation of the god. Rolleston even cites a historical figure, Mongan, who lived in the

seventh century AD, claiming to be a reincarnation of Fionn mac Cumhaill. The Irish and Welsh tales represent a Celtic belief in the immortality of the soul that has ties to the Celts of continental Gaul. Rolleston says, “many ancient writers assert that the Celtic idea of immortality embodied the Oriental conception of the transmigration of souls” (49). He quotes Caesar, “The principal point of their teaching is that the soul does not perish, and that after death it passes from one body to another” and Diodorus, “Among them the doctrine of Pythagoras prevails, according to which the souls of men are immortal, and after a fixed term recommence to live, taking upon themselves a new body” (49). While the classical authors may have exaggerated the Celtic belief, since transmigration seems to be not so much likely as possible, that possibility infuses the Celtic legends with powerful magic that overshadows the reality of death. Death is most often inevitable, but not always final. A preoccupation with time and death does not exist in the Celtic mindset; however, for the Anglo-Saxons, the finality and ultimate tragedy of death and endings lends an entirely different quality to Old English literature.

In the centuries between the time of Celtic legend and the penning of Geoffrey’s *Historia Regum Britannia*, the Germanic culture of northern Europe brought to the people of Britain a new set of ideals and views on the passage of time and death. The stories of the Anglo-Saxons reflect a powerfully Germanic mindset that is best exemplified in the Norse myths of the Scandinavians. The Norse myths do not provide a range of specific characters for the later Anglo-Saxon literary works, but they do offer a clear foundation of beliefs that functions as an integral part of the structure of later Anglo-Saxon texts. While Anglo-Saxon writers do often draw on Christian themes for their poetry and prose, they remain consciously connected to their Germanic roots.

The poem *Havamal* from the *Poetic Edda* presents a set of heroic ideals for the men of the north:

Cattle die,
 kinsmen die,
 one dies oneself in the same way,
 but a reputation
 never dies
 for one who acquires a good one.

Cattle die,
 kinsmen die,
 one dies oneself in the same way.

I know one thing
 that never dies
 the judgment of each dead person. (qtd. in Lindow 164)

Lindow argues that the composition of *Havamal* was sometime in the twelfth or thirteenth century, a medieval poem rather than an ancient lay, but the message reflects a constant preoccupation of Germanic literature and mythology: Everyone must die (164). The brutal world of the cold, harsh north formed a hardy breed of men who were forced to fight daily for their survival. H.A. Guerber describes their mythology as “grand and tragical” and its major focus on “the perpetual struggle of the beneficent forces of Nature against the injurious,” a very different religious theme than that of more temperate, southern countries (9). H.R. Ellis Davidson adds that the tribal social structure is another factor in the Germanic view of the dangers of life and the reality of death. As one tribe battled another, the constant presence of

death was on every man's mind (14). The dark, deadly forces of the Germanic world inspired what scholars often consider a fatalistic view of life. Kevin Crossley-Holland introduces his translation of the Norse myths with a summary of the northern mindset: "This fatalism, so fundamental to the Norsemen, is reflected in the myths. It was in the power of Odin and the Valkyries, not of men, to decide which slain warriors would be taken to Valhalla; ... and Ragnarok itself, 'the Destruction of the Powers', is inescapable. The time must come when all creation will be destroyed by fire and flood" (xix). The term "fatalism" is certainly attached to the reality of death, but the word ought to be more closely tied with the belief in fate's control over everything rather than a belief in the meaninglessness of life. The Norse heroes are not fatalistic in the sense of being hopeless; rather, as Davidson says, they recognize fate's control and face death courageously:

In spite of this awareness of fate, or perhaps because of it, the picture of man's qualities which emerges from the myths is a noble one... We find in the myths no sense of bitterness at the harshness and unfairness of life, but rather a spirit of heroic resignation: humanity is born to trouble, but courage, adventure, and the wonders of life are matters of thankfulness, to be enjoyed while life is still granted to us. (qtd. in Crossley-Holland xix-xx).

The northern hero cannot forget the passing of time or the eventuality of death, but he can be the better hero for being worthy of the lifespan allotted him.

Unlike the Celts, the Norsemen have a very clearly described creation myth. Their mythology begins with the beginning of the world. Appropriately for the north, the world was born of ice and created from a frost giant's body. The structured world that Odin, Vili and Ve build from Ymir's corpse consists of multiple levels. Certain elements of the world structure

demonstrate the focus the Scandinavians consistently put on time and fate. The only truly timeless element of the universe is the great ash tree Yggdrasil that provides a structure for the world. This tree existed before the world was created, and it will survive the end of the world and beyond. Beneath the roots of Yggdrasil is the Well of Urd, which is Fate itself. Crossley-Holland mentions the goddesses of destiny, the Norns, who guard this well. These Norns, as Guerber says, were separate from the other Norse gods, completely uninfluenced by them and able to alter past, present, and future (154). Also at the roots of the Guardian Tree is a dragon, Nidhogg, who gnaws at its roots and awaits the end of days, known as Ragnarok (xxiii). Yggdrasil presents a sort of paradox. Intertwined with a timeless tree is Fate's well, the dragon of Ragnarok, and also the hope for a new world. When Ragnarok takes place, a few will hide inside the tree and survive to continue the human race. While this message of hope promises that a new world will be created after the old one is destroyed, the gods and heroes of the Norse myths do not see the hope of a new world so much as the dangers of the present. They are caught in the linear story of the current world that begins with creation and ends with Ragnarok. Every kingdom of man and god must and will rise and fall according to that chronology. Along that same line, each man faces a life that begins at birth and proceeds inexorably to his death. No story of reincarnation exists in the Germanic myths. Each hero must confront the dangers of life and leave behind a catalogue of deeds that will be immortal when he cannot be.

Far removed in time and distance from their Germanic homeland, the Anglo-Saxons were yet able to produce a Germanic hero in *Beowulf*, a hero who lives in this fate-driven world where life is so quickly supplanted by death and where warriors can battle enemies and monsters, but never their own destinies. Although *Beowulf* does not contain the familiar gods and warriors of Norse mythology, and while the *Beowulf* poet drew on countless Christian references, the hero

who meets his three monstrous enemies with such assurance is bound by the same linear time-world and the same eventuality in death. Whereas the Celtic heroes are most often portrayed in their youth, Beowulf's life advances from youth to old age. The aged king Hrothgar reminds him of his eventual death:

Today and tomorrow
 you will be in your prime; but soon you will die,
 in battle or in bed; either fire or water,
 the fearsome elements, will embrace you
 or you will succumb to the sword's flashing edge,
 or the arrow's flight, or terrible old age. (118)

Before the dragon discovers the hoard of treasure, the gold belongs to "a noble people" (130) who are slowly claimed by death until only one remains:

'Cruel death has claimed hundreds of this human race.'
 Thus the last survivor mourned time passing,
 and roamed about by day and night,
 sad and aimless, until death's lightning
 struck at his heart. (131)

When Beowulf himself reaches the end of his life, he reflects on the course of his life as a stream of events of which he can be proud: "He was well aware / that his life's course, with all its delights, / had come to an end; his days on earth / were exhausted, death drew very close" (142). He passes his ring and corslet to the heroic, young Wiglaf: "You are the last survivor of our family, / the Waegmundings; fate has swept / all my kinsmen, those courageous warriors, / to their doom. I must follow them" (145). Men are all doomed to die, fated to perish, destined to

age and fight and struggle until they reach their definite ends. Taine writes of the Anglo-Saxons, “Is there any people which has formed so tragic a conception of life? Is there any which has peopled its infantine mind with such gloomy dreams? ... Energy, tenacious and mournful energy, an ecstasy of energy – such was the chosen condition” (qtd. in Ackroyd 22). The true Anglo-Saxon hero rises above his fate, not by defying his doom, but by being as noble, courageous, and memorable as he can in the time given him.

This idea of a lasting memory is echoed in the elegiac poems of the Anglo-Saxons as well. While many of the poems have strong Christian element, the poets continue to dwell on the reality of death with comparably slight emphasis on the hope of an afterlife. The greater emphasis is placed on what is left behind, rather than on what exists beyond death. Christian faith exists in combination with Germanic beliefs. Thus, in “The Seafarer,” the poet offers praise to the Lord in the somber frame of death’s certainty and the world’s impermanence:

So it is that the joys
of the Lord inspire me more than this dead life,
ephemeral on earth. I have no faith
that the splendours of this earth will survive forever...
illness or old age or the sword’s edge
can deprive a doomed man of his life. (55)

The poet does offer the hope of an eternal heaven, and the somber poem ends in swelling praise to the power and dominion of a God who has replaced Fate as the ordainer of man’s destiny; but the poet counsels men to also consider their actions on earth, that they might leave a lasting account of heroic and worthy deeds that they have done. What men do while they live matters even more because of death’s certainty. Nothing else will stand against time.

In the poem “The Wanderer,” an even grimmer picture is offered as the poet counsels men to be ever careful of how they live their lives and what they leave behind them: “Nothing is ever easy in the kingdom of the earth, / the world beneath the heavens is in the hands of fate. / Here possessions are fleeting, here friends are fleeting, / here man is fleeting, here kinsman is fleeting” (52). The awareness that this poet holds of a merciful Christian God and a hope of heaven only appears at the conclusion of a long examination of the grim struggle faced by humanity on earth. He begins the poem saying that “Often the wanderer pleads for pity / and mercy from the Lord; but for a long time, / ... he must follow the paths of exile: fate is inflexible” (50). Several stanzas of grief, difficulty, and dying separate this plea from its eventual resolution: “It is best for a man to seek / mercy and comfort from the Father in heaven where / security stands for us all” (53). Christian faith brings a new light to Old English poetry and prose, but it long remains a flickering candle in a dark world of enduring Germanic traditions.

The Anglo-Saxon world is caught in a stream of beginnings and endings; each man’s life progresses inevitably toward his final day. The Celts live in a cyclic world in which the end of one thing is the beginning of another; death and life often trespass on each other, blending into one another. In one realm, Arthur succeeds one king and precedes another in a historical framework; in the other, he is a god-like entity, presiding over a court that is both long established, and yet vibrantly young and new. The Arthur who evolves from myth and history into a British legendary hero embraces both figures, both concepts of time, and both views on death. This Arthur exists within time and outside of it. He is the king who meets a tragic end, and the king who can never truly die. The elements of time and death in the later Arthurian legends effortlessly blend these two cultural conceptions.

The *Historia* of Geoffrey of Monmouth offered contemporary readers a story of Arthur as a historical king. The majority of those who read the account did believe it was based on fact rather than fiction. When Chrétien de Troyes claimed Arthur's story, he wrote a consciously fictional account. William Kibler says that *Lancelot, or The Knight of the Cart* is the first narrative that deliberately uses Arthur's legend as the basis for a fictional account (121). In Chrétien's writing, French romantic influences have clearly formed a new genre of storytelling, but the Arthurian story is still of a British king in the British Isles, and themes within the tale are firmly grounded in their Anglo-Celtic roots. The element of time in the story of *The Knight of the Cart* clearly draws on both cultural influences.

The beginning of *The Knight of the Cart* calls to mind the beginning of "Culhwch and Olwen" because it introduces a world that has no historical setting or background and no account of a before or an after for the story. The story begins, "On a certain Ascension Day King Arthur was in the region near Caerleon and held his court at Camelot, splendidly and luxuriantly as befitted a king" (124). As with "Culhwch and Olwen," the story takes place during the height of Arthur's power. His kingdom is a timeless entity, providing a framework in which a hundred such adventures could as easily take place. No beginning or end suggests itself regarding Arthur or Camelot. The great king simply is. Also throughout the tale are objects and events that seem suspended in time, awaiting only the arrival of the hero Lancelot to be brought into action. A knight stands guard at a ford. The audience can imagine that he has always been there, an eternal challenge for any would-be hero who would cross that river. Lancelot comes to a tomb on which are inscribed the words "He who will lift this slab by his unaided strength will free all the men and women who are imprisoned in the land from which no one returns" (144). How long this tomb has existed, it is impossible to know. Lancelot, of course, is the knight who lifts the slab.

Lancelot crosses the mysterious Sword Bridge. It, too, has a timeless quality, seeming to exist only for this moment and challenge. No one but Lancelot can cross it. The adventure brings with it in Otherworldly quality of timelessness.

Yet, as Lancelot proceeds on his journey, he is not carried entirely into an ageless Celtic realm. Chrétien provides an almost historically precise account of every day of Lancelot's journey. Morning and evening are recorded with biblical consistency. The audience never loses sight of time altogether. They are also given a glimpse into the future of Arthur's kingdom. Beside the strange tomb that Lancelot encounters on his journey with its important inscribed slab, are several other tombs. Lancelot reads the inscriptions of these: "Here will lie Gawain, here Lionel, and here Yvain" (144). Beside these are a multitude of other tombs with the names of many other knights, "the most esteemed and greatest of this or any other land" (144). The tomb with the famous slab is destined to be Lancelot's own tomb. The inscriptions have a note of finality. Rather than the Celtic acknowledgment of death's possibility, there is a much more Anglo-Saxon note of destiny. Each of these knights will and must die. They will one day lie in these tombs. Arthur's kingdom will eventually end. The sobering existence of death provides a realism to blend with the adventurous fantasy of Lancelot's daring exploits. Even in an ageless Arthurian kingdom, time passes.

In the fourteenth century, an anonymous author penned the beautiful alliterative poem *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, a story that focuses on another of the greatest knights of Arthur's court. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is a very Celtic story in its roots. The beheading game has many similarities to the Celtic myth *Bricriu's Feast*. The Green Knight is very like in appearance and nature to the Celtic Green Man. Morgan le Fey and Merlin, magical forests, and shape-shifting all arise from a Celtic tradition of which the author was clearly aware.

However, within the magical framework of the poem, the author provides a very consistent, timely account that draws on history, marks the passing of days and years, and gives the story a degree of chronological context.

The poem does not open with the action of the plot as Chrétien's tale does. The first stanza of *Sir Gawain* goes back to Geoffrey's historical account of the origins of the British people in Troy. The following stanza gives a brief account of the British rise in power and grandeur and of Arthur's eventual ascent: "And when Britain had been built / ... Bold men were bred there who relished their battling / ... And of all the British founders who have ever flourished here, / Surely Arthur was the most heroic, as I have heard" (20-21, 25-26). In stanza three, the action begins. The author establishes a time of year for the audience. The story begins at Christmastime in Camelot. The Green Knight appears at the turning of the new year. After the beheading game, another time element is given. Gawain has one year to live before going to the Green Knight and offering his head for the returning blow. Not only does the author never allow the audience to lose track of time, but the passage of time plays a crucial role in the storytelling. The suspense of the wait, the fear of Gawain's companions for their noble companion, and his eventual journey to the Green Knight's Chapel all give the poem a natural and exciting flow. They firmly ground the adventure in a time-driven world. When Gawain arrives at the merry Bertilak's hall for the three days before his meeting with the Green Knight, another series of time sequences takes place. The hunting and wooing games in the morning alternate with the exchange of prizes in the evening, leading inexorably to the final, culminating exchange at the Chapel where Gawain receives his three blows.

The poem is driven by the passing of time in a rhythm of numbers, days, and years. From one New Year to the next, Gawain moves through time, not outside of it. However, while

this is not a tale of pure Celtic mysticism, it is no Anglo-Saxon epic either. Time is clearly marked in the poem, and events are couched in a historical context (history according to Geoffrey of Monmouth, that is; the *Gawain* poet gives a brief account of Britain's Trojan past); but whereas time's passing leads to an inevitable death in the Anglo-Saxon mind, *Sir Gawain* provides a brighter ending. Death is certainly on Sir Gawain's mind after his first encounter with the Green Knight. He is given one year before he must feel the axe on his very mortal neck: "The seasons run rather swiftly and experience many shiftings: / The outset and the outcome are seldom in one accord. / And so the Yuletide rolled by, and the young year came on" (498-500). The poet offers an eloquent description of the passing of the seasons between one Christmas and the next. All too soon, Arthur is preparing a farewell feast for his nephew. Gawain is no coward. Like any Anglo-Saxon warrior, he goes willingly, nobly and unhesitatingly to his doom: "Should I now retreat? / Whether destiny looms dear or dark, / What can a man do but seek?" (563-545). These are words that Beowulf himself might say before facing Grendel or the dragon. The plot leads toward a naturally dark ending. Gawain cannot deny the Knight his deadly blow. His doom seems sure.

Despite all indications, the ending of the adventure is a far different matter. Sir Gawain puts his head down and receives his blows, but he is offered life, not death. The allotted years, the days of questing, and the hunting game all lead not to an end, but to a new beginning. Gawain returns home with his head, if not his pride, firmly intact. The tale ends not with Gawain's demise, but with his return to Camelot, to Arthur's court, and to his former life. The poet concludes with Arthur's knights seated at the Round Table laughing, joyous and seemingly triumphant over death itself. The poet's final lines before the benediction imply continuity rather than finality: "Many adventures of this kind / Have happened long since then" (2527-2528). The

stories can conceivably continue forever as one knight after another ventures forth from Arthur's eternal court.

While a multitude of Arthurian legends offer this blended time construct, the figure of Arthur himself is the most poignant joining of the two views on eternity and finality. Arthur stands as the hub of the cycle of tales, the necessary central figure who might not play a strong acting role, but whose presence is an absolute necessity. Lancelot and Gawain are the heroes of Chrétien's and the *Gawain* poet's works, but there must be an Arthur behind them. The stories could not begin until Arthur rose to power and they could not continue without him. Arthur often seems to be a timeless figure, the essence of the Celtic divinity who exists, young and vibrant, within and beyond the world. A thousand stories might be told, and Arthur is alive in all of them. As a literary figure, he is truly immortal. But the Arthur of the medieval, the Victorian, and the later, modern renderings is not insusceptible to time's passing, to old age, and even to death. Even as early as the account of Geoffrey of Monmouth, there is a Modred who deals Arthur a mortal blow. The king faces a doom as sure as Beowulf's. Camelot falls as every kingdom of men must fall.

This dark ending of Arthur's kingdom appears in several notable Arthurian accounts. Sir Thomas Malory's *Morte d'Arthur* provides an early fictional narrative of Arthur's death. Malory offers a rather grim picture of the end of Camelot. Sir Gawain, the heroic knight who faced the deadly axe of the Green Knight and survived, dies in King Arthur's arms. Arthur himself passes away: "For I must into the vale of Avilion to heal me of my grievous wounds" (208). Malory adds that the three ladies who bear Arthur away "brought him to his grave; and such one was buried there" (309). The fuller accounts of Arthur's reign feel a need to include not just his ascension, but the eventual end of his reign. Pitiless time drives the tales, and the poignant and

necessary tragedy of Arthur's reign is that it cannot last forever. The weakening of its internal structure through Lancelot's and Guinevere's infidelity and assault from the outer forces of the wicked Modred tear the kingdom apart, and not even Arthur can hold it together. Arthur and his kingdom are a single entity. Where one falls, so must the other. Without Arthur, there cannot be a Camelot. The ending of the story lends a beauty to it that the Celtic tales cannot have. The perpetuity of many Celtic stories, their lack of real beginnings and endings, gives them a suspended nature. The audience has no sense of urgency or awareness of impermanence in the magical world they have stepped into. The Celtic world is lost in itself, drifting in a wondrous, but aimless existence outside of time. The story of Arthur includes a keen awareness of the temporality of all things. As one fabulous tale after another delights the listener's ear and the reader's eye, the awareness of an eventual ending to the adventures provides intensity and a bittersweet quality to every story.

The tragic loss of Arthur signals what ought to have been an ending to the cycle of legends. Once his death story was written, Arthur should have retreated into the ranks of the once-great, now-lost heroes of ages past, keeping the company of Beowulf, of Odysseus, of Hercules, of Aeneas. His canon should have been closed, his stories all told, an anthology prepared for endless study, but no enhancement. However, Arthur's stories continued to be told. New poems and narratives join the increasing canon of Arthurian legend. The book never closes. Arthur does not die.

Malory, Tennyson, and the other authors and poets who told of Arthur's end did not – could not – leave Arthur in a tomb. Unlike Beowulf, Arthur's last words are not his dying words. Whereas the Anglo-Saxon texts come to a conclusion, the Arthurian tales do not end. It is here that the Celtic belief in continuity, in cycles, and in the triumph over death emerges and

keeps Arthur alive. While remaining grounded in the temporality of a fading world, the Celtic tradition allows for the existence of another world, one that does not acknowledge time or death; and into this world will Arthur pass, wounded, but not dead. The rather pragmatic Malory does suggest that Arthur could well be buried in a tomb, but he adds that no one knows for sure whether the body buried there is Arthur's or not: "some men say in many parts of England that King Arthur is not dead... and men say that he shall come again" (309). Even the tomb that Malory believes Arthur to be buried in bears the legendary words: "Here lies Arthur, the once and future king," the words that inspired T.H. White to pen his account several hundred years later. Tennyson portrays Arthur's passing as mournful, but not final. In *The Idylls of the King*, Arthur says to Sir Bedivere:

I think that we
 Shall never more, at any future time,
 Delight our souls with talk of knightly deeds,
 Walking about the gardens and the halls
 Of Camelot, as in the days that were.
 I perish by this people which I made, -
 Though Merlin sware that I should come again
 To rule once more; but, let what will be, be. (185-192)

Arthur's words are both bitter and hopeful, embracing the end of Camelot, but also its eventual renewal.

Arthur proceeds into Avalon to be healed of his wounds. Avalon is one of the strangest and most beautiful pieces of the Arthurian legend. Avalon lies across the sea, somewhere in the Otherworld. It is both the land of the dead and a land of immortality. Avalon offers the realism

of Arthur's passing a measure of hope. As Tennyson says, "He passes to be King among the dead, / And after healing of his grievous wound / He comes again" (449-450). If he is in Avalon, he is not only alive, but also a potential redemptive force. If he is not dead, then he can come back. He is not just a past king; he is a future king. Time cannot close on Arthur's story because he is not yet dead. Camelot is not lost. The stories are told, retold, reinvented, renewed, and revered. The Anglo-Saxons ensured an Arthurian cycle in which time and death cannot be ignored; they are part of the mortal world and experience, drawing a needed connection between legendary heroes and mortal men. However, the mysterious, timeless Celtic Otherworld gives the audience a legend that does not have to end and a king who does not die. Between the reality of the mortal world and the magic of the Otherworld lies the transient, yet timeless realm of King Arthur.

Chapter Two:

Immanence and Otherness

When the Celts removed their stories from a regular time-sequence, they also introduced to their myths another world. Just as time proves an elusive concept in the Celtic myths, so does this Otherworld slip in and out of perception, existing beyond the natural world, beneath it, and beside it. The Otherworld is so intertwined with the natural world that the one must influence the other. Magic and monsters move easily from one realm to the other, providing the intrepid Celtic hero with endless mythic adventures. The Celtic heroes identify closely with this magic and with the Otherworld. Nature itself is an entity of magic, both dangerous and alluring.

When the Anglo-Saxon hero emerges from his lord's hall, he faces a natural world that is equally dangerous, but possesses none of the appeal of the Celtic realm. In England's recognizable woods and fields dwell monsters and magic, but no portal to the Otherworld, no capricious spirits and natural wonders. The Anglo-Saxon, keenly aware of the passage of time, of ever present death, sees around him a darker world that may inspire courage, but rarely carefree delight. A grim contest rages between the mortal hero and the natural world. Security, comfort, and joy exist with one's friends, kinsmen, and lord within the house and hall, leaving nature and its monsters outside.

These two opposing conceptions of nature and magic form the unique setting for Arthur and his knights. The magic of the Otherworld is as essential to Arthurian legend as the sense of a solid reality. The natural world is at times brilliant and at other times alarmingly brutal, a world that Ackroyd describes as "a charmed landscape of confrontation and of peril" (121). Both these viewpoints contribute to the creation of the world in which Arthur exists. In the poem *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, the Gawain poet brings the two forces of Celtic and Anglo-Saxon

magic and landscape together, and Sir Gawain finds himself caught in a world that holds both a threat and a promise.

As the poet of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* begins his story, he introduces a picture of the hospitality, order, and warmth of King Arthur's hall. This convivial scene is interrupted by the entrance of the Green Knight, who presents an immediate threat to this orderly kingdom. After the initial confrontation in Arthur's court, the Green Knight demands that Sir Gawain come to the Green Chapel to receive his blow from the Knight's great axe. Sir Gawain must leave his mortal king and mortal court to go out into the hostile natural world and face nature's knight. However, as this Green Knight, enchanted mortal or supernatural creature that he might be, draws Sir Gawain into his world, nature gains a light and beauty to accompany its dangers, and the ultimate outcome of the tale indicates the benevolence of nature, rather than its severity, as the Green Knight withholds the final blow. Sir Gawain's quest is a fusion of the Celtic portrayal of nature and magic as both dangerous and beautiful with the Anglo-Saxon belief in nature's inherent evil and darker elements.

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight is a medieval Arthurian tale filled with magic and immersed in the wilds of the natural world that is England and not England. Alan Markman says that the magic of this story "constitutes the marvelous atmosphere, which supplies the necessary feeling that everything which occurs is occurring 'nowhere,' which makes us accept the fundamental precept of romance, namely, that we are, at the same time, both in this world and in another world" (580-81). The appeal of this and many other Arthurian tales is in its ability to draw its audience away from the mundane and into the fantastic without losing that essential connection with a knowable world. The magical elements that give this poem its inspiration and magical atmosphere originated in the Celtic myths of the Otherworld.

The Celtic myths do not base their literature entirely in imagined locations. Both the Irish and Welsh myths provide at least some real geographical context for their stories. The Irish cycles begin with the successive invasions of Ireland, grounding the tales firmly in the real world. The *Mabinogion* provides some identifiable locations in Wales. However, both mythic cycles integrate the existence of another world that coexists with the natural world. Unlike the usual hierarchical structures that many religious traditions give their godly realms and underworlds, the Celtic Otherworld is more difficult to place with any consistency. The Otherworld defies natural order, existing independently of the human world, but constantly interacting with and influencing it.

In the Irish mythic cycle, the Otherworld is given an origin and an initial location, but neither is very definite as successive stories are told. The Otherworld becomes the realm of the Tuatha Dé Danaan after the human Milesians come and take Ireland for themselves. The strange and fantastic Danaans come to Ireland from four cities called Falias, Gorias, Finias, and Murias, certainly magical cities. They come from across the sea and land in Ireland “in a magic cloud” (Rolleston 69). For a time, they rule over the visible world, and their magic is fully discernible, but with the coming Milesians, the Danaans make a new home for themselves in the Otherworld. Rolleston describes this crossing over to the Otherworld: “By their magic art they cast over themselves a veil of invisibility, which they can put on or off as they choose. There are two Irelands henceforward, the spiritual and the earthly. The Danaans dwell in the spiritual Ireland... Where the human eye can see but green mounds and ramparts, the relics of ruined fortresses or sepulchres, there rise the fairy palaces of the defeated divinities” (96). Charles Squire’s rendering of the story has the Danaans going to two separate locations that become the Otherworld: “One section chose to...seek refuge in a paradise over-seas, situate in some unknown, and, except for

favoured mortals, unknowable island of the west” (133). The remaining gods were given new homes called *sidhe*: “These *sidhe* were barrows, or hillocks, each being the door to an underground realm of inexhaustible splendour and delight” (135-136). If this distinction is made at the beginning of the Danaan’s existence in the Otherworld, the two locations blend together as the myths progress. As Josef Baudis says, “this same fairyland is sometimes the object of expeditions which resemble closely expeditions to Hades... The *Caer Sidi* mentioned in [“The Spoils of Annwn”] is a horrible prison of Gweir...and yet the same place appears in another poem like paradise” (39-40). Chadwick emphasizes the ease with which the gods and even the mortals move between the two worlds: “In many circumstances there does not seem to have been any barrier. At times a ‘druidical’ mist surrounds the hero and heralds the approach of the gods; at others the god appears from across the sea and perhaps a lake; sometimes a human being enters a *sidhe* or burial mound. While both the underworld and oversea Otherworlds do appear in the legends, they seem to be the same place” (180-181). While the entrance to the Otherworld may shift, appearing and vanishing in one location or another, its many manifestations provide a glimpse of a magic beyond that is consistently fantastic and beautiful.

The Otherworld is often placed across water, or even beneath it. This Otherworld is one that the Celtic hero cannot see or reach on his own, but might always look toward with a sense of fascination and wonder. When the fairy queen Niamh comes to woo the mortal Ossian in the Ossianic Cycle of the Irish myths, they ride horses across the waves to her kingdom: “When the white horse with its riders reached the sea it ran lightly over the waves, and soon the green woods and headlands of Erin faded out of sight” (Rolleston 210). Many divine figures and fairy folk become associated with the Otherworld beyond the sea, but the deity Manannan mac Lir is most often specifically defined as the god of the sea and the god of the Otherworld, joining the

two together. Chadwick argues that Manannan and his father Lir are separate from the Dagda and the other Irish gods, “pictured as approaching Ireland from overseas or across a lake” (174). Manannan seems to have more of a connection with the Otherworld than any other god, for he comes from it and prepares entrance for the other gods back into it. Alwyn and Brinley Rees say that Manannan is the god who distributes the *sidhe* to the Danaans (49), giving him a knowledge and authority over the other gods. He has a greater association with the interaction between mortals and gods than many of the Tuatha Dé Danaan. Spaan’s article on Manannan says, “some of the most beautiful tales in the literature are those in which Manannan breaks down the spatial barrier between gods and men to lead a chosen warrior to his Land of Promise, either to be educated there at his own hand, or to enjoy its sybaritic pleasures, temporarily or eternally” (179). The connection between water sources and the Celtic gods goes back much further than the Celtic habitation of Ireland. Myles Dillon and Nora Chadwick note that the Celts of Gaul commonly left votive offerings in water sources: “one of the most common features of Gaulish religion is the wide prevalence of sanctuaries connected with natural features, especially springs, rivers, lakes and forests” (137). The association of water sources with the Otherworld in the older religious practices translates into mythology as Manannan bears heroes to this oversea kingdom or undertakes a journey from the Otherworld to interfere in the affairs of the Irish heroes.

The Welsh myths are very similar to the Irish in their depictions of the Otherworld. Even the Irish god Manannan mac Lir appears in Welsh mythology as Manawydan son of Llyr. Manawydan is, incidentally, one of the warriors in the catalogue of heroes who accompanies Arthur on the quest for Culhwch’s bride Olwen. Manawydan, like Manannan, is connected to the Isle of Man, the island sometimes associated with Avalon, and he is considered the Welsh

version of Manannan, but he seems to play less of the role of sea god or god of the underworld. Rather, Manawydan acts as a warrior and a multi-talented god of craftsmanship. The Welsh connection between water and the Otherworld appears in another source. In the poem “The Spoils of Annwn,” Taliesin tells the story of Arthur’s journey to Annwfn, the Welsh Otherworld. Arthur and his warriors raid Caer Siddi, the fairy palace in Annwfn, in order to carry off a magical cauldron. They achieve the Otherworldly kingdom with ships, implying that water separates this kingdom from the mortal world. This adventure, like so many Arthurian quests, takes the warriors into a dangerous realm, but also a wondrous one. When Celtic myth inspired Arthurian legend, the link between water and the Otherworld inspired some of the most powerful and beautiful elements of King Arthur’s story.

The Isle of Avalon is as defining an aspect of Arthur’s legend as Excalibur, the Round Table, or the wizard Merlin. Nearly every story portrays Avalon as a castle or island shrouded in mist across a lake or a sea, indicating its Otherworldly status. Avalon can be reached by crossing the lake, but only in certain times and by certain people. Arthur, more than anyone, is considered worthy of the journey. Geoffrey, Malory, and Tennyson all include an ending to the Arthurian cycle rather than focusing only on individual quests and adventures in the middle of his reign. Even allowing for the pseudo-historicism of Geoffrey’s writing and Malory’s attention to realism as well as romance, each rendering of the conclusion of Arthur’s tale includes the same, crucial element: the passage to Avalon. Geoffrey mentions it only in passing: “Even the renowned King Arthur himself was wounded deadly, and was borne thence unto the Isle of Avallon for the healing of his wounds” (236), attaching to the event only the year AD 542 and the name of his successor, Constantine. He makes no mention of any of Avalon’s more magical attributes and the story continues to pursue history rather than legend, as was Geoffrey’s overall

purpose. Nevertheless, even Geoffrey was aware of the magic of Avalon since he represents it as the place where Arthur might be healed. Earlier in Geoffrey's account, he also mentions that Arthur's magic sword Caliburn (the precursor to Excalibur) was forged in the Isle of Avalon (188). Malory and Tennyson offer a more fictionalized and dramatic telling of Arthur's passage to the magic isle. Malory's conclusion offers a description of the ladies who come to bear Arthur away: "thus was he led away in a ship wherein were three queens; that one was King Arthur's sister, Queen Morgan le Fay; the other was the Queen of Northgales; the third was the Queen of the Wastelands. Also there was Nimue, the chief lady of the lake" (309). Noticeable among these ladies is Morgan le Fay, whose magic caused Bertilak's transformation into the Green Knight. Nimue, the Lady of the Lake, also presents another connection between fairy world and water sources. Just as Caliburn is associated with Avalon in Geoffrey's account, in Malory's telling, King Arthur receives Excalibur from the mysterious Lady of the Lake in one of the most extraordinary Otherworldly encounters of Arthurian literature:

So they rode till they came to a lake, the which was a fair water, and broad. And in the midst of the lake Arthur was ware of an arm clothed in white samite, that held a fair sword in that hand... "That is the Lady of the Lake," said Merlin; "and within that lake is a rock, and therein is as fair a place as any on earth, and richly beseen." (40)

When Arthur lies wounded after the battle with Modred, he asks Sir Bedivere to throw the sword back into the water. As the Celts attempted to do with their votive offerings, when Sir Bedivere at last, albeit with great reluctance, throws Excalibur into the water, he returns it to the immortal realm of the fair people: "And there came an arm and an hand above the water and met it, and caught it, and so shook it thrice and brandished, and then vanished away the hand with the sword

into the water” (307). At this same place, Arthur finds passage to the immortal world, not beneath the water in the way of Excalibur, but across it to the Isle of Avalon. At the end of Tennyson’s *Idylls of the King*, Bedivere watches Arthur sail away to Avalon. He makes the somber comment: “He passes to be King among the dead” (449), but adds “And after healing of his grievous wound / He comes again” (450-451). Avalon is suspended between life and death. Tennyson concludes his poem with a long look beyond the horizon where Avalon lies:

Then from the dawn it seemed there came, but faint
 As from beyond the limit of the world,
 Like the last echo born of a great cry,
 Sounds, as if some fair city were one voice
 Around a king returning from his wars...
 Straining his eyes beneath an arch of hand,
 [Bedivere] thought he saw, the speck that bare the King,
 Down that long water opening on the deep
 Somewhere far off, pass on and on, and go
 From less to less and vanish into light.
 And the new sun rose bringing the new year. (457-461, 465-470)

As tragic as Arthur’s passing is, he passes beyond the sea and Tennyson’s description hints at an extraordinary beauty just out of sight. Avalon is the Otherworld.

Avalon is an Arthurian rendering of an Otherworld where immortality, healing, and magic are as real as knights, kings, and castles. This magical realm exists not below or above the natural plane, but parallel to it, accessible by means of crossing a body of water with the help of the gods themselves, altered by time and literature to become beautiful fairy queens. Avalon is

the most tangible version of the Otherworld in Arthurian lore, but true to the nature of Celtic magic, the Otherworld is able to exist in more than one place without causing any real contradiction in itself. The Otherworld's ability to be both distant and immanent, inaccessible and yet unavoidable, sets it apart from the unearthly realms of so many other mythologies and allows it a special power over the Arthurian world.

At the end of the reign of the Tuatha Dé Danaan, Manannan allots to the gods their *sidhe* mounds, and thus is created the underworld kingdoms that become a new manifestation of the Otherworld. Spaan notes that while the concept of the godly realm and land of the dead over the sea does not necessarily disappear, the *sidhe* are somehow tied directly to Manannan's oversea kingdom, and the two are often used interchangeably (185). The relevance of these *sidhe* mounds is in their position within and around the land of mortals, rather than across an ocean. Niamh carried Ossian away to a distant land. However, these *sidhe* portals to the Otherworld became the very visible mounds that are scattered throughout Ireland, easy to reach and ever present in the mortal landscape. These mounds, though always visible, are not always open to the adventurer wishing to enter the fairy world. In many legends, the Otherworld gates open only when one of the gods wishes to emerge and meddle in human affairs, or during certain times of the day or the year when magic is stronger. However, quite often a hero might stumble across the threshold, as in one case that Rolleston notes of Dermot O'Dyna in the Ossianic Cycle, who falls into a well and wakes up in the fairy world (227). The *sidhe* mounds offer a land-based entrance to the Otherworld and also draw it closer to the actions of mortal heroes who hunt in the forests or wander the fields of the natural world. Rather than simply existing beyond the sea, mostly unreachable and distant, the Otherworld is immanent and, if not tangible, then at least close enough for its magic to affect the natural world.

Irish and Welsh mythologies tend to allow much more movement between the Otherworld and the natural world by means of these gates, both visible and invisible. While water continues to provide an entry, in other stories, such as “Pwyll, Prince of Dyfed,” from the *Mabinogion*, the hero is able to ride to Annwfn on horseback with no detectable point of crossing from one world to the next. After Pwyll trades shapes with the Otherworldly king, he lives in Arawn’s kingdom for a year. While there seems to be little indication of Annwfn’s magical nature, the palace that Pwyll enters has many of the attributes commonly associated with the Otherworld. Pwyll enters the hall and immediately finds himself awed by “the most beautifully ornamented buildings anyone had seen” and a queen who is “the fairest woman anyone had ever seen, dressed in a glittering gold brocaded garment,” and he passes the year in Annwfn in “the court best supplied with food and drink, gold vessels, and royal treasures” (39). While he dwells in Annwfn, Arawn possesses Pwyll’s form and rules Pwyll’s kingdom. Arawn has the characteristics of a deity. He has the ability to change his shape and Pwyll’s shape, and while he is in Pwyll’s kingdom, he rules it with greater wisdom and success than a mere mortal might hope to achieve. Pwyll leaves Annwfn and returns to his own kingdom after the year is completed, presumably through the same means by which he entered it. The Otherworld and the mortal world are distinguishable by quality rather than location.

In both Welsh and Irish traditions, magic joins with nature as the Otherworld offers adventures, monsters, and beautiful fairy queens to the mortal world. When the Celts interact with the natural world and the Otherworld, they approach both without fear. The Otherworld frequently presents danger, as in Taliesin’s and Arthur’s journey to Caer Siddi, but even at its most dangerous, the Otherworld is the most beautiful land, contains every imaginable treasure, from cauldrons to enchanted swords, and offers immortality, eternal youth, and everlasting joy

and feasting. The Celtic Otherworld is no Hades; it is more of an Elysium or Olympus, a divine and heavenly realm, more desirable than deadly. The Celtic heroes surround themselves with nature and with magic in order to experience the thrill of adventure. They are very much like Arthurian knights as they ride out on their quests, seeking adventure, honor, and glory, regardless of the danger. The Celtic Otherworld presents a magical landscape for Arthur's knights where the danger exists alongside the fantastic.

When the Green Knight rides his massive, green steed into Camelot's hall, the Otherworldly opponent is fantastic, but not at all friendly. He comes to Arthur's palace as an opponent, a dangerous creature of nature. The Green Knight's appearance creates an instant dichotomy between the order and rightness of Arthur and his kingdom and the chaos and violence of the Other, the outside world, and magic. The Green Knight has been suggested to be a derivation of the Celtic Green Man or some other wood deity, but his initial presence in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is in many respects more reminiscent of Grendel's entrance into Hrothgar's hall than of Pwyll's encounter with Lord Arawn, a sudden, unwelcome infiltration rather than a mere surprising encounter. The Anglo-Saxon view of magic, nature, and the order of the world is extraordinarily different from the Celtic, giving to Arthur's legend a sometimes darker tone, a keener awareness of the dangers of the natural world as opposed to the safety and order of the human sphere, as well as a stronger sense of reality as monsters and mortals share the same, knowable world.

The Germanic foundations of Anglo-Saxon literature provide a clear world-structure in the Norse creation story and subsequent myths. While the Otherworld interweaves itself with the natural world, allowing for less sense of distance and hostility, the Norse myths establish boundaries between the mortal and the immortal realms. The magical Otherworld is essentially a

part of the mortal experience, neither essentially good or evil; the Norse world is formed into distinct levels that are accessible to each other, but entirely separate and often antagonistic toward one another. In Crossley-Holland's compilation of Norse myths, he points out that the Norse divide their universe into three levels, each level composed of three parts (xx). On the highest level in Asgard dwell the Norse gods known as the Aesir, the fertility or nature deities called the Vanir, and the light elves. The second of the three levels is called Midgard where mortal men, giants, and dwarfs live in their respective worlds. Beneath Midgard is Niflheim, world of the dark elves, of the land of fire, and of the dead (xxi-xxii). Each of these levels has its own physical location in the universe, but the presence of the tree Yggdrasil joins them all together on one physical plane of existence. Crossley-Holland cites Sturlson's *Prose Edda*, which says that rainbows connect Midgard and Asgard and that Niflheim is "a nine days' ride northwards and downwards from Midgard" (xxi). Davidson says that although the three levels are certainly connected, great distances separate them: "Only a god in bird form or a supernatural horse like Sleipnir can pass swiftly from one to another. The poems describe a long and perilous journey over mountains and through forests, across dangerous rivers, and through mist and darkness, and finally over a high gate shutting off the Other World from men" (113). A tangible link exists between each of these levels, but mortal man cannot and does not attempt to access the heavenly realms without divine aid.

The Otherworld of the Celts has correlations with both godly realm and land of the dead. In the case of the Norse, the two worlds are widely separated and utterly different from one another. After Odin and his brothers build Midgard out of the body of the dead frost giant Ymir, they construct their own palace: "a mighty stronghold, a place of green plains and shining palaces high over Midgard" (6). Like the Greek Olympians, the Aesir live in a palace in the sky

where they can overlook the mortal world and the men and women living in it. The gods are immortal, set apart, and imbued with magical powers. They are much more the traditional deities than the Celtic gods found in Irish and Welsh literature. They are meant to be worshiped, and while they have obvious human characteristics and flaws, they are clearly greater than humanity and able to come to a mortal's aid as needed.

The Aesir and their sky palace, Asgard, stand above and beyond the reach of mortals. On this highest level, the light elves and the Vanir also live. While from the very beginning, the Vanir and Aesir have difficulties in cooperating and often fight with each other, all the beings on this plane are essentially representations of light and good. The only real exception to this general goodness is in Loki, the unpredictable god of chaos and pranks. However, Loki is very quickly associated with the other two levels of the universe. In one story, he goes to the land of the giants in Midgard and takes a giant lover named Angrboda. Their offspring, the wolf Fenrir, the serpent Jormungand, and Hel, goddess of the underworld, are all instruments of chaos and evil. Loki represents a rogue god, called in Crossley-Holland's translation "the Father of Lies" (33) and his offspring all play a role in the destruction of the world and the death of gods and men: "just as the Midgard Serpent waits at the bottom of the ocean, coiled round the world; just as Hel waits in Niflheim, surrounded by corpses and swirling death-mist; so, gagged and bound on Lyngvi, Fenrir lies and waits for Ragnarok" (37). Loki's treachery aside, Odin, Thor, Freya, and the other deities of Asgard make mistakes and show pettiness and flaws, but still represent the best and greatest elements of the Norse world.

The Norse heroes aspire to sit one day with these gods in the feasting hall after they have died bravely in battle. One legend says that when brave warriors fall in battle, warlike women called Valkyries fly down on horses to the battlefield and carry them back to Valhalla to sit and

feast with the gods. As in the case of Arthur's passing to Avalon, the journey to Valhalla is allowed only to the chosen few, the deserving warriors. This is the closest that the Norse come to associating the godly realm with the land of the dead. The heavenly palace of Valhalla is meant for gods and a few, select heroes, rather than for the majority of the dead. For the Celts, beautiful halls, happiness, and eternal feasting exist on the other side of perception, close enough to find with the help of the fair folk or a little magic; for the Norse, the fantastic palaces of the Aesir remain a distant hope, inaccessible in life and only rarely offered in death.

The mortal heroes who are carried away to Valhalla are the very fortunate few, chosen by the Valkyries to fight with the gods until it is time to help in the battle at Ragnarok. An entirely separate level exists beneath the ground for the majority of the Norse dead. In the lowest level of the universe, Loki's daughter Hel oversees the land of the dead. When Odin first sees Hel, he immediately decides to cast her into this lower realm. Its description and hers are both horrific: "[Odin] threw [Hel] into the mist and darkness of Niflheim, the world beneath the worlds... Hel made herself at home: beyond the sheer rock, Drop to Destruction... her plate was called Hunger, and her knife Famine. Her bed was Sick Bed, and the bedhangings Glimmering Misfortune" (33-34). This land of the dead has no light or joy, no magic or wonder. Mortal men aspire all the more to enter Valhalla because the inevitable alternative is so gruesome. Once again, the Norse tend to hold more similarities with the Greek partitioning of the world rather than the Celtic; this construction is also reminiscent of the Christian religion with Heaven above and Hell below. The Norse death world is an underworld and one might easily imagine the weeping and gnashing of teeth within Hel's kingdom. Absolutely no good associations connect to this level. The dark elves or dwarves who reside in the land on the same level as Niflheim are workers of mischief, unpleasant and more willing to do evil than good. The slain warriors who

go to Valhalla go to a land of immortality and life. The underworld is a world of death.

Midgard, the mortal plane of humankind, exists between immortality and death. As the Aesir fight to maintain order in the worlds, and the forces of dark and chaos gnaw at Yggdrasill and plan revenge on the gods, men stand between the two opponents, fighting for one side or the other, but ultimately in the hands of Fate.

The Norse world structure is a physical representation of an ongoing battle between order and chaos, with chaos eventually winning, at least for a time. The destruction of the world is set in motion almost from its creation, but the death of one of the Aesir begins the chains of events that quickly lead to Ragnarok. The god Baldr is beloved by the Aesir. Due to a troubling dream that foretells his death, Baldr's mother Frigga sends out her servants to exact promises from every animal, plant, and rock to never harm the doomed god. Cunning Loki discovers that the young plant mistletoe was overlooked and uses it to bring about Baldr's death. The gods hunt for Loki and chain him to a rock, where he is tortured by dripping venom on his face. With the coming of Ragnarok, Loki's children and Loki himself will free themselves and terrorize both Midgard and Asgard. No safety exists in the natural world. No protection will suffice from the heavenly realm. When Ragnarok comes, the underworld will fight against Asgard and they will destroy each other: "the gods will die. The Einherjar will die, men and women and children in Midgard will die, elves and dwarfs will die, giants will die, monsters and creatures of the underworld will die, birds and animals will die. The sun will be dark and there will be no stars in the sky. The earth will sink into the sea" (Crossley-Holland 175). The Norse belief in the inevitability of this destruction and of Fate's words causes their view of the world to be one of mistrust as they recognize the danger and chaos that exists outside their walls.

When the Anglo-Saxons began to write works of literature, they drew from a culture that was not only distanced from the Norse traditions by both time and geography, but also had been converted from pagan Germanic beliefs to the Christian faith. The Anglo-Saxons were drawing from a Germanic tradition associated with, but not directly equivalent to the Norse myths, and thus likely did not bring the Aesir with them from continental Europe. Because Christianity directly preceded literacy, the gods do not play a role in Anglo-Saxon writings. Asgard, Midgard, and Niflheim were not a part of their religion and mythology; however, the contention between light and order and darkness and chaos persists to a significant degree, reworked though it often is into a more Christian belief system. The Germanic worldview is noticeably similar to the Christian in its perspective on the passing of time, the aging of the world, and the eventuality of its destruction. Both views carry, in their own ways, a belief in the threat of the mortal world. These similarities could have made it very easy to convert to the new religion and employ literature for Christian purposes without losing the old traditions. The Old English elegies are able to be both Christian in theme and Germanic in quality. In *Beowulf*, the monster Grendel is both the descendent of the biblical Cain and a dark embodiment of the chaos of the outside world. The sincerity and devotion that Anglo-Saxon writers demonstrate toward their new faith in their poetry is undeniable, but that devotion does not necessitate any abrupt abandonment of long held traditions.

The powerful sense of fatality in Old English literature often ties directly to the natural world. The magic that the Germanic equivalent of the Aesir would have possessed transferred to the natural world of the Anglo-Saxons. For the Anglo-Saxons, nature is predominantly hostile, filled with danger and exile at best, and monsters and dark magic at worst. In the elegies, the focus is on a Christian present when the supernatural is not a concern, but the authors of these

poems still dwell on nature's actively adverse qualities. To step beyond the gates of the known, orderly human dwelling is to enter a merciless environment. While the Celt feels equally comfortable within and without the home, the Anglo-Saxon believes that safety and happiness do not exist outside the familiar walls of the hall.

The Old English elegies exemplify the dichotomy that exists between family, happiness, and a sense of belonging and exile, danger, and the outside world. In Crossley-Holland's translation of the elegies, he introduces them with an emphasis on not only their mournful qualities, "the six so-called Elegies are poems where the topic itself is loss" (46), but also the contrast between the feelings of belonging that come from one's home, family, and lord with the exile that exists when the narrator is forced out into the world: "At the heart of Anglo-Saxon society lay two key relationships. The first was that between a lord and his retainers... The second was the relationship, as it is today, between any man and his loved one... So one of the most unfortunate members of this world (as of any) was the exile, the man who...was sentenced to live out his days wandering from place to place" (46-47). The poem "The Wanderer" is by its very title indicative of someone who has left his home and kinsmen to experience the world outside the hall. Crossley-Holland describes the contrast made in the poem: "the warm joys of the lord-retainer relationship, contrasted with the images of falling sleet and freezing cold, turbulent winds and buildings laid to waste" (47). The narrator of "The Wanderer" mourns the loss of his home and the protection and respect of his lord:

cut off from my country,
 far from my kinsmen, after, long ago,
 dark clods of earth covered my gold-friend;
 I left that place in wretchedness

ploughed the icy waves with winter in my heart. (50)

The descriptions of the home he longs for involves warmth and light and peace: “I sought far and wide / for a treasure-giver, for a man / who would welcome me into his mead-hall, / give me good cheer” (50). The wanderer clings to this image, but when he describes his immediate surroundings, he sees nothing but coldness and hostility: “Sorrow upon sorrow attend / the man who must send time and again / his weary heart over the frozen waves” (51). The wanderer cautions his audience not to rely on the world to provide any security:

A wise man must fathom how eerie it will be
 when all the riches of the world stand waste,
 as now in diverse places in this middle-earth
 walls stand, tugged at by winds
 and hung with hoar-frost, buildings in decay. (52)

The imagery is one of assault on the hall.

As the narrator continues his lament, his words come very close to a description of the Norse Ragnarok. While the hall provides safety from the hostile world, the darkness continues to surround and attack that order and will, the wanderer claims, eventually overcome it:

Thus the Maker of Men laid this world waste
 until the ancient works of the giants stood idle,
 hushed without the hubbub of inhabitants...
 Where has the horse gone? Where the man? Where the giver of gold?
 Where is the feasting-place? And where the pleasures of the hall? ...
 How that time has passed away,
 darkened under the shadow of night as if it had never been. (52)

The narrator presents a grim picture of a world drawing ever closer to its end. Attached to the fatal conclusion of this middle-earth, this Anglo-Saxon Midgard, is the assault of the chaotic darkness of the natural world: “the whole world becomes a wilderness” (52). Wilderness holds no appeal for the Anglo-Saxon hero. Peter Ackroyd describes the perception of the Anglo-Saxons of their world as “an odd, silent and empty England” and one that “haunted the Anglo-Saxon imagination” (72). From the wilderness comes the ice, the wind, the snow. From the wilderness come the monsters. Ackroyd calls it a “waste land scarcely populated and meagrely cultivated, a dark tangled landscape of wolves and boars. So it appears in *Beowulf*, too; the home of the monster race the ‘*mor*’ and the ‘*faestnes*,’ the moor and the fastness where there is frost and darkness” (72). The Germanic warrior stands against these forces, not because he can ultimately overcome them, but because he must: heroism exists in his fearless endurance and his willingness to face an impossible opponent.

“The Wanderer” is one of several works that focus on both exile and its relationship to the sea. While the Celt regards the sea as a means of achieving bliss, the Anglo-Saxon directs his longing backward at the home he was forced to leave, rather than toward the grim world that awaits him. Similar to “The Wanderer,” although much more religious in its message, “The Seafarer” offers another picture of an exile on the raging seas. The first description the narrator of this poem gives is of his place on the ship and of his dangerous, unfriendly surroundings: “Wild were the waves when I often took my turn, / the arduous night-watch, standing at the prow / while the boat tossed near the rocks. My feet / were afflicted by cold, fettered in frost” (Crossley-Holland 53). Like the wanderer, the seafarer equates this journey on the sea with exile and with separation from his kinsmen and the place where he belongs: “I, careworn and cut off from my kinsmen, / have as an exile endured a winter on the icy sea ... / hung round with icicles;

hail showers flew” (53). The seafarer offers a heart-rending description of his utter loneliness. He finds himself surrounded by desolate oceans and crying birds but has no surety and no satisfaction in his life. Far from conveying a sense of adventure in his travels, the seafarer finds only bitterness and disappointment in his journey. No wonder or fascination accompanies his observations of “the rolling of the waves” and “the whale’s domain” (54). The message of “The Seafarer” cautions awareness of the insecurity the natural world presents as opposed to the surety of God’s heaven: “So it is that the joys / of the Lord inspire me more than this dead life, / ephemeral on earth I have no faith / that the splendours of this earth will survive for ever” (55). Both “The Seafarer” and “The Wanderer” offer a picture of life on the sea that is very Germanic in its cold, dark descriptions. This view of the sea, which is so representative of the Anglo-Saxon sentiments regarding the natural world, is in direct opposition to the Celtic perspective. The Celt looks across the sea and imagines the kingdom of the god Manannan, the palace of the fairy queen Niamh, a place of beauty and immortality, a place of endless possibilities. The Anglo-Saxon looks not ahead so much as behind at what he has been forced to leave. His surroundings are cruel, merciless; the sea is desolate, never beautiful, offering no prospects of excitement or joy, only misery.

In the epic story of *Beowulf*, the sea reappears and continues to exemplify danger rather than wonder. In this poem, magic exists as it does not in the elegies. This is a world much more closely connected to its Scandinavian ancestors in both time, place, and theme. However, the *Beowulf* poet does not lose sight of the real world in which he places his hero. The audience of this poem knows where *Beowulf* comes from and where King Hrothgar’s hall might be found. The *Beowulf* poet draws back on the heroic past of his people, setting his story on the continent, rather than in Anglo-Saxon England. This past includes monsters and supernatural feats, but

everything is placed in a recognizable natural world. The sea offers not only the hostility of the natural, but also the supernatural. Ackroyd describes it as “the image of privation and isolation, even of hell itself, ‘that bottomless swell beneath the misty gloom.’” (274). Beowulf approaches the sea as an opponent; he is a hero rather than an exile. Beowulf explains his swimming contest to the doubting Unferth. His descriptions are filled with images similar to those found in “The Seafarer” and “The Wanderer,” of the dangerous sea:

So for five nights we stayed together in the sea,
 until the tides tore us apart,
 the foaming water, the freezing cold,
 day darkening into night – until the north wind,
 that savage warrior, rounded against us
 Rough were the waves. (87)

Added to this familiar picture of a cold, raging, northern sea, Beowulf faces the monsters of the deep: “A cruel ravager / dragged me down to the sea-bed, a fierce monster / held me tightly in its grasp” (87). In Charles Kennedy’s introduction to his translation of *Beowulf*, he suggests that even Grendel’s name is associated with water, citing Lawrence, who connects the word *grendel* with the Old English word *grund*: “ground, bottom, or watery depths” (xxi). Kennedy says that the monster Grendel is likely derived from the waterfall troll found in Scandinavian mythology (xxi), which makes it unsurprising that Beowulf would later face Grendel’s dam in a cave beneath a lake. In this lake, Hrothgar’s warriors see “sea-dragons swimming in the lake, / and also water-demons, lying on cliff-ledges, / monsters and serpents of the same kind, / as often, in the morning, molest ships on the sail-road” (109). Beowulf faces sea monsters as well as Grendel’s dam, but ultimately triumphs over these threats. He is all the more courageous for

being willing to leap into the water without hesitation, and all the more extraordinary for rising out of that water the victor.

Beowulf is filled with detailed descriptions of the natural world. The images are so dark and terrifying that they only draw more attention to Beowulf's heroism. Grendel himself embodies the natural world in direct opposition to the mortal dwelling. The *Beowulf* poet precedes the initial confrontation between Grendel and the warriors of Hrothgar's hall with a description of both the monster and the king and his hall. For Heorot, the poet offers bright and beautiful words: "So those warrior Danes lived joyful lives, / in complete harmony" (76). When Grendel enters the hall, he finds the warriors "well-feasted, fast asleep, dead to worldly sorrow, / man's sad destiny" (77). Heorot offers the warriors a temporary escape from the darkness. Like Arthur's palace, Hrothgar's hall brings his warriors together for feasts, merry-making, order, and peace. Unfortunately, such a beacon of light attracts the jealousy of darkness.

Grendel embodies a supernatural rendering of the outside world. He is "the brutish demon who lived in darkness" and he cannot stand to hear "the din of merry-making / inside the hall" (76). The poet offers two associations with Grendel. The first is nature itself. Grendel is the "notorious prowler of the borderland, ranger of the moors, / the fen and the fastness" (76). He represents the sort of creature that awaits the Germanic hero outside the walls. This association between monster and nature turns nature as a whole into the monster's dwelling. The heroes have their hall. Grendel has the moors. The second element of Grendel's nature is his descent from the biblical Cain. This connection ostensibly offers little more than a Christian element in a Germanic poem; however, Cain represents an especially horrific fate that is all too familiar in the Anglo-Saxon mindset. Cain is the first true exile. Just as the seafarer and the

wanderer lose the sense of belonging to a lord and must travel the harsh world alone, the Beowulf poet describes Cain's fate:

the Creator
sent him into exile, far from mankind,
because of his crime.
He could no longer
approach the throne of grace. (76)

The Beowulf poet claims that "In him all evil-doers find their origin, / monsters and elves and spiteful spirits of the dead" (76). The poet binds the exile of Cain to Grendel, linking the natural world with banishment from both the heavenly Lord and earthly kings and with the realm of monsters.

Grendel's invasion of Heorot is vaguely reminiscent of the Green Knight's appearance before Arthur. The supernatural appears suddenly amidst the conviviality of an orderly, mortal kingdom and upsets the peace therein. Grendel's method of destroying the well-being of Heorot's inhabitants is certainly more brutal than the Green Knight's, but each forces the hero of the tale to emerge from the hall and face the monsters of the world in order to confront the challenge the presented and to overcome. First, Grendel draws Beowulf away from the land of the Geats where he faces Grendel in abandoned Heorot. After Beowulf overcomes the initial threat, Grendel's mother forces him farther into the natural world, beneath the lake, and exacts even more of his courage and ability before he defeats her. Beowulf returns Heorot to its lord and finds his way home again. His triumph is complete, and at this point, if it were to parallel *Sir Gawain*, the story would end. However, relentless fate and encroaching darkness demand another encounter for Beowulf with a dragon. Like Grendel and his mother, the dragon is a part

of the Other seeking to invade the mortal world. No benign creatures appear in this story. The dragon is unreasoning evil. Unfortunately for Beowulf, he cannot overcome nature a third time and emerge unscathed. The story ends with the dragon defeated, but also with Beowulf's death. He receives no mercy from the natural world.

In *Gawain*, Arthur's palace is a place of feasting and merry-making, a medieval equivalent of the Germanic Heorot: "With all the delights of the world they dwelled together, / The most celebrated knights to recognize Christ himself, / And the loveliest ladies who have ever enjoyed their lives, / And the most courteous king who ever controlled a court" (50-53). Into this convivial scene comes the Green Knight, wild and dangerous. He is a mixture of the familiar, "wholly human" the narrator says (141), but also "half a giant" (140) and, most notably, "he acted like a thing bewitched / And was, head to toe, ink green" (149-150). Some contention has emerged about what role the Green Knight is meant to play in this piece. Alan Markman takes one position that claims the Green Knight to be neither supernatural, nor particularly magical. He is merely Morgan le Fey's "instrument of magic" and a foil for Gawain's virtues (579). On the other hand, the Green Knight exhibits not only a wide array of magical attributes, but also a pleasure and degree of contentedness in his position. His actions reflect a being who is older than a witch's spell and more connected with the forests in which he lives than a temporary state would imply. For this reason, other scholars have suggested an innately supernatural essence to the Green Knight, despite his later explanation of his shape shifting. The roots of the Green Knight and the beheading game have been tied to a variety of stories, many Celtic, the earliest literary piece being *Bricriu's Feast*, and several being French, including, most importantly, the *Livre de Caradoc*. In *Bricriu's Feast* the mortal hero Cù Chùlainn faces Terror in an exchange of blows. Terror spares him on the third for his courage and Cù Chùlainn proves his courage.

Caradoc proves even more similar to *Sir Gawain*, and is more than likely one of the Gawain poet's inspirations. Arthur is king, but Caradoc is the knight who faces the mysterious knight dressed in green. This knight does not explain where he comes from or who he is and he remains nameless. He manifests many attributes of the fairy knight who wears the finest clothes, as Benson describes them, "adorned with a belt of rich silk... trimmed with gold and many fine pearls" (19), and rides into the palace to issue his challenge, disappearing and reappearing only to fulfill the requirements of the game. This is no mortal knight. Likewise, the Green Knight of *Sir Gawain* exits the poem in the same mysterious manner: "the gent in inky green / Slips off to a place untold" (2477-78) and he is heard of no more.

Obvious ties have also been made between the Green Knight and the Celtic Green Man. George Kittredge's analysis of *Sir Gawain* says that while many influences went into the creation of the Green Knight, the obvious nature deity qualities should not be ignored (195). While the previous beheading game myths do not employ a wood deity as their opponent, the Gawain poet has already proved his ability to adapt old stories to new traditions when he fuses myth, history, and religion into his Arthurian poem. The Green Knight's role in the poem should not be explained away as a simple mortal with temporary magical powers. His position in the poem offers a powerful contrast between the orderly mortal world and the dangers of the Other.

The Green Knight gains even more of a connection to nature as he proves to be the instrument in drawing Sir Gawain out of Camelot and into the forests. Sir Gawain's journey is marked by the loneliness and dangers of a hostile natural world, equivalent to the Germanic, more than the Celtic: "The knight took many pathways strange / in terrain both bleak and mean; / And his visage suffered many a change / Before that chapel was seen" (709-712). He has no friend, no security, and no safety until he reaches Bertilak's hall. When Sir Gawain finally

reaches the Green Chapel and kneels before the Green Knight, nature has, in effect, triumphed over the knight. Like Beowulf, Sir Gawain faces his end at the hands of one of nature's monsters. Only at the final moment does the Green Knight reveal that Gawain has, through his honor and his courage, and despite his moment of weakness, won the battle. The Green Knight proves to be a benign rather than a hostile natural force. Markman points out that Morgan le Fay is the true instrument of magic behind the tale, rather than the Green Knight himself: "The marvelous is, of course, indispensable. It informs and shapes the entire narrative. From the moment the Green Knight enters Arthur's hall until Gawain returns safely to the same hall the action of the romance is severely conditioned by the influence of Morgan le Fay's magic" (580). Sir Gawain's physical battle might be with the Green Knight, but his true quest is to defeat the opposing magic of Morgan. By ultimately honoring his promise, Sir Gawain defeats Morgan's plot to disprove the worthiness of Arthur's knights. He overcomes the magic of the Other that is forever seeking to destroy Arthur's kingdom.

The tale of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* may not be original in some of its basic content, drawing as it does from such works as *Bricriu's Feast* and *Caradoc*; however, Kittredge argues that despite these outlying influences, an Englishness characterizes this poem that sets it apart from any literature its poet may have drawn on for inspiration (4). This English essence provides the grim and dangerous path that Sir Gawain must travel before reaching the Green Chapel. The English Sir Gawain is the heroic knight who embraces reality with courageous resignation. As Markman says, Gawain is not simply "a symbolic knight in shining armor, but a man" (586). He is no supernatural hero. He is the best and greatest knight of Arthur's court, the ideal, but grounded in a reality that gives him a solid presence and appealing quality that the purely supernatural must always lack. The audience relates to the English knight, to his trials

and tribulations, and to success, tempered as it is with real human failings. The Germanic tradition underlying the medieval poem allows for this sobering, grounding quality. The dangers are more present because they are in a real world filled with magic, rather than a purely magical world apart from the real.

The darkly dangerous natural world brings the Otherworld closer to perception. Both elements play a part in the masterful construction of *Sir Gawain*. Markman describes the poem as a “fundamental mixture of realistic detail and marvelous occurrence” (575). The invasion of the Green Knight in Arthur’s hall signals danger and Otherness in a negative sense, as does Sir Gawain’s initial departure from Arthur’s palace. Like the Anglo-Saxon hero, Sir Gawain leaves because he must, not because he longs to experience the world. When his trial is completed, he wastes no time returning to Arthur, even at the expense of rudeness toward Bertilak and his aunt, Morgan le Fay, for refusing their hospitality. During the course of the adventure, however, the poem transitions away from the darkness into an Otherworld that is wonderful as well as wild. Bertilak’s hunting expeditions are beautiful, adventurous, and exciting, reminiscent of the Celtic love of the hunt. The hunt positions mortal against nature, but in playful games rather than hostile encounters. Furthermore, Bertilak himself represents the kindly side of the Green Knight. A monster of the Anglo-Saxon moors has no redeeming qualities. The Green Knight is initially cruel and merciless, exacting a deadly price in his unfair game. Bertilak, on the other hand, is the convivial host who is still a part of the natural world, surrounded as he is by the forests of the hunt, but who treats Sir Gawain as a special guest and offers him another game, one which is a test of honor as well as courage. Sir Gawain’s failure is his own fault, not the Green Knight’s; yet, the Knight is merciful nonetheless. Sir Gawain encounters the magical world, but this world

offers him life, not death. He is able to return to Arthur's hall with his head firmly on his shoulders.

The magic of Arthurian legend imbues the tales with a sense of wonder akin to that found in Celtic literature. Celtic magic allows the Lady of the Lake to offer Arthur his enchanted sword, Excalibur from the mystic waters of the lake. Celtic mythology provides the boat that carries Arthur to Avalon. The magic of the supernatural world presents an indispensable element of Arthurian literature that draws the stories out of the ordinary and into Otherworld. But this Otherworld, as interwoven as it is with the natural world, cannot give Arthur and his knights the grounding they need to connect with real danger, real sorrow, and reality itself. The Celtic hero belongs in nature, interacting with the magical creatures that embody nature's beauty, danger, and caprice. Arthurian literature has something that these Celtic stories lack: a center. King Arthur is the axis around which every tale of questing knights and courtly intrigues revolves. Everything proceeds from him and returns to him. Arthur and Camelot offer the knights of the Round Table a place of belonging. To leave Arthur's court is to face the dangers of a land ungoverned by Arthur's wisdom. The knight goes on an adventure because he has enough courage to leave the convivial order and security of Arthur's hall, to achieve his goal, and to return with stories of his success. The magical world interacts with, but does not engulf Arthur's kingdom. Camelot is in a real England, infused with magic in such a way that it becomes more real, rather than less; it is an idealized kingdom, but a believable one, where the sense of wonder is tempered with the threat of darkness. Camelot stands on the edge of its destruction and that poignant combination of beauty and danger lifts the audience into a greater world, made all the more real because it must one day end.

Chapter Three:

A King in his Castle, Knights on their Quests

In the Arthurian legends, the mythic-historical period draws the reader into a world that is timeless, yet tragically impermanent, and the fantastic, yet familiar landscape provides a setting inundated with magic, but grounded in geographical reality. However, the stories are not necessarily about the time element or magical world; they are about the king and his knights, the ladies and the courts, the battles and the adventures. The framework constructed by the combination of timelessness and transience, and Otherworld and natural world, provide a background for the action and drama of the legends. When a knight appears in the Arthurian world, he is immediately a certain kind of knight. Interacting with this world and assuming this particular set of values both necessitate a particular sort of hero, an Anglo-Celtic warrior who can thrive within such a cultural fusion.

The definitive event for the Arthurian knight is the adventure, the riding out from Camelot in order to obtain some object, achieve some goal, or rescue some captive. The knight who succeeds in his endeavor proves to the world that he belongs in Arthur's court. As the Arthurian world becomes established as the greatest period in history or myth, and Arthur's knights become known as the embodiments of every ideal: courage, honor, and courtly virtue, the knights bear the weight of constantly having something to prove. Sir Gawain must face the Green Knight and demonstrate not only that he is worthy of being called a knight, but that the fame of Arthur's knights as a company is well earned. Each adventure added to the canon has its own worth, but the exploits of the knights must serve a greater purpose than as pure demonstrations of momentary bravery. As is so often the case with Arthurian literature, the stories demand more of the knights than any non-Arthurian tale might. Arthur's knights must

surpass expectation and imagination. The tales offer more than light-hearted adventure; a conjoining of the Celtic and Anglo-Saxon qualities of heroism, courage, and loyalty raise the mere adventure to a far greater standard.

Both Celtic and Anglo-Saxon literature present impressive images of heroes facing fantastic challenges, unbelievable opponents, and impossible tasks. The difference between Celt and Anglo-Saxon is not in a presence or lack of courage. The two cultures present their heroes as ideals of their societies. However, the external motivations for the adventures and the internal development of the heroes are often widely different. These distinct cultural values manifest in the Arthurian knight's venture in the forms of the quest and the trial. The heroic adventure of the knight might be a Celtic quest, a voluntary challenge for a visible prize, or it might be more of an Anglo-Saxon trial, a test of the knight's inner strength and virtue. Both quest and trial serve the joint purpose of establishing the knights of Camelot as the greatest knights in fact or fiction; however, each offers its own quality to the adventure and requires something different from the knight.

The questing knight is the daring hero whose purpose is to seek glory as well as honor. He interacts with the natural world willingly and fearlessly, forward-looking as he searches out his prize. The quest is a dangerous game that must be won; the prize is most often external, a physical object to prove the knight's heroism and success. The knight returns, not as a survivor of a temporary exile, but as a conqueror of his chosen foe. The pure quest offers little self-improvement for the knight. He only proves what he already knows: he is a knight worthy of Arthur's court; he lays claim to the Arthurian ideal. The questing knight is often embraced by a Celtic world. In this world, the danger is present and threatening, but not overwhelming. The knight willingly and actively searches out his opponent, not by necessity, but because he enjoys

the challenge. No longing for the court left behind plagues the questing knight. True to the Celtic mindset, the natural world is familiar; it may be magical and unpredictable, but it is not alien. The prize is worth the danger, and only when he has succeeded will the knight return. While the quest may often exact some small price from the knight, perhaps an injury, it rarely requires a change in the knight's nature or any spiritual development. The quest is a purely external manifestation of heroism, important for the image of Arthur's court, but of no deep or abiding import to the knight himself.

The trial is a testing of the strength and endurance of the knight; however, unlike the quest, the trial often demands more than the knight realized he would be asked to give. The knight is forced to develop and improve himself in order to succeed in his trial. The prize is not necessarily a physical object. For the knight, the true prize is becoming a greater man and a greater knight than he was before he set out. The trial comes to the knight, whether he is seeking it or not, and he must undergo the test. Failure might mean death; it will likely negatively affect the image of Arthur's kingdom; but it will certainly be a deeply personal disappointment for the knight. The light-hearted nature of a quest, so much more in keeping with the thrilling, magical world of the Celt, is exchanged for a more somber landscape. The trial is an utterly and essentially Anglo-Saxon element of the hero's journey. For the Anglo-Saxon, venturing out into the world is no game and no simple display of physical prowess for the gaining of a prize. For this warrior, the prize is life, and not necessarily his own life; the trial might be on behalf of others, and his life is a worthy sacrifice for a nobler cause. The hero of Anglo-Saxon literature undergoes a trial rather than a quest, and his goal is to overcome and, if he can, to return. In the Arthurian tales, the knight is not always leaving Camelot of his own spontaneous will; he is not always searching for excitement and personal gain; he is not always able to return from his

endeavor unchanged. The journey is necessarily solitary, even lonely, because the knight must be the one to examine himself and better himself in order to succeed, and he must pass the test alone.

As Arthur's knights ride from one adventure to the next, aspects of both quest and trial influence their exploits. Each type of venture is a necessary part of the knight's identity and his place in Arthur's kingdom. Arthur himself must be the epitome of knighthood as well as kingliness, embodying every ideal of his men as well in addition to a set of virtues that are his alone. He is both a part of the circle of Round Table knights and above them, a solitary figure in an established hierarchy. Arthur's position in Camelot is crucial to his knights' motivation and purpose in their quests and trials. The knight is tied to his king, bonded by the loyalty of camaraderie and as a vassal before his liege lord. The knight rides out, not as a singular hero, but as a representation of an entire kingdom, a reflection of Arthur and his court that the rest of the world will judge and either find sufficient or find wanting.

The questing knight is influenced by the Celtic hero. The Celtic warrior confronts the world with a fully developed and entirely self-sufficient sense of courage and ability. A true Celtic hero can venture out into the world and be victorious over his enemy without any need for development on his part. The Celtic hero is comfortable in the world of quests and adventures. When he is questing, he finds a sense of belonging in that quest. The prize drives him onward, rather than the thought of going home. While not every venture is successful, a general sense of optimism drives the Celtic hero forward. The prize is worth the danger, and if he is as great as he believes himself to be, he will succeed. The Celtic quest proves the existing mettle of the hero through daring adventures that only he could possibly undergo and accomplish.

This Celtic form of adventure finds a parallel in the sport of the hunt. The hunt is a contest and a challenge. It is a social event, voluntarily undertaken by a group of skilled heroes, and the goal is to attain a prize. The hunt has no sense of true finality. One hunt can easily be followed by another. Each hunt is its own adventure, its own game. The hunt might be dangerous and might require a great deal from the participants, but their abilities are only tested so far as they have already developed. A hunt requires no inner development. The Celtic quest often has these same elements as the hunt. Celtic heroes treat the challenges they face as hunting expeditions in search of a worthy prize. Pertinent to Arthurian studies is the story of “Culhwch and Olwen.” Culhwch’s quest is for a wife. His opponent is Olwen’s father, the giant Ysbaddaden. The entirety of the tale is the series of challenges standing between Culhwch and his prize. The final line of the story reads: “Thus did Culhwch obtain Olwen daughter of Ysbaddaden Chief-giant” (157). The story is about the hunt, and the appeal of the tale lies in how Arthur’s warriors achieve each task and ultimately gain Culhwch his bride.

The first trait of the hunt that appears in Culhwch’s story is the social nature of the quest. When Culhwch realizes that if he is going to obtain Olwen, he must first face the giant, he does not ride directly to Ysbaddaden’s home and approach the giant himself, as one might expect of a capable, courageous hero. Instead, he rides to Arthur. Despite the fact that his step-mother’s curse is on him and it is his specific mission to procure Olwen, the quest holds no demand for a solitary journey. His father immediately advises him to ““Go to Arthur, who is your cousin”” (123). No shame exists in gathering a proud company of warriors to join the hero on the quest. The prize is Culhwch’s, but the hunt belongs to his companions. This inherently social element of the Celtic quest finds its roots beyond just the literature of the Celts. Chadwick mentions the importance of kindred to the Irish: “the most striking feature of the native institutions of Ireland

is their apparently non-individual character... The 'kindred' stood or fell together" (113-114). The Celtic heroes embraced the camaraderie, forging bonds of loyalty amongst each other from childhood. The heroes of Celtic literature, while often rising above their fellows in skill and fearlessness, are generally placed within a group. They venture forth on their quests together. The fellowship of a company is extremely important. The quest does not require solitude. A hunt is more entertaining in company than it is alone. Attaining the actual prize might be the responsibility of the hero, but he is accompanied by his fellow warriors. Thus is Culhwch able to promise to meet each of the giant's excessive list of demands for his daughter's hand, and yet fulfill those demands through the skills of Arthur's company.

The collective quest appears more often in the Welsh tales than in the Irish. The Welsh hero Manawyddan travels with Pryderi, Caswallawn, and Rhiannon in the story of "Manawyddan the Son of Llyr" from the *Mabinogion*. Pryderi had just given the Cantrevs to Manawyddan, along with his mother Rhiannon's hand in marriage. As they ride through the land, they realize that it is strangely desolate. The seven Cantrevs of Dyved had been enchanted and Manawyddan finally forces the one responsible to break the enchantment. With a level of familiarity typical to the Celts, the four travelers are perfectly comfortable in both palace and in the wilderness. They need only each other's society: "And friendship grew among the four of them, so that none wanted to be without the others either day or night" (77). While the challenges these four face are neither terrifying, nor overly threatening, they do provide an opportunity to prove Manawyddan's ability and cleverness. Rhiannon and Pryderi both fail to end the enchantment while Manawyddan happens upon the solution. Even in the social quest, one hero generally rises above the others and proves his capability.

Taliesin's poem "The Spoils of Annwn" presents another Welsh rendering of the quest that involves an adventure in order to achieve a prize. Once again, the hero is singularly named, but he is one of a company. In this case, the hero is Arthur himself. Taliesin makes it clear from the outset of the quest that Arthur did not venture into Annwn alone: "Three shiploads of Prydwen we went to it; except for seven, none returned from Caer Siddi" (qtd. in Wilhelm 20). This adventure is far more brutal, dark, and dangerous than even the series of challenges presented by the giant Ysbaddaden. The voyage seems to hold a joint prize, both to rescue the captive Gwair and to obtain the magical cauldron that restores the dead to life. The obscurity of the texts does not give a certain answer as to whether or not Arthur and his men succeeded despite their losses. The implication that Taliesin gives of this "disastrous visit" (20) is that it was not a successful quest. However, the point remains that neither Arthur nor Taliesin nor any of the company of men attempted the journey alone. Arthur stands at the head of a group of warriors, and whether he achieves his prize or not is tied to the effort of his entire company.

In the story of "Culhwch and Olwen," the final challenge for Olwen's hand, interestingly enough, is an actual hunt. Arthur's warriors must run to ground the infamous Twrch Trwyth, the chief of boars. The hunt that takes place is no ordinary chase. The great boar destroys everything its path and kills anyone who attempts to catch it: "'Twrch Trwyth has killed many of my men,' said Arthur to the warriors of this Island, 'and by the might of my men he shall not go into Cornwall while I am alive!'" (155). The hunt can easily be dangerous, even lethal. Likewise, the quest, while essentially a game between hero and opponent, is a thrilling battle of courage and wits, not to be treated lightly simply because its goal is to win a prize. Death is often as real a threat as it is in battle, and the glory won from the quest is equal to the honor achieved on the battlefield.

The classical writers often make note of the warring nature of the Celts and their fierce love of battle. However, Chadwick makes the point that “the ‘warlike’ tendencies of the Celts, which appear to have been thought significant by classical writers, might be better classified as ‘non-essential’... This type of warfare had characteristics more akin to those of hunting” (131). The Celtic fighting spirit translates well in literature into the small forays against single enemies: “this ‘non-essential’ form of warfare was considered more of a sport than true warfare, despite the very real risk of death for those concerned in it” (132). For the Celt, fighting other tribes or kingdoms is a necessary part of life, not only because of the world of which he is a part, but because proving himself in battle is an essential element of his culture. The hero of Celtic literature does not move from one battle to the next in state of weary acceptance; rather, he thrives on each encounter. In the Celtic quest, this mindset brings to the adventure both a high level of excitement to the quest, but also a sense of continuity. The series of quests might continue so long as the hero lives because each quest is its own foray and no quest is the culminating event of a hero’s career. This quality of the quest is most apparent in the stories of the recurring heroes. The *Mabinogion* gives only one story of Culhwch. Finding Olwen may well be the culmination of his life’s adventures and there is no way to know if any other stories of Culhwch were ever told. The story offers more to the collective saga of Arthur than it does as an individual story of the Welsh hero Culhwch. Other stories in the *Mabinogion*, those of Pwyll and Pryderi, offer more series of adventures. The Irish cycles provide two heroes, Cù Chùlainn and Fionn, who recur in a multitude of short tales.

In the Ultonian Cycle of the *Tain Bo Cuailgne*, the famous Irish warrior Cù Chùlainn stands out as an uncommonly singular hero. Unlike the companies who ride together in the *Mabinogion* or Fionn and his Fianna in the Ossianic Cycle of the *Tain*, Cù Chùlainn is most

often found alone in his adventures. Cù Chùlainn is unique because he seems to even reject the companionship that the normal Celtic hero would embrace. While he forms close friendships, even those seem destined to fail him, notably Ferdia, whom he is forced to kill in combat. Cù Chùlainn's singularity makes him exceptional among Celtic heroes. He does, however, ascribe to many of the other attributes of the Celtic quest. Similar to Culhwch, Cù Chùlainn's first prize is a bride whom he is forced to win through combat. He goes not to Arthur or to another king for aid, but to the island of the warrior queen Skatha to learn combat. He meets several of his greatest friends there, but ultimately he stands alone. As with so many Celtic heroes, Cù Chùlainn is able to perform feats that no one else could achieve, some of which Rolleston narrates, such as crossing an uncrossable bridge, wielding the infamous weapon the Gae Bolg, and defeating the warrior princess Aifa (141-142). After he has obtained Emer, he moves on to the next quest, then to his next. Cù Chùlainn's quests do not offer any sense of finality for the hero. He continues to accomplish one feat after another until he dies, ever the hero and ever a complete and developed warrior. Once he has left Skatha's school, he has no need to improve himself at all; he remains for the rest of his life in the pinnacle of his heroic youth, the perfect warrior. The hero who dies by the spear of an enemy is the same hero who won Emer, who killed Ferdia, and who had until that day defeated every enemy who faced him. The Celtic hero must prove himself sufficient for each successive quest. If he was insufficient when he began the adventure, he will ultimately fail. The quest does not require the hero to learn from his mistakes; he must simply be sure that none of his mistakes prove fatal.

Fionn mac Cumhaill, like Cù Chùlainn, achieved extraordinary abilities as a youth and, once he reached adulthood, would develop no further. He would not need to. When Fionn arrives at Tara, he is placed in charge of the company of warriors known as the Fianna. As

Rolleston says, “Finn became Captain of the Fianna of Erin, and ruled them till he died” (198). He would never be the single hero that Cù Chùlainn is. Fionn and his Fianna are a company and take part in quests together. Fionn has sometimes been compared to Arthur. He is the leader of a notable company of heroes, similar to the Arthurian knights. He is part of a love triangle with his fiancée Grania and one of his warriors named Dermot, quite similar to the story of Lancelot and Guinevere. He and his Fianna are esteemed throughout Ireland for their abilities and valor; as Rolleston says, “the best of them became like [Fionn] in valour and gentleness and generosity. Each of them loved the repute of his comrades more than his own, and each would say that for all noble qualities there was no man in the breadth of the world worthy to be thought of beside Finn” (203). Fionn and his Fianna encounter the Danaans, who are now the Fair Folk dwelling beneath Ireland, as well as giants, enchanted fawns, and magical wells. Each adventure is a singular quest, requiring the wits of Fionn and the Fianna to defeat the enemy or gain the prize.

The stories of Fionn and the Fianna take place after those of Cù Chùlainn and the tone is markedly different. Cù Chùlainn lives in a world still walked by deities and entirely inundated by old magic. Fionn’s world is much different, intermingling old religion with new as St Patrick appears and the deities remove themselves almost entirely to the Otherworld. Thus, it is not surprising that Fionn is a more human hero than Cù Chùlainn, one who grows old instead of remaining young. Nevertheless, Fionn’s adventures retain the sense of being a series of distinct quests that begin on a random day while Fionn is hunting, feasting, or traveling with his warriors. They pursue the quest to its end and, upon its completion, presumably return to their hunting, feasting, and traveling until another quest offers itself. These quests are thrilling and inspiring because the heroes represent the greatest warriors of their time and the adventures are

set in a timeless world that accommodates a multitude of successive endeavors that need not ever end so long as the heroes live.

While the Celt rides willingly out in search of glory and victory, the Anglo-Saxon hero is drawn into the world by necessity whether he is ready or not. The Anglo-Saxon adventure is a trial, not a quest, and the lonely hero must examine himself and know his own failings in order to better approach his opponent. The remaining Old English literature has only one well defined image of the Anglo-Saxon hero. *Beowulf* is the epitome of Anglo-Saxon heroism. Because *Beowulf* is the only complete example of the epic hero in Old English texts, designating his adventures as the definitive Anglo-Saxon trial is rather forced; but the other Old English texts available, including the elegies, and Anglo-Saxon culture, provide some insight into the values that the Anglo-Saxons placed on certain ideals. *Beowulf* exemplifies a specific type of warrior and his story carries the attributes of a very different sort of adventure, one that requires something else from him than a Celtic quest would have. *Beowulf's* trial is the predecessor of the Arthurian's knight's test of heroism and knighthood; and just as *Beowulf* must stand alone and face his monsters in order to become the ultimate hero, so the Arthurian knight is not necessarily the greatest knight he can possibly be until after he has faced both outer enemies and inner failings and overcome them both.

The essentially Germanic culture of the Anglo-Saxons was born of a somber, severe environment. Anderson aptly describes their literature as emerging from "a damp climate, in raw sea-driving winds, with more than a happy share of foggy, overcast days in which sunlight too often shone feebly or was lost altogether. This literature, in all its forms, is inclined to speak but little of the all too brief northern summer; instead it is cast in the mood of autumn and winter, to which spring comes but slowly if at all" (42-43). Not only did the Germanic tribes face a harsh

landscape and even harsher weather, but they were also under constant threat from the surrounding tribes. Even after their invasion of Britain, they carried old mindsets and outlooks with them. Like the Celts, constant fighting was a part of life, but the excitement of battle was tempered by a darker preoccupation with the inevitability of death. The Germanic social structure, while lending itself to constant feuding, also caused the Germanic people to be very aware of the threat of chaos. Crawford places the development from a much more loosely constructed society to a more hierarchical social structure in the seventh century, at which point a class of rulers arose and the focus of the community turned increasingly inward toward a central ruling figure (57-58). Lawrence, however, adds that these Germanic societies remained loosely grouped into small kingdoms with very little strength or centrality compared to later kingdoms. As a result, these tribes were often destroyed by one another. This constantly threatening environment made the position of the king all the more important. The king was a warleader and administrator, but he was also a symbol of centrality greatly needed by the community (49). The Germanic people could find a sense of security to offset the constant tribal warring in the establishment of both king and hall. Chaos becomes an entity represented by the outside and the dangers of the Other, whether it be monster or mortal enemy. Order exists within the hall.

Having a king gives the tribe a strength and an ability to withstand the outer dangers. Thus, when Beowulf dies, the lament is not simply for a beloved lord, but also for a loss of security: "I expect the Swedes to attack us / as soon as they hear our lord is lifeless" (149-150). Losing the king is akin to losing that security and order. The king's importance to the survival of the society made the warrior's continued allegiance a crucial element of that society, as Anderson says, "*Beowulf* depicts the loyalty of warrior to chieftain; of freeman, earl, and churl to their king – a whole-souled devotion to which the Anglo-Saxon was ready to dedicate his life"

(64). The king represents the core values of the warrior, everything he for which he would willingly give his life.

This centrality of the king and hall is exemplified in *Beowulf* with King Hrothgar, and later with Beowulf himself. Halverson describes the opening scene of *Beowulf* as an establishment of this centrality in the Anglo-Saxon world: “The hall [Heorot] embodies all the good things of this world; it represents the principle of harmony: everything is in order. At the center of the center is the King, Hrothgar... He is the source of food, drink, and treasure. And he is the protector of his people” (594). While the Anglo-Saxon hall was no medieval castle, the *Beowulf* poet is careful to emphasize that Heorot exceeds every other hall of its time; it embodies in abundance every virtue of a good hall. Just as Camelot stands out among the other kingdoms of Arthur’s world, Heorot is the best of its kind. It is an ideal hall, worthy of a great king’s presence and all the more offensive to a creature of chaos and darkness like Grendel. Having an established leader and home shapes the warrior’s mindset on his expeditions; he is going out from a certain place and returning to it. Loyalty impels him forward, but also draws him back.

The Anglo-Saxon certainly possessed a desire to fight equivalent to the Celt’s. However, his courage manifests in a different manner than the Celt’s bravery, and his ideals for the hero are exemplified not in group battles, but in the testing of a single warrior’s ability. The Celt’s quest is communal; the Anglo-Saxon’s trial is isolated. The distinction between these two types of adventures is tied directly to the source of courage in each warrior. The Celtic hero is on a hunt and seeking a prize, courageous because he fights every opponent between him and his goal and proves his mettle by acquiring it through his skills and wit. His friends ride with him both for the joy of companionship and to come to his aid as needed; he stands out among them, the

best of a great company of heroes. The Anglo-Saxon warrior, too, exceeds his peers, a hero among heroes, but he has a different mission and a different resolution to his adventure. Battles might often bring the Anglo-Saxon warriors out in force, but the ideal hero stands out because he ventures forth not in a company, but alone, and his victory is entirely solitary. His courage is in his willingness to face an enemy that his companions either cannot or will not face with him. His heroism emerges when his journey tests the limits of his strength and bravery, and forces him to become more than he was before. The Anglo-Saxon warrior must, in the course of his trial, come to know himself in order to become a true hero.

The Anglo-Saxon world is not naturally convivial, nor conducive to hunts and games. The disparity between the hall and nature emphasizes the darkness outside and the light within. Crawford mentions the Venerable Bede's use of the hall metaphor to describe the religion of the unconverted Anglo-Saxons, demonstrating how strongly it weighs on their cultural consciousness: "For a pagan, life was like the passage of a bird out of a storm, into the warmth of a hall, and then back out into the darkness again, not knowing where it had come from or where it was going to" (55). The Anglo-Saxon hero would be far less likely to willingly ride out to seek a glorious prize, a cauldron or beautiful maiden, for no other purpose than because it would be a challenge to do so. The incentive for the Anglo-Saxon trial is often an immanent threat that demands resolution. Defeating Grendel, Grendel's mother, and the dragon are not pastimes for Beowulf. These fights are necessary actions on behalf of Hrothgar's people and his own and on behalf of the society that he and his allies uphold. As Lawrence says, "To him [these fights] afford occasion not only for heroic achievements, and for the protection of suffering mankind, but also for the defence of the settled orderly happiness of the civilized state. It was the duty of a sovereign and of those who would uphold human sovereignty to meet and destroy [the enemy]"

(131). In a society of small kingdoms that are constantly on the edge of destruction by outside forces, the danger most prevailing on the people's minds would be that an enemy from outside would threaten their society's stability and safety. A creature like Grendel is the epitome of the violent Other because he poses such a direct threat to the hall. The epic hero who would arise in that same society would be the warrior who defended his people and destroyed the enemy. This hero will defend the hall or, in the case of Beowulf and Grendel, return the hall to its people. The prize is security more than it is a physical object.

The most distinguishing feature of the Anglo-Saxon hero is his individuality. He stands alone against the enemy. His friends and fellow warriors are not with him in the final battle. He must face his opponent on his own as a true test to himself. Lawrence notes this distinction in *Beowulf* as opposed to other epics, such as the *Song of Roland*: "The individual warrior assumed great importance, and personal allegiance to the sovereign was the first of his duties... no misfortune was greater than to be deprived of a protecting lord and the joys of the mead-hall" (53). The Anglo-Saxon hero leaves the hall alone. While by no means is he being exiled by his king, he is, in a sense, exiling himself from the joys of the mead-hall until his adventure is finished. He deprives himself of the protection of lord and hall and undergoes his trial apart from the safety and comfort of the social setting. There is a deeply internal element to the trial that demands solitude. Beowulf stands alone in each of his trials, even when he brings companions with him in the initial stages of his adventures. When he first sets out from his own lands, he brings fourteen men with him. Like any Celtic quest, Beowulf's endeavor seems to have a communal aspect. In his fight with Grendel, his men attempt to help, although they do no good with their swords. Beowulf is Grendel's only real adversary. Grendel's defeat belongs to Beowulf. Beowulf neither communicates with, nor interacts with, his fellow warriors during the

fight. He focuses only on his opponent. When Beowulf fights Grendel's dam, he undergoes a truly singular trial. He leaves Hrothgar behind: "remember now - / for I am now ready to go - what we agreed if I, fighting on your behalf, / should fail to return" (110-111). He remains beneath the water until he has defeated Grendel's mother. When he returns, he can at last tell Hrothgar, "I promise, then, O prince of the Scyldings, / that you can sleep in Heorot without anxiety, / without further fear / of death's shadow skulking near the hall" (115). Beowulf has won his prize.

When Beowulf is an old king, he finds himself undergoing one last solitary trial. The dragon's hoard, while impressive, is not the prize that Beowulf seeks. He rejoices in it briefly after he has destroyed the dragon, but the poet has made it very clear that the treasure brings more sorrow than joy. Rather, Beowulf goes out to kill the dragon in order to protect his people, because he knows that no one else is willing or capable of doing so. Once again, he brings with him a company of warriors. Yet, once again, he faces his ultimate opponent alone, except for the courageous endeavors of one young kinsman. All of his other warriors desert him: "And Beowulf's companions, sons of nobles - / so far from protecting him in a troop together, / unflinching in the fight - shrank back into the forest / scared for their own lives" (139). Wiglaf fights as well as he can alongside Beowulf, though the defeat of the dragon is attributed to the old king, not the young warrior. Beowulf passes the kingship on to Wiglaf, the only one who is worthy to follow in Beowulf's path.

Another element that distinguishes the Anglo-Saxon trial from the Celtic quest is the trial's sense of finality. The timeless world of the Celts allows heroes to ride from one quest into the next with no ultimate conclusions except, perhaps, the hero's death. No quest serves a higher purpose or acts as a defining moment in the hero's life because each quest is preceded by one

and followed by another in a seemingly endless series of adventures. In *Beowulf*, the poet offers both purpose and definition in the trials throughout Beowulf's life. Each adventure achieves a certain goal that moves the hero forward in his maturing and development, and the trials point toward a specific, purposeful conclusion. Beowulf's story has a destination.

In a timeless world, stories can move in spirals, circling continuously without a strong emphasis on climax or conclusion. The entire sequence of events entertains, but because another story will likely follow afterward, the story has less significance as a single entity. On the other hand, in a story with a setting that is focused and driven by the passage of time and the inevitability of death, the journey from beginning to end holds a stronger purpose and poignancy. For the hero, each segment of the journey should have meaning and contribute to the ultimate conclusion of the hero's trial. Beowulf's journey is not unique in this sense of destination. In the Anglo-Saxon elegies "The Wanderer" and "The Seafarer," the narrators undergo trials, not in the epic sense, but of a deeply personal, culturally identifiable sort. Their journeys are about suffering brought upon them by outside forces; but the journeys are not necessarily the major themes in and of themselves. The narrators examine the purposes and meanings of their trials. The narrator of "The Wanderer" advises his listeners that "a man will not be wise / before he has weathered his share of winters / in the world" (51) and continues to give a description of the wise man. His trial involves following "the paths of exile" (51), a fate so keenly felt by the Anglo-Saxons, but the testing of his person will bring a certain result; he seeks to become a wiser person. His destination is not a mortal port, but an immortal one, where he can find eternal security: "Brave is the man who holds to his beliefs; nor shall he ever / show sorrow in his heart... / It is best for a man to seek / mercy and comfort from the Father in heaven where security stands for us all" (53). "The Seafarer" holds a similar theme of sorrow in exile and a

steadily growing awareness of the transience of life. The narrator elaborates on the journey and leads toward a conclusion, not of his trial, but of his search for understanding. His advice to his listeners is that “each man should strive, before he leaves / this world, to win praise of those living / after him, the greatest fame after death / with daring deeds on earth” (55). While belief in eternal life implies hope after death, the seafarer urges his listeners to do what they can in life and to make the most of the days fated to them. He adds a warning against pride and cautions prudence: “Foolish is he / who fears not his Lord: death catches him unprepared/ / Blessed is the humble man” (56). The end of the poem, as in “The Wanderer,” does not end the narrator’s sufferings so much as his test. He has gained wisdom.

The epic differs from the elegy because the hero does have a physical mission and a physical destination that serve an important purpose in the story. The physical goal, however, is tied closely to the internal testing and achievement. Beowulf’s trial links also to the singularly crucial value of the Anglo-Saxon society, the centrality of the warrior-king as the binding element of society and the first defense against the chaos of the Other. Beowulf’s trial takes him first to a foreign land in order to prove his worthiness as a warrior, and then to his own home to prove his worthiness as a king. In each case, he defeats not just a personal enemy, but the enemy of the people; and while the final trial ends with his death, he also achieves his ultimate goal: defending his kinsmen from an undefeatable foe and fulfilling his role as a hero and a king.

In some respects, Beowulf appears to need no inner development or testing. Before Beowulf has even begun his journey to Hrothgar’s hall, he is already “renowned among the Geats for his great bravery” and considered “the strongest man alive, / princely and powerful” (79). Like any Celtic hero, Beowulf seems to already be a fully developed warrior, prepared to take on any enemy, the greatest in his magnificent company of heroes. However, his kinsmen do

concede that early in his career, they had recognized little potential in him: “He had been despised / for a long while, for the Geats saw no spark / of bravery in him” (129). Perhaps Beowulf did need to prove himself to his people as well as to himself. When he returns after successfully killing both Grendel and Grendel’s dam, there is no doubt in anyone’s mind of Beowulf’s worthiness as a hero: “How fate changed, / changed completely for that glorious man!” (129).

Bravery is certainly one of the foremost virtues of the Germanic people. Schücking quotes Heusler’s description of the ideal Germanic hero: “Their first virtue is bravery, but this may also be blind courage, for heroic poetry loves bravado, over-activity, contempt of caution” (47). Certainly, the Norse gods exhibit more foolhardy courage than prudence. The Anglo-Saxons, however, have added to their list of heroic virtues. Beowulf has already proven his bravery and skill. An early event in his development that he recounts during the feast with Hrothgar is the swimming contest with Breca. Unferth makes this even out to be a foolish and vain contest, pointless except to exhibit skill, and a failure, moreover, for Beowulf. Beowulf’s answer demonstrates not only the more serious nature of the contest, but also its importance in his development as a hero. This adventure was not undertaken on behalf of any suffering people. It was a purely personal endeavor, but perhaps a necessary one for Beowulf. The sea, once again, exists as a sort of ultimate opponent, an entity that forces danger and exile on the hero. Like the narrators of the elegies who are separated from home by the waves and made to endure the harsh forces of nature, Beowulf must overcome the sea. This demonstration of courage is a necessary step in his journey because he must test himself against the elements themselves. Through what may have been a brash promise between two young warriors, Beowulf has learned what he is capable of, his own strengths, and perhaps his own weaknesses as well: “I have never

heard / of a fiercer fight by night under heaven's vault / nor of a man who endured more on the ocean streams. / But I escaped with my life from the enemies' clutches, / worn out by my venture" (88). Beowulf has great strength, but also some limits. Because the contest was undertaken purposefully and not forced on him, and because it did nothing to help his friends or kinsmen, the whole adventure was on some level a foolhardy, youthful enterprise. But even as a young hero's first adventure, the swimming contest still contributes to Beowulf's maturing and development. He is learning what is and what is not a worthy endeavor. He has no shame in his courageous exploit, but he recounts the tale as an older warrior who understands that he must now focus his abilities on worthier causes.

While it certainly involves helping people in need, Beowulf's journey to Hrothgar's hall does not, at first, seem to be an entirely necessary trial for the hero. Hrothgar's hall is not his immediate responsibility, and Grendel is no threat to the Geats. Kemp Malone says, "He undertakes a task which he is not in duty bound to perform; full of the generous spirit of youth, he goes out of his way to do good; he fights single-handed against two foes... he wins, and goes home in triumph" (143). In this sense, Beowulf's journey seems more of a quest than a trial, an optional fight inspired by glory rather than need. However, while his journey is not obviously the direct duty of the young hero, the undertaking does have the necessary qualities of a test. While the Geats may have had some doubts about Beowulf, he has clearly already performed some heroic feats that have gained him fame beyond the borders of his homeland. Hrothgar knows of him: "I have heard seafarers say... / that in the grasp / of his hand that man renowned in battle / has the might of thirty men" (83). His journey is not only about proving his physical ability, but about proving his quality as a hero and leader of men.

Beowulf's willingness to aid Hrothgar is in part to repay past debts incurred by his father Ecgtheow. He has taken on that responsibility and willingly offers to risk his life against the monster to repay the debt. He is also strengthening the bonds between allies, which, in such a tumultuous time, is a wise move on the part of both kingdoms. Beowulf, here, is not only exhibiting courage and seeking glory, but also attaining prudence and wisdom, both important traits for both a hero and a king. Beowulf's fight with Grendel shows that he is not rushing unwisely into a fight with the monster. While he matches Grendel who is "so reckless he spurns the use of weapons" (84), he proves his wisdom and cleverness in doing so because "no war-sword, / not even the finest iron on earth, / could wound their evil enemy" (94). Schücking adds that Beowulf also demonstrates a chivalrous impulse to match his enemy, no matter how little he deserves it, and only use the fighting methods that his enemy has chosen (48). Beowulf carefully uses what might have been a disadvantage in the fight and turns it to his advantage: "[Beowulf's] ideal is discretion and circumspection. In the Grendel battle the hero shows just this when he seizes the demon only at a sure moment" (47). He is neither hasty nor unsure. He defeats Grendel, not only because he has an already established courage, but because he has learned prudence and wisdom as well.

Beowulf's fight against Grendel's dam tests Beowulf's limits once again. The merewife is an even more ruthless opponent. Furthermore, Beowulf is forced to leave the more familiar environment of the hall and venture once again under the water to meet his enemy. Perhaps his swimming contest prepared him for the endeavor. Beowulf makes the mistake of bringing a sword to this fight, lent to him by the less than reliable Unferth. However, he eventually achieves his victory through the use of a magical sword he finds while he is in the monster's cave. After the defeat of Grendel's mother, Beowulf has achieved a definitive goal in his life,

not only material, but personal. He has not only secured a strong alliance with a great king and destroyed two impressively dangerous monsters, but he has prepared himself as a worthy successor of his own people. Malone describes him as he has established himself by this point in the poem as “high-minded, gentle, and virtuous, men dedicated to the heroic life, and the poet presents this life in terms of service: Beowulf serves his lord, his people, and all mankind, and in so doing he does not shrink from hardship, danger, and death itself” (140). Beowulf as a hero has fulfilled his role.

As a king, Beowulf has only one more great trial. He has ruled for an estimated fifty years, employing his wisdom and courage to the benefit of his people. As an old king, Malone says, “he is represented as an ideal king; the task which he undertakes is one which he cannot avoid without failing in his duty to his own people; sad at heart, he meets the issue without flinching; he fights, with a helper beside him, against a single foe; he wins, but at the cost of his own life” (143). Just as Hrothgar designated the fight to younger warriors, Beowulf could have easily commanded his company of heroes to perform the dragon-slaying in his stead at no cost to his honor as a king. But Beowulf knows that despite his age, he is the only man capable of killing the dragon. Here, more than in the fight with Grendel or Grendel’s dam, Beowulf must come into a full awareness of the reality of death and fatality. He must prove himself not only still in possession of his former skill and courage, but also willing to pay one last sacrifice on behalf of his people. While his young kinsman stands by his side, Beowulf’s last contest is ultimately alone, a personal testing of fortitude and also the final confrontation with his own mortality. Beowulf dies with a full awareness of who he has been and who he has become. He is able to die satisfied in himself. He recounts his reign to Wiglaf without regret:

I have ruled the Geats

for fifty winters; no king of any
neighbouring tribe has dared to attack me...

But in my own home I have awaited
my destiny, cared well for my dependents,
and I have not sought trouble...

Because of all these things

I can rejoice, drained now by death wounds. (143)

Beowulf has not simply lost his life in one unlucky encounter in a series of adventures. Each of his battles has served a purpose in furthering his development, and each trial has built toward the final battle, a resolution and an ending of a great hero's life.

The courtly knight who rides out from Camelot is no Celtic or Anglo-Saxon hero. His gleaming armor, lance and sword, and his courtly manners and gentle demeanor arise from a medieval world seemingly far removed from either Celtic or Anglo-Saxon warrior. But however much the knight appears to represent a different age from his heroic predecessors, the landscape of this Arthurian knight has retained a strong quality of both literary worlds. Whatever other influences may have contributed to the medieval knight of Arthurian legend, the singular combination of the quest and the trial fits extraordinarily well into the unique Anglo-Celtic world of King Arthur. The Celtic and Anglo-Saxon threads woven throughout the image of the Arthurian knight are rarely deliberate or overt, but are no less crucial for their subtlety.

Notable among the Arthurian knights for their many adventures are Lancelot, Parzival, and Gawain. Gawain appears as the Welsh Gwalchmai and continues to figure as one of Arthur's foremost knights throughout the tales of the Middle Ages. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, a spectacular example of the Arthurian world, also does well in portraying the Arthurian

trial. The adventure comes upon Sir Gawain, who is drawn out on a solitary journey in a dangerous environment, willing only because he is both loyal and courageous to complete the daunting task. Gawain proves his worthiness as a knight, but also faces his own weaknesses as he fails a test of fidelity to his host and challenger. He returns to Camelot as the defender of Arthur's good name and as a humbled hero who has learned his own limitations. While this story fully embraces several elements of the trial, the quest-like nature of so many Arthurian adventures appears often in conjunction with the trial aspects. Arthur's knights can rarely happen on the one without the other.

Few Arthurian works dedicate as many pages to the adventures of Arthur and his knights as Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur*. Malory's Arthur is a British king, but a truly legendary one who has gathered a host of heroes to him with what Michael Senior calls "his remarkable gravitational attraction" (12). He is no longer warring with Saxon tribes as Geoffrey of Monmouth portrayed him; he has united Britain under his rule. By the time Malory wrote in the fifteenth century, Arthur had extended out of Britain and into France. Wace wrote a translation of Geoffrey of Monmouth's work. Chrétien composed an entire cycle that dwelled most fully on Lancelot. Other works began to appear with Arthur at their center. Malory drew from a large number of these texts for his final work. His Arthur, however, is no eclectic European king. Malory brings Arthur back to England, firmly establishing him where he has always belonged. Senior describes Malory's work as the earliest definitively English Arthurian legend: "The themes were the traditional material of his native land, and in translating them into the English of his day he revealed a consciousness of his identity as an Englishman, in a sense which only became meaningful after the three streams of Celtic, Anglo-Saxon, and Norman

peoples had become fully merged” (10). Malory’s Arthur is the epitomized English king, fully realized in literature for the first time.

While Malory begins and ends his account with Arthur’s birth and ascension and with his decline and passing to Avalon, the majority of his tales focus on the knights who swear allegiance to Arthur. While Gawain does appear in Malory’s work, Lancelot gains much of Malory’s attention as the greatest of Arthur’s knights. Lancelot’s adventures have many of the qualities of the Celtic quest. Because Lancelot is the best of knights, he is already a fully developed hero. Like Cù Chùlainn, when he reaches the height of his potential, he needs no further development in skill or courage: “for in all tournaments and jousts and deeds of arms, both for life and death, he passed all other knights, and at no time was he overcome but if it were by treason or enchantment (Malory 73). Lancelot often rides out voluntarily on his adventures. Like any questing knight, he seeks whatever adventure might befall him, fearing nothing from the outside world because he is equal to its dangers. After Malory introduces his favored hero, he sends him out on a journey that has no purpose other than adventure seeking: “And then [Lancelot] thought himself to prove himself in strange adventures, and bad his nephew, Sir Lionel, for to make him ready, ‘for we two will seek adventures’” (73). Lancelot has only to prove what he already believes himself to possess. In the course of his quest, he proves his chivalry, his steadfast love of Queen Guinevere, and his skill at arms. Like the Welsh heroes of the *Mabinogion*, Lancelot is as comfortable outside the walls as he is within them. While Lancelot rarely has a particular prize in mind, neither does he ride for the sake of any great need. The adventure, like a Celtic quest, is the hero’s decision to explore the world and test his abilities against it.

Lancelot's exploits, however, cannot be called quests only. Elements of the trial appear as well. While Lancelot's journeys are voluntary, the dangers he faces are often connected with others, not just himself. The Celt's pursuit of a personal prize often lacks a consciousness of anyone outside of the community of warriors. The Anglo-Saxons, however, saw their heroes as champions for good. Beowulf's victories were both personal and tribal. He fought on behalf of the people. Lancelot represents the best of Arthurian knights, not only because he is a great warrior like Cù Chùlainn, but also because he is willing to aid anyone who asks for his help. Like Sir Gawain in *The Green Knight*, Lancelot understands true knighthood. Another element of the trial that appears in Lancelot's adventures, and is truly defining of the knight's adventure, is the solitary aspect. Even though Lancelot is first accompanied by Sir Lionel, they are quickly separated, and the story is about Sir Lancelot alone. He accomplishes his challenges as a lone hero. Like the Anglo-Saxon warrior, the true knight faces his greatest tests alone, divested of all allies.

The Arthurian knight's adventure has elements of both quest and trial, rarely entirely one or the other. The quest brings the knight out into the magical Otherworld where he can fully involve himself in the adventure. At the end of the quest, the knight has attained the prize, defeated the ultimate enemy, or succeeded in whatever challenge was placed before him. But the Arthurian story cannot remain a series of simple, endless quests. Malory wished to direct his stories toward a certain end. The elements of the trial lend a greater weight and depth to the knight's endeavors. His mission is solitary; his goal is both within and outside of himself. Whether or not necessity impelled him at the outset, the needs of his dependents drive him toward the conclusion of his adventure. The quest and the trial together give the knight's adventure both its lofty heights and its powerful depths.

Of all the adventures of Arthur's knights, the most famous and mystical is the search for the Holy Grail. Malory draws on different sources before recreating his own account of the expedition. This quest involves not one, but all of Arthur's greatest knights. It is the ultimate quest. It is also the ultimate trial. The Grail legend has both religious and mythological significance. Interestingly, the Grail only later manifested as a chalice or cup, often appearing as a bowl, platter, or even a stone, if described at all, in Arthurian stories. In Helen Mustard's and Charles Passage's translation of Wolfram's *Parzival*, they discuss the etymology of the word "grail" as having come from the Welsh word "dyscyl" meaning platter (xli). Furthermore, they argue that the Holy Grail only seems to have become a famous relic of the Church after the stories of the Grail in the Arthurian tales, implying more secular roots despite its often overtly religious manifestation (xliii). In Celtic mythology, the search for the Grail is directly paralleled by the quest for the cauldron of plenty. Just as the Grail supposedly brings health and life, the Cauldron of Annwfn in Welsh mythology and the Cauldron of the Dagda in Irish literature are magical objects of plenty that bring the dead to life and produce an abundant supply of food. Alby Stone makes an interesting argument that the Grail legend is not simply Celtic in inspiration, but also Norse and Germanic, equating, for example, the Grail-maidens with the Valkyries of Valhalla and Parzival's "Question Test" before the Fisher King with the questioning of Odin by Gylfi (32-33). As fundamentally religious as the Holy Grail itself became, the story is woven of many other strands. In a Christianized medieval world, the ultimate prize is both magical and divine, and has become the holiest of holy relics.

As a quest, the story of the Grail has many parallels to the Celtic heroic stories of Cù Chùlainn, Pwyll, Fionn, and Pryderi and of Arthur's own search for the Cauldron of Annwfn. In Malory's rendering, the Grail appears, covered by a cloth, before the knights in Camelot. Sir

Gawain is the first to declare his decision to ride out and see the Grail uncovered: "I will make here a vow, that tomorn, without longer abiding, I shall labour in the quest for the Sangrail, and that I shall hold me out a twelvemonth and a day, or more if need be, and never shall I return unto the court again, till I have seen it more openly than it hath been showed here" (Malory 164). The rest of the Round Table knights swiftly take up the quest with Sir Gawain. This is very much the beginning of a quest. The knights seek a prize, each choosing to leave the castle of his own free will. The adventure involves acquiring an object, not defending a people or defeating a monster. The knights ride out in company, like Celtic heroes, although only one will succeed. The quest will draw the knights into the magical world outside of Camelot for as long as it takes each to succeed or fail in his endeavor. At its outset, the quest for the Holy Grail is a quest indeed.

The hero of the Grail legend is not the great Lancelot, but Lancelot's greater son, Sir Galahad. As the knights ride out in a company, Galahad makes up one of their number. As the distinguished hero and ultimate champion of the tale, Galahad is quickly singled out. Not long into the journey, the knights begin to separate, to find their own adventures. The search for the Grail, it becomes clear, is no ordinary quest. The Grail requires not only bravery, but virtue, of its hero. It requires testing. Each knight undergoes tests in order to determine which is the best knight to achieve the prize. Galahad stands alone among his companions as the greatest in all ideals. He is more like a Celtic hero because he proves himself sufficient without any need for development. He is the perfect knight from the moment he appears in the story. This is Galahad's singular and ultimate adventure. He neither wants nor needs another. The test has purified him: "And then suddenly his soul departed to Jesu Christ, and a great multitude of angels bare his soul up to heaven" (212). The search for the Grail begins as a quest for a prize,

but the prize that Galahad achieves is a deeply spiritual one, not merely an external glimpse at a mystical object, but the ultimate religious experience and purifying moment.

Malory's Grail legend presents one rendering of the adventure. A German writer from the late twelfth and early thirteenth century, Wolfram von Eschenbach, wrote the poem *Parzival*, drawing from Chrétien's version, among others, but brought to the story his own personal conception of the magical adventure of the Grail. In this story, Parzival is the hero, rather than Galahad, and the knight who ultimately achieves the holy treasure. Once again, Gawain figures largely in the tale, but is overshadowed by a greater knight. Whereas Malory's conception tends more toward the Celtic interpretation of a quest with its fully developed hero and the initial massive expedition by the Round Table knights, Wolfram's story focuses on solitary journeys and one knight's succession of tests, some of which he fails, as he matures and develops into a hero worthy of the ultimate prize. Despite the many similarities between the two Grail heroes, Parzival is no Galahad. Both are fair youths with noble bloodlines. Both appear in the midst of Arthur's court with a set of skills that astonish the other knights. Here, the similarities give way to stark contrasts. Parzival begins his adventure as a fool, quite often called a simpleton by Wolfram as well as by the characters in the story. He is certainly strong and has his father's gifts for battle, but he has no training in courtly arts and no worldly or spiritual wisdom as evidenced by his initial treatment of ladies and the fact that he mistakes the first knight in shining armor he sees for God. As with most Arthurian adventures, Parzival's journey begins as a quest for glory. He sees a magnificent group of knights and wishes to become one. As his journey continues, he is forced to learn and change and mature. He, unlike Galahad, is not worthy of the Grail when he begins the quest. He must first be tested and, upon failing his test, undergo more trials still until he is found worthy by the Grail.

The first time Parzival comes to the Grail castle, called Munsalvaesche by Wolfram, he has become a knight and hero, having won armor, queen, and country, but he is still not wise enough to understand the mystery of the Grail. After witnessing the fantastic succession of ladies and squires, he sees the object itself, which in Wolfram's version is a wonderful stone: "Upon a deep green achmardi she bore the perfection of Paradise... that was a thing called the Grail, which surpasses all earthly perfection" (129). Parzival witnesses wonder upon wonder, but fails to ask the crucial questions that would have brought him success. He goes to sleep in the Grail Castle and wakes up to find it abandoned and the prize lost. His first encounter is a complete and utter failure.

Wolfram's secondary hero in his epic narrative is Gawain. Gawain provides a contrast for Parzival because he is the complete hero, already fully developed as a warrior upon arriving in the narrative and remaining consistently so throughout. Parzival and Gawain each receive their great challenge in Arthur's hall and are drawn out by necessity. Parzival's challenger is Cundrie, who reminds him of his failure at the Grail castle. Gawain must face Kingrimursel, who challenges his honor. By happenstance, Gawain ends up looking for the Grail as he continues to attempt to prove his honor. He searches for the Grail as any knight would hunt for a prize. Wolfram's emphasis on Gawain's quest for the Grail is on the physical aspects: "whoever desire the Grail has to approach that prize with the sword. So should a prize be striven for" (268). Here, only, does Gawain ultimately prove insufficient in his endeavors. As a Celtic hero, Gawain meets every requirement. He is brave and capable and interacts with wilderness and foreign lands with ease. Even his ultimate failure to attain the Grail does not necessarily define him as something other than a questing hero. Like every Celtic hero, Gawain must finally meet the adversary he cannot defeat. His final success in becoming the lord of the Castle of Wonders,

however, demonstrates that he is a worthy knight for the particular quest he was meant to follow.

These two separate adventures hold elements of both quest and trial, but each tends more toward the one or the other. For Parzival, the search for the Grail is more internal, as Poag says, a personal testing: “Parzival’s way is not one that points primarily towards external recognition of achievement. Parzival’s way moves, above all, through inner growth toward spiritual illumination” (71). Gawain’s adventure is necessary because it pertains to his own honor, but Gawain rides out as a fully equipped hero to achieve a goal he is already capable of meeting. James Poag calls Gawain “the Arthurian paragon. Fame and love are also his major concerns” (79). These are precisely the virtues of a questing knight. He is often found in the company of friends, followers, fellow knights, and, quite often, of ladies. Parzival most often rides alone. In Gawain’s journey, no strong sense of longing causes him to think back on what he leaves behind. His quest drives him forward. Even in Malory’s text, Galahad is always looking forward, toward the Grail, never backward toward hall or home. For Parzival, his home and wife continue to dwell on his mind; he is exiled until his adventure is finished: “‘If I am to strive for the Grail, the thought of her pure embrace must drive me on. I parted from her – too long ago... I am still a captive of sorrow’... Now he intends to seek distress anew... this man fleeing from joy” (382). Wolfram sets up two very different adventures. Poag puts Parzival and Gawain in two different spheres. Gawain is in Arthur’s material sphere while Parzival occupies the spiritual Grail sphere (70). Each knight meets adversaries, rescues damsels, and faces surprising challenges, but Parzival’s adventure is a spiritual trial that traces his full development as a knight while Gawain is the questing hero whose adventures change him very little because he is sufficient in himself for all that his adventure requires: “An inner need drives Parzival to seek the Grail, whereas Gawan [*sic*] is bound to seek it only through his given word. Parzival finds the Grail, and

Gawan does not. Gawan's world is that of the courtly gentleman and Parzival's that of the lonely seeker with an unusual destiny" (Poag 70). Each knight is great, courageous, and ultimately worthy of honor and fame, but each has a different purpose, a different goal, and a different means of reaching his final prize.

Wolfram's depiction of Parzival's struggles as he searches for the Grail are far more emotive than Malory's rendering of Galahad. Galahad is so spiritually attuned to the Grail from the onset that his journey toward it is unwaveringly straight and clear. He reaches a moral pinnacle upon viewing the Grail, but the adventure itself plays little role in developing his already pure character. Parzival's search for the Grail involves confusion, wandering, suffering, doubt, and even the questioning of his faith. He doubts even God during the course of his trial: "I hate Him Whom [the pilgrims] love with all their hearts and from Whom they look for help. He has barred His help from me and has not spared me sorrow" (242). The grim possibility of failure adds a more poignant note to Parzival's adventure. He doubts and struggles, but he also learns and matures. Before he can reach the Grail, he must merit his prize. After his brief moment of crisis, he puts his entire trust in God's guidance: "'If God's power is so great that it can guide both horse and beast, and men as well, then I will praise His power...Now go, whichever way God chooses!'" And he let the reins fall loosely over his horse's ears and urged it on vigorously with his spurs" (243). His uncle, the hermit Trevrizent, tells him, "No man can ever win the Grail unless he is known in heaven and he be called by the name of the Grail" (251). Wolfram places no emphasis on Parzival's sword as he does with Gawain. Parzival's trial involves inward change before he can achieve an outward goal.

As with Galahad, Parzival is accompanied to the Grail Castle by companions, but faces the completion of his trial alone. He reaches the Grail, rescues the inhabitants of Munsalvaesche,

and completes his test of knighthood. However, unlike Sir Galahad, Parzival has one more move in his journey before it is truly complete. He still longs for his wife and home. The trial requires him to leave the familiarity of his hall only until his adventure is complete. For Parzival, home is relocated to Munsalvaesche because he becomes its king, but the necessity of reuniting with his wife and coming to a place that is his home brings the trial to a necessary conclusion.

The Grail adventure is extraordinarily powerful, not simply because of its religious nature, but because it is both the most important of quests for the ultimate prize and a deeply personal test of faith, virtue, and true greatness. The Grail adventure has drawn more fascination than any other Arthurian legend. It is greatest of the Arthurian tales, and as such, best exemplifies the most important elements of Arthurian legend. Galahad and his fellow knights ride across a landscape that is English, but a mystical, fantastic England. Their adventure takes place in the midst of Arthur's timeless reign, but suggests a looming darkness as the knights depart for what might be the last time. The adventure itself is for the only prize truly worth seeking, a quest among many quests, but the ultimate trial of Galahad and Parzival brings the truest reward and has proven to be the defining journey of Arthurian lore. Other adventures in Malory, Wolfram, and in other writers, such as the later poet Tennyson or author T.H. White would draw on both the heights and depths of these adventure tales for their inspiration because they, like so many others from Malory onward, have come to realize that no story of kings and knights and great adventures is really worth telling unless it is set in an Arthurian world.

Conclusion:

A Far-Reaching Legend

By the time Malory's work appeared toward the end of the fifteenth century, Arthur, his knights, and his world were a definitive entity, neither Celtic, nor Anglo-Saxon, but Anglo-Celtic: a British king in a British kingdom who was able to exceed the bounds of that physical kingdom to become something more. Even before Malory's time, and certainly after, the Arthurian stories were not written to fit into an adventure genre so much as adventure stories were often written to be a part of the Arthurian legend. The best stories were the ones about Arthurian knights, and a tale anchored by the central presence of Arthur himself gained a greater power over the imagination and a higher degree of respect from its reader. The Arthurian world would prove its ability to not just outlast its origins, but to bring its own identity forward, both adaptable and influential to literary development. Arthur and his knights, their stories, themes, and the spirit of the legend itself have been reworked many times over. Arthur has passed away to Avalon in medieval epic, Victorian poetry, and modern fiction, but he has never truly died.

That Arthur has become not just a king, but the king of fantasy, fiction, and poetry cannot simply be deemed a happy coincidence for a mysterious quasi-historical figure of legend. More than Arthur's name – or Lancelot's, Gawain's, Guinevere's, or Parzival's name – has lasted through literary history. Avalon is not just an island any more than Merlin is just a king's advisor. Arthur is a particular sort of king and his knights, his kingdom, his enemies, and his adventures have a very particular essence linked to his legend from which authors rarely dare to stray. Arthur and Camelot are more than king and castle. Arthur is an ideal and his kingdom is a perfect kingdom; however, the fantasy never quite breaks away from some sort of reality. Arthur

is, for many readers, as real as any king in a history book. Both the lofty magic and the immediate relevance of Arthur owe their power to his unique formation, to his world, and to the adventures that have attached themselves to his name. Literature has brought Arthur's name through history, but with Arthur comes a world that belongs entirely to him, given to him by Celtic magic and Anglo-Saxon heroes, and remaining with him in the many interpretations and re-workings of the Arthurian legends throughout history.

The Arthurian world has reappeared in a multitude of literary works in the centuries following Malory and the end of the medieval period. Fiction and poetry have embraced his stories and the adventures of his knights repeatedly, as Ackroyd notes, for a millenium:

What is the spell of this enchantment thrown over a thousand years of English literature and English art? ... He represents blood kinship and tribal fealty for the heterogeneous and muddled race of the English; he represents sanctified leadership, uniting England and the Holy Grail. Yet at the same time he is an image of transience and of loss, the unendurable loss of one who just slipped away. He is the shadow on the page... Arthur slept in popular superstition, therefore, and he was not dead. (122-23)

No matter how many times the adventures of knights are told, they can be retold at least once more. The imagination embraces every new conception of Arthur drawing the sword from the stone, of Sir Gawain lopping off the head of a large, green knight, of Parzival finally achieving the Holy Grail. The love triangle of Lancelot, Guinevere, and Arthur has been examined in minute detail, told from each point of view, argued as if these three people were historical rather than fictional. While there seemed to be a brief period of silence regarding Arthur in literature between the late medieval period and the Victorian writing, Ackroyd suggests that "[h]is

memory was kept alive in folk-tale or oral tradition, and in the early eighteenth century it was recorded that ‘King Arthur’s story in English’ was ‘often told by the ballad-singers’” (123). In the mid-1800’s, Arthur’s fame was renewed when Tennyson produced the beautiful narrative poems that would make up the *Idylls of the King*; at the end of that century, Mark Twain wrote his *Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court*; John Steinbeck’s rendition *The Acts of King Arthur and His Noble Knights* in the mid 1900’s reworks Malory’s version; at about the same time, T.H. White penned his famous *The Once and Future King*, which gives both the humorous beginnings and the tragic endings of Arthur’s reign with a multitude of knightly adventures throughout. More modern works from Marion Zimmer Bradley’s *Avalon* series to Stephen Lawhead’s *Pendragon Cycle* offer Arthur’s story with particular nuances, whether it is to view the world from the eyes of the women of Arthur’s world or to use Arthur’s legend as the basis for a tale that combines both ancient magic and Christian religion. These stories all share the Arthurian world and the threads that have woven through every image created for centuries.

Despite the distinctive elements to each interpretation of Arthur’s story, the degree of similarity in the various novels throughout the last few centuries conveys Arthur’s lasting appeal. If Arthur were just another king, his name would be easily transferable with any other king’s. Alternately, if Arthur alone were the key to his fame, and Arthur’s world were not so extraordinary, Arthur and his knights would have been more consistently placed in different environments. When an author attempts to draw Arthur or his knights away from their normal setting, the act is noticeable and conscious and singular to that particular work. Arthur inevitably returns to his most familiar setting. The same motifs continue to attach themselves to him. Arthur evolves, and yet remains constant. He is ever changing, but timeless; he is in the real world, but an alternate reality. Even his development in literature is surprisingly Anglo-Celtic.

One of the most powerful examples of this consistency in Arthur's appearance in literature is in the legend of Arthur's passing into Avalon. No story so fully and clearly embraces all three elements of joined Celtic and Anglo-Saxon myth and literature: time and death, nature and magic, quests and trials. The stories of Arthur and Camelot have a timeless nature that allow for endless retellings, but the reader remains ever conscious of a conclusion. Ackroyd describes this element of Arthur's story as decisively English, "touched with melancholy...and the sad fate of Arthur and his kingdom corresponds to that national mood" (115). Like all men, Arthur must die. Like all stories, this one must end. Arthur's death at Modred's hands is extraordinarily tragic, conveying a sense of defeat that only true loss can bring. But from Geoffrey of Monmouth's writings to Thomas Malory's to Lord Tennyson's to T.H. White's, Arthur's passing never concludes with a simple death. The hope of Arthur's return has become a lasting motif attached to Arthur's legend. Ackroyd adds that to the somber aspect of the story, "There is something, too, of determination and endurance within this dominant sensation. Some men say that Arthur will rise again; we must endure our going hence" (115). The sad departure of the king and the bereavement of those left behind is blended with an enduring hope of better days: "That combination of bravery and fatalism...is the defining mood of Arthurian legend" (Ackroyd 115). J.R. Simpson examines several texts from the early nineteenth century that mention Arthur, and many of them reference him not as a past king, but as a future one. He quotes one such poem called "The Iron Gate – A Legend of Alderley:"

For good King Arthur did not die,

As idle tales have said;...

But Merlin from the battle bore

His friend and king away:

That he might lead his chivalry,
 In England's needful day. (208)

Another such poem Simpson examines, written by Giffard, says, "Entranced beneath St. Michael's keep, / Now Arthur and his warriors sleep / Their charmed slumber, long and deep / In magic thralldom bound" (209). While the possible location of Arthur are debatable (just as the location of the Otherworld shifts with every new tale), Arthur's passing is marked both by finality and potential. While the realist might write a novel that follows Malory's suggestion: "More of the death of King Arthur could I never find, but that these ladies brought him to his grave; and such one was buried there" (309), the timeless aura of Arthur's passing continually emerges in the retelling.

Of nature and magic, Arthur's passing speaks of Otherworld and afterworld, but also of exile. Avalon is a place of magic, an island across the sea, a land of the fairies and a land of the dead. However, for Arthur, crossing to Avalon signals an end of an era and the loss of a kingdom. Camelot must fall when Arthur leaves. Restoration can only be attained when Arthur returns. Arthur's passing brings the golden age of his reign to a close and suggests a dark future. A people without a king are lost. They might say, as Sir Bedivere does, "Ah my lord Arthur, what shall become of me, now ye go from me and leave me here alone among mine enemies" (308). Arthur leaves behind a kingdom that cannot stand without him. Their only hope is in his eventual return.

The passing of Arthur is both the conclusion and, in a way, the climax of Arthur's adventure, a part of his quest and a part of his trial as king and warrior. As a king of the greatest knights, Arthur must himself be a knight among knights. Many of the novels about Arthur trace his rise, the pinnacle of his reign, and his eventual fall. The story of Arthur's adventure as a hero

is perhaps more important than any of his knights' adventures. Like so many of the knights' tales, Arthur's begins as a quest-like venture. He gathers a host of the greatest heroes around him. He is always seen in a company. They are Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table. The stories must have Arthur, not alone, but with his knights. The bond between king and knight is in one sense a bond of equality between warriors who fight together and feast together. Also like any questing hero, Arthur is the greatest among a company of great heroes. He alone is able to draw the sword from the stone and become king when no other knight could do so. However, the role of a sovereign and his ultimate successes and failures as a leader is a singular burden. His connection to his knights is not simply a convivial fraternity; he is a lord with a responsibility to his vassals. He stands apart. Arthur's eventual fall is all the more tragic because he seems to face it alone and he knows that it is his own fault. He was not a flawless king. He bears the weight of Camelot's end. When he passes into Avalon, his knights do not accompany him. He leaves Bedivere behind. Gawain and many others are dead. The Otherworldly ladies guide the ship, but Arthur is a solitary figure.

The allure of Arthur's world has inspired a multitude of retellings. Arthur provides the perfect figure of either overseeing lord of the adventurous hero or a hero in his own right whose successes and failings are both relevant and transcendent. However, Arthur and his knights have not been so successful as to appear in every adventure novel, every fictional epic or fantastic saga. As impressive as Arthur's influence has remained on the popular imagination, stories of heroes, adventures, and magic abound in literature without any mention of the king and his loyal knights, or of Avalon, Merlin, or Camelot. But even where Arthur's name is not present, the influence of the Anglo-Celtic world in which his legends figure so prominently continues to appear in a wide array of literary works. The ideals of the Arthurian legend extend beyond the

names. Ackroyd explains this persistent image that English authors give their heroic stories: “That there continued a popular tradition, of heroic myth or folklore, can hardly be in doubt” (102). He attributes this in large part to Arthur’s influence: “this spectral and futilive tribal warrior became the central figure or figment of the English imagination whose creative life has stretched into the twenty-first century with no sign of abatement” (112). Arthur’s inspiration is indispensable to the stories that have been told in the English speaking world ever since.

While the occasional story of the hero would appear in the centuries after the Middle Ages, epic heroic tales set in a fantasy world did not begin to achieve widespread popularity until the writing of J.R.R. Tolkien in the twentieth century. Tolkien built an entire world that interweaves both the Germanic and the Celtic myths and traditions into an original fantasy realm. In Tolkien’s Middle Earth, the elves and dwarves are creative interpretations of familiar figures of Norse mythology. The constant threat of darkness overshadowing the world, the curse of a ring, the dragon with his hoard of treasure, the attention given to the passing of one age and the beginning of the next all fit easily into a Germanic tradition, some drawn specifically and consciously from Germanic literature. Alongside these images is that of the timeless elves who cross the western sea into a beautiful Otherworldly realm. Magic and nature are malevolent and dangerous, and such things as evil rings, dragons, and monsters remain a constant threat to the heroes of the story. However, magic also brings light and hope, and nature provides the ancient, powerful walking trees and good wizards. Into this world, Tolkien introduces the definitive adventure tale that would begin a new wave of imaginative literary works in purely fantastic worlds with noble heroes facing evil tyrants, pursuing magical treasures, and fulfilling mighty destinies.

Tolkien's adventure in his famous trilogy *The Lord of the Rings* notably forms a fellowship, a group who will go out together on their quest. But to this adventure, Tolkien adds the trial elements as the fellowship disbands each member faces personal challenges. Frodo is also faces a particular trial as he is forced, of necessity, to leave the safety of his home and is tested beyond the limits of his endurance in order to succeed. He ultimately fails, and yet is given a last moment of grace. Frodo's end is remarkably similar to King Arthur's. Both are wounded and cannot be healed by natural means, and both take a ship that bears them across the sea to an Otherworldly realm where true healing can be found. Tolkien invokes both finality and timelessness in his epic. In his trilogy, the heroes of the tale forestall their world's version of Ragnarok, bringing peace back to the world, but they cannot stop the passing of time or the end of the age. The elves still leave Middle Earth.

A more Arthurian hero still is Aragorn. In some ways, Aragorn follows an opposite pattern in his adventure as he begins a lone wanderer and ends surrounded by heroes and friends. But Tolkien gives Aragorn's adventure a strong element of the trial throughout. Like Beowulf, Aragorn is a great hero, exceeding the ability of any normal man, but he is being tested and prepared for kingship. Like Arthur, Aragorn is often surrounded by his fellow warriors, many times leading the fight, but ultimately standing alone as he faces outer enemies and inner weaknesses. Notably, the last part of the trilogy is called *The Return of the King*. Aragorn comes to Middle Earth and brings peace just as those who wait for Arthur hope that will one day do. Tolkien's epic is not just Anglo-Celtic; it is Arthurian.

A multitude of novels would follow in Tolkien's wake, many adopting parts of his world structure, even more drawing from his adventure theme. The appeal of the epic has fascinated more than one culture, but literature in the English speaking world has its own particular sort of

grand adventure story, one that Tolkien popularized but did not necessarily invent in its most basic form. In many of the novels that have come after Tolkien, elements of the Anglo-Saxon warrior, the Celtic hero, the Otherworld, the weight and finality of the trial, and the exhilaration of the quest emerge, whether unconsciously employed or deliberately invoked, testifying to Arthur's continuing influence in modern epic fiction. Some notable authors whose cycles of tales utilize many of the Arthurian elements are Robert Jordan's *Wheel of Time* series, Terry Goodkind's *Wizard's First Rule* and its sequels, and David Edding's *Elenium* trilogy. These represent some of the more popular series, but are by no means the only ones who use Arthurian themes.

Robert Jordan begins his novel *The Eye of the World* with a strange mixture of timelessness and time sequences. His time-construct includes both a Wheel and successive Ages, invoking eternity and transience: "The Wheel of Time turns, and Ages come and pass, leaving memories that become legend. Legend fades to myth, and even myth is long forgotten when the Age that gave it birth comes again... There are neither beginnings nor endings to the turning of the Wheel of Time. But it was *a* beginning" (Jordan 1). Jordan's hero Rand finds the normalcy and naturalness of his surroundings invaded by the realization that the legends of magic are true. Rand is thrust out on his adventure upon the illness of his father and a bargain made with a mysterious woman who agrees to save his life if she can, reminding him, however, that "it is beyond my power to stop the Wheel from turning" and that "Death comes sooner or later to everyone" (102). Rand is discovered to be not just a hero, but the greatest hero, and the only hero able to defeat ultimate evil. The stories will follow many characters, but revolve continually around its central hero. Rand develops from simple, rural boy to courageous warrior,

drawn by necessity into a war for the future of his entire world. The Wheel of Time turns endlessly, but the story of Rand is heading towards a final battle.

Goodkind's first novel introduces the central character Richard, who has no recognizable potential for heroism until an adventure literally comes upon him. He exists in the comfortable surroundings of his woods, but when his quest begins, nature begins to offer more threat than safety as the monsters emerge. He travels from a relatively normal environment into a world heavily inundated with magic. Richard proves not only to be the hero of the story, but the only one able to fulfill the particular quest required of him. He is the Seeker; he is the only one who can wield the Sword of Truth. He is extraordinary not because he is drawn unwillingly into his adventure, but because he embraces the traits worthy of a true hero and faces danger courageously. He contends with a dragon, confronts his own brother's betrayal, and triumphs over his ultimate enemy. He begins the novel a simple woodlander (or so he believes) and finishes it a warrior, gaining both confidence and humility in the process. His destiny is set in motion before he perceives it. Like Arthur, he is chosen.

The first book of David Edding's *Elenium* trilogy, *The Diamond Throne*, begins in the prologue by describing a prize, a jewel among jewels, a massive sapphire carved into a rose that is not only immeasurably valuable, but incredibly powerful. The first chapter introduces the hero, a knight returning to his home from a long period of exile. Unfortunately, he finds not rest, but more difficulties upon his arrival and yet another reason to leave home again. The first book only begins to explain the dangers and treachery that the knight and his company must face; the second book, *The Ruby Knight*, sends Sir Sparhawk out on his quest for the jewel, his testing of loyalty and courage, as he seeks to rescue his queen and save his country from being destroyed. Sparhawk must contend with a monster, win his prize, and return home. The final novel, *The*

Sapphire Rose, concludes the series with one last quest for the hero before his time of adventure and exile comes to a close and he is able to return home to stay.

Like *The Lord of the Rings*, each of these series manages to convey not only the excitement and adventure of a quest, but the weight and grandeur of a trial that will determine the fate of a nation, or even an entire world. These heroes face wonders and dangers as they venture out, but only for the sake of returning to the homes they hope to save. These series portray a world that is pure fantasy, but somehow recognizable, filled with knights and kings, magic and monsters, the natural and the supernatural. In order to be both epically significant and immediately relevant, these stories must touch on the knowable, admirable motifs that Arthur and his knights have instilled. Arthur's world is not purely fantastic, but his stories hold a relevance that carries them beyond their natural borders. Arthur's kingdom is a beacon, an ideal nation that is continually seeking to expand its territory and spread its light while resisting the threat of invading darkness. More than one author has recognized the power of such a concept and has woven a tale that employs many of these threads. Arthur's world has become the world of countless epic fantasy novels from Tolkien onward.

The stories of heroes and adventures have not consistently employed every Arthurian motif available. Some tales draw more heavily on realism and others romanticize their heroes. Some are more Germanic and others more Celtic. Some have entirely original interpretations of the heroic adventure. Nevertheless, these ideals have persisted both overtly and subconsciously in every writer's mind and every reader's imagination, easily adaptable to storytelling, easily embraced by the audience. These motifs are recognizable, understandable, believable, and admirable. They are cliché when badly done, enchanting when masterfully done, and authors like Jordan, Goodkind, and Eddings will continue to use them as they recreate the epic adventure

in an infinite number of forms. The hero and his band will always ride out on a quest only to find themselves tested to the limits of their endurance. There is always an enemy to vanquish who threatens their homeland, values, and lives. But, as Arthur did, one hero will capture the love and attention of both his fellows and his audience. His trial will force him to become better and allow him to finally overcome both his own failings and his enemy. Arthur's Anglo-Celtic world has found its way outside of its own already far-reaching boundaries into the broader world of fantasy and fiction, and there it will remain.

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